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FRIDA LEIDER

FRIDA LEIDER was born in Berlin in 1888. Her mother came from Lausitz, her father, a carpenter, from Angemünde. She was an only child. As a school-child she survived diphtheria and scarlet fever. At thirteen Azucena in a performance of *Il Trovatore* at the Theater des Westens impressed her immensely, and at about the same time a school music teacher noted her voice. However, her parents intended her to become a teacher. Her next musical experience was to sing a duet from *Guillaume Tell* on to a brown wax cylinder with a friend, and next year she was thrilled by music from *Die Walküre* played on the piano. Plans for her to go to a teacher training college were abandoned when her father died. To earn some money she did private coaching after school. She went to a commercial school and entered a bank. Leider went for an audition for the chorus at the Unter den Linden Opera and was told by Professor Rüdél that she was a dramatic soprano and should study for a career. With three teachers she failed to make progress, but Otto Schwarz was able to draw out her voice and her talent. Her acting was greatly influenced by watching Eleonora Duse in *Heimat* by Sudermann at the Lessing Theater and she was very impressed by Fritz Massary at the Metropol, and by Julia Culp, Elena Gerhardt, Susanne Dessoir and Tilly Koenen in Lieder recitals.

When the war started German theatres closed. Leider saw this as an opportunity to improve her singing technique and to study repertoire. In 1915 provincial theatres re-opened and she deliberately took a post at a small theatre, that of Halle-an-der-Saale. Her début was as Venus in *Tannhäuser* and Martha in *Tiefland* followed. She was by then twenty-six.

Leider was helped at Halle by well-disposed colleagues. Thus, when she moved on to Rostock in 1916, in place of romantic illusions about the theatre there was growth as an artist. Her first appearance at Rostock, as Valentin in *Les Huguenots*, was well received. Next she was Rostock's first Marschallin. Aida, Senta and Ortrud followed, and then, despite the shortages and the bitter winter of 1916/1917, *Parsifal* was put on with Leider as Kundry. In her second season at Rostock she was able to sing Brünnhilde (*Siegfried*), but she declined Isolde as she felt too inexperienced for the part.

She was deeply shocked by conditions in Berlin, to which she returned for the summer of 1918.

Leider next moved to Königsberg, appearing first in *Fidelio*, followed by *Die Walküre*, *Un Ballo in Maschera* and *Don Giovanni*. She learnt how to switch each evening to the different requirements of the different composers.

Inflation was starting as the exceptionally severe winter of 1918 set in, there were food and fuel shortages, and street-fighting. As winter was ending Leider went for a country walk. Whilst she was walking there was a series of devastating explosions in the town's munitions factory.

In 1919, after guest appearances in *Fidelio* and *Aida*, Leider was invited to Hamburg. From several seasons in the pleasant atmosphere of smaller houses she had learnt much; she now had to learn how to cope with intrigue in a major house and how to withstand a press which dwelt on her illustrious predecessors. Thus her Isolde was highly applauded in the house, but in print the following morning she was nowhere near as good as X or Y. Leider continued to study how to match her Italian bel canto style of singing to the music of Wagner. At the same time she benefited greatly from advice from Löwenfeld, the director, on presentation and movement.

At a guest appearance as Ortrud at The Hague in 1923 'I sang with a completely Dutch cast, and had to listen frantically for my cues.'

In Barcelona she first sang with Heinrich Schlusnus and they both walked out of a bull fight.

Quiet negotiations were going on with the Berlin State Opera. In November 1921 she sang Isolde as a guest in Berlin and was offered a contract at the end of the first act. She still had a secure contract binding her to Hamburg for a third year, but during that year she was able to appear a number of times in Berlin before becoming a member of the company in 1923.

At this time she also appeared at Zoppot and at the Volksooper in Vienna, where 'I had great difficulty understanding the Viennese dialect'. At the Vienna State Opera she first sang with Friedrich Schorr.

In Berlin Leider started with Mozart and Verdi, and a new production of *Fidelio* under Erich Kleiber. The production was very successful, though some artists found him difficult to follow. Her Venus (*Tannhäuser*) led to her first visit to London in 1924, the start of a fifteen year association. Her first role was Isolde with Lauritz Melchior as Tristan under Bruno Walter. This was followed by a complete Ring-Cycle.

During a further visit to Zoppot, in 1927, she met Rudolf Deman, leader of the Berlin State Opera Orchestra and of the Deman Quartet. They were later married.

Leider began to be aware of vocal problems. On the advice of Heinrich Schlusnus she went to his teacher, Professor Louis Bachner, who was able to help her. Then, as she progressed with Wagner she began to worry about her lower register. Here Professor Raatz-Brockman was able to advise her.

In 1925 John Forsell, great Don Giovanni of his time, now director of the Stockholm Opera, invited her for a long visit on which she sang a wide range of works from her repertoire.

When Carl Muck came to Berlin to conduct a complete Ring cycle at the Staatsoper, Leider sang the three Brünnhildes. She had to restudy much of the music to sing at his slow tempi, which were regarded as coming from Wagner himself.

In May 1926 Leider was in *Don Giovanni* conducted by Bruno Walter in London. A stunning cast (Don Giovanni:Mariano Stabile, Ottavio:Fritz Kraus, Donna Anna:Frida Leider, Elvira:Lotte Lehmann and Zerlina:Elisabeth Schumann) and careful preparation ensured a great success.

For La Scala in 1927 Leider relearned the role of Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre* in Italian. Apart from learning Italian, there was a continual change of note values to fit the language. There were intensive rehearsals which began at 3PM; possible as there were only three or four performances a week.

She went often to hear performances at La Scala and was surprised to find that the frequent rubati made at home by German conductors in Italian operas were not made in Italy – 'Conductors and singers keep strictly in time and the result is absolutely amazing.'

Later Leider was asked to follow her Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre* with the continuation of the role in *Siegfried* and *Die Götterdämmerung*. She found in singing Italian much of benefit to her technique to carry over in to her German. However, with her career expanding, she decided not to take on in addition an Italian Isolde. This was partly on ideological grounds; German works, particularly Wagner, should be sung in German.

She returned to Berlin expecting to sing in *Un Ballo in Maschera* with the Romanian tenor Trajan Grosavescu, but was shocked to learn that the performance was cancelled as he had been shot by his wife in a fit of jealousy.

In the spring of 1927 Leider returned to London for her fourth season there. This time she was to sing Leonora in *Il Trovatore*. For a German to appear in an Italian role at Covent Garden marked a break in tradition. There was initial resentment from the Italian wing of the house, but then everything went well.

The London season was followed by Zoppot's first *Die Götterdämmerung*. In the finale a policeman dressed as Brünnhilde rode Grane boldly over the fire. It was Leider who gradually persuaded directors that the customary live horse, which she always found somewhat unpredictable, even with a supply of lump sugar, could be pensioned off.

In London in 1928 she, Maria Olczewska and Walter Widdop made a great success in a revival of the long-neglected *Armide* of Gluck.

Kundry at Bayreuth that August with guidance from Siegfried Wagner was a great experience. The singers were apprehensive of Carl Muck's slow tempi, but Leider found that 'Muck's calmness and clarity enabled me to draw everything out of the role.' The season for Leider continued with the complete Ring cycle.

Then, later in the year, Leider travelled to Chicago, the Staatsoper waiving the requirement of three months notice on condition of her prompt return. Besides works by Wagner, she was to sing Rachel in *La Juive* in French and Donna Anna in Italian. She was very impressed by Rosa Raisa, especially as Norma. By 1928 German works and German artists were again acceptable. Thus *Der Rosenkavalier* could be given with Maria Olczewska as Octavian, Frida Leider as the Marschallin and Alexander Kipnis as Ochs. Edith Mason was the Sophie.

Early in 1929 Leider was, as promised, back in Berlin in good time for the Ring cycle under Erich Kleiber in the newly refurbished Staatsoper.

In London Colonel Blois wanted Leider to sing Norma. To his considerable disappointment she declined; true she had sung Donna Anna and Verdi's Leonora, but she found the technique for Norma incompatible with her Wagnerian parts.

From London Leider travelled to Paris for Isolde with Melchior under Furtwängler and then returned to Berlin to prepare for Dido in *Les Troyens* under Leo Blech. Berlioz's opera, however, was not popular.

In these years Richard Strauss appeared more often in Berlin directing performances of his own operas and Leider very much enjoyed the opportunity of studying *Ariadne auf Naxos* with him.

In 1929, with the Staatsoper again accommodating regarding leave of absence, Leider embarked on a five month trip. A season in Chicago, where she was greatly impressed by Claudia Muzio, was followed by a tour from East to West across the United States stopping at thirteen towns en route. Keeping a voice in good trim through the extremes of climate on such tours required great care.

Seasons in Chicago ended with the crash, which wiped out the fortunes of wealthy patrons, and an epidemic of influenza amongst the artists. Then a serious cold resulted from the contrast of tropical heat of the hotels with arctic weather in the streets. This delayed her return to Europe. As a fortunate consequence she was in New York to meet with an envoy from the Metropolitan Opera. Thus, in December 1932 Leider and her husband sailed for New York.

Leider's début at the Metropolitan Opera was on 16 January 1933 as Isolde with Melchior as Tristan, Bodanzky conducting. On 30 January came the news on the wireless that Adolf Hitler had been elected Chancellor of Germany. This was particularly disturbing for them as Rudolf Deman was Jewish. Indeed, on their way back via Monte Carlo, where Leider had an engagement, they found people already on their way from Germany.

Melchior refused to come to Bayreuth for the 1933 season, according to Leider 'he was having differences of opinion with the management', so Max Lorenz 'who had all the attributes of an ideal Wagner singer' was engaged. Heinz Tietjen conducted the Ring. There were intense rehearsals from 2 to 11 almost each day. As Leider noted, Jewish artists such as Emanuel List and Alexander Kipnis still sang at the festival. She also noted that on her next season in New York, Gatti-Casazza, the manager was distinctly cool on account of her appearing at Bayreuth.

In 1934 leave for trips to America ceased to be granted, but visits to other European venues were still allowed. Leider began to realise that, despite Furtwängler's 'non-political stand, ... art was becoming subservient to politics'.

Leider was at Covent Garden for the Beecham Grand Opera Seasons of 1936, 1937 and 1938. In the first she sang in the Ring cycle under Beecham; in the second, the Coronation Season, she sang in the Ring cycle under Furtwängler and Isolde under Beecham; in the third, her fifteenth and last season in London, she again sang in the Ring cycle under Furtwängler.

In Paris later that year with the visiting Bayreuth company, she was depressed to note that various friends of earlier times were no longer at her performances.

At Bayreuth next year she was so attacked by worries and nerves that she cancelled an appearance; an all but unheard of occurrence at Bayreuth.

Leider and her husband had been discussing their situation for months. Matters were brought to a head by the events of 9 November 1938. They decided that he should attempt to reach Switzerland, which he succeeded in doing, whilst she would remain in Berlin. She was in a seriously depressed condition. Medical advice was that she should continue to work. It was agreed to lighten her load by changing her status at the Staatsoper to that of a guest artist.

Although she was cold-shouldered by many former colleagues, Heinrich Schlusnus and his wife remained firm friends. Schlusnus suggested that she should take up Lieder singing. She realised that such a change so late in her career would require not only acquisition of a new repertoire, but also a radical reshaping of technique. Shortly after she chanced to meet Michael Raucheisen. He was very keen on the idea and, as a senior and most widely experienced accompanist, he was able to give her an excellent grounding. At her first concert, at the Beethoven-Saal on 7 April 1940, she was most warmly received by her former opera fans, but she was not satisfied within herself. She continued to study and practice.

In the bitter winter of 1941/1942, reminding her of that of 1916/1917, she made a long concert tour of East Prussia. She saw soldiers returning wounded and insufficiently clad against the cold; she already sensed disaster.

At this time she sang a number of operatic performances abroad. These trips enabled her to see her husband and to help him financially; foreigners not being permitted to work in Switzerland.

Leider and her mother were in their home outside Berlin as Russian and Polish troops flooded by on their way to Berlin, ransacking everything in their path.

In July Leider was invited to the Admiralspalast, one of the few theatres surviving in Berlin, at which the Staatsoper now met. She was asked to resume her career, but she resolutely declined on grounds of age. She agreed, however, to be an artistic adviser and instructor; she would open a studio to train young singers. She and her mother were fortunate to find an empty and undamaged apartment nearby, and as a member of the Staatsoper she received some rations from the Russians.

The Staatsoper re-opened in September 1945 with *Orpheus*, followed by *Rigoletto* and *Eugen Onegin*. At the end of the year *Hänsel und Gretel* was mounted with Leider as producer.

Leider's last appearance at the Staatsoper was in a recital of duets with Margarethe Klose.

In 1946, after months of quadrilingual paperwork, her husband was able to re-enter Germany and resume his position at the Hochschule für Musik.

On returning home one evening Leider was very moved to find that Furtwängler and Celibidache had called. Furtwängler 'was still the same simple person he had always been'. Later Leider produced *Tristan und Isolde* with Furtwängler conducting.

In 1948 she became Professor of Singing at the Hochschule. Many of the students had experienced war-torn adolescence; as well as teaching singing, Leider

found herself giving spiritual guidance and advice. In 1952 she gave up her post at the Staatsoper to devote herself to the increasing number of students she was attracting to the Hochschule.

She retired in 1958 and worked on her memoirs which were published in German in 1959 and in English in 1966.

Frida Leider died in Berlin in 1975.

CARL GÜNTHER [Ottensen, near Buxtehude 1885 – Hamburg 1958] was the son of a cottage-industry cigar maker and he worked as a coppersmith in Hamburg until his voice was discovered at an amateur Lieder concert in Altona in 1911. Next year he made his *début* as Florestan in *Fidelio* at the Hamburg Opera. He remained a member of the company throughout his career. He sang the part of The Stranger in the première of Korngold's *Das Wunder der Heliane* and he achieved a notable success as Don Carlos in the Hamburg revival of 1926. He made guest appearances at the Städtischen Oper, Berlin from 1924 to 1927 and at the Vienna Staatsoper in 1926. During the second world war he became a teacher in Hamburg.

ROBERT HUTT [Karlsruhe 1878 – Berlin 1942] worked as an engineer until the conductor Felix Mottl told him he should study singing. Initially he was taught by Wilhelm Guggenbühler in his home town, and then in the Bayreuth school founded by Julius Kniese. He made his *début* in Karlsruhe in 1903 and then worked his way up, as was normal in Germany at that time, gaining experience in a succession of houses, to reach Berlin in 1917. In 1920 during his ten year engagement there, he created the part of the Emperor in *Die Frau ohne Schatten* and in 1926 he appeared in the première of Prokofieff's *L'Amour des trois oranges*. He sang Walther in Beecham's Drury Lane season of 1913, he sang Walther and Parsifal at Covent Garden in 1914, and he was a member of the German Opera Company which toured North America in 1923. He became known primarily as a Wagner-tenor and won much acclaim.

HEINRICH SCHLUSNUS [Braubach am Rhein 1888 – Frankfurt am Main 1952] was the son of a postman who ran a vocal quartet. He also worked first as a postman, at the same time studying singing. In 1912 he gave a concert in Frankfurt. He enlisted at the start of the 1914-18 war, but before August was out a leg injury on the Belgian front rendered him unfit for further service. He decided to become an opera singer and was ready to make his *début* as the herald in *Lohengrin* at the Hamburg Opera in 1915. He soon moved to the Stadttheater at Nuremberg and by 1917 he was making his *début* at the Hofoper, from 1918 the Staatsoper, in Berlin, where he remained until 1945. He studied further with Louis Bachner and in 1918 he gave his first Lieder evening. He was a leading artist in the German Verdi revival of the '20s. He appeared in opera in most European countries and in North America, and at Bayreuth in 1933 he sang the role of Amfortas in *Parsifal*. In those years he also became one of the most significant

Lieder singers of his time, giving over 2,000 concerts throughout the world. He retired in 1951 from both the operatic stage and the concert platform.

FRITZ SOOT [Wellersweiler, near Neunkirchen, Saar 1878 – Berlin 1965] became an actor at the Hoftheater, Karlsruhe in 1906. At the same time he studied singing. Later he was a pupil of Karl Scheidemantel in Dresden. His début at Dresden in 1908 led to small parts in the première of *Elektra* in 1909 and in *Der Rosenkavalier* in 1911. After military service he resumed his career in Stuttgart at the same time changing from lyric to Heldentenor roles, which enabled him to undertake Wagnerian parts. From 1922 to 1944 he was a member of the Staatsoper Berlin. There he was in the various première including works by Krenek, Berg, Franz Schmidt, Milhaud, Pfitzner, Graener. In 1921 he was a guest at the Vienna Staatsoper, from 1924 to 1925 he was at Covent Garden and from 1924 to 1931 he sang at the Zoppot Festival. He was celebrated as Waldemar in Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder*. He continued to appear in small parts until 1956.

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