

The Indestructible Voice Of Kirsten Flagstad

ROLAND GELATT

THE CHRONICLES of opera are filled with legends of seemingly indestructible singers. Thanks to the phonograph, we need not take them wholly on trust. Old recordings attest the astonishing vocal prowess of Lilli Lehmann at fifty-nine, Nellie Melba at sixty-seven, Mattia Battistini at sixty-eight. But these past glories are no more incredible than the present exploits of Kirsten Flagstad, who at sixty-two remains far and away the most accomplished heroic soprano of our time. Although Flagstad seldom performs in public today, her work in the recording studio continues unabated, and each new record that arrives from Europe evokes fresh wonder at the radiant power and secure control she still commands.

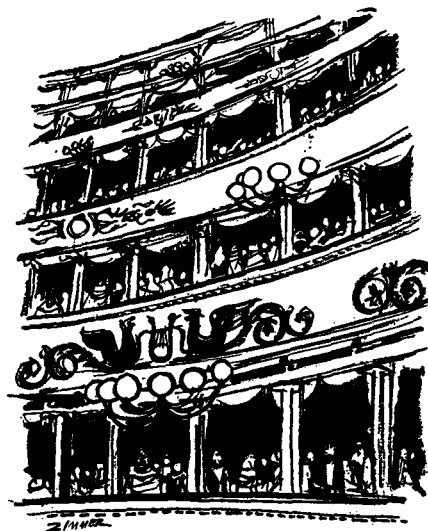
Before Flagstad made her Metropolitan debut on February 2, 1935, and almost singlehandedly inspired a great Wagnerian revival there, she was on the point of retirement from the operatic stage. After more than twenty years of professional singing, she already had literally hundreds of opera and operetta performances in Scandinavia to her credit. She had also reached her fortieth year. Singers have retired with honor at that age (Geraldine Farrar and Rosa Ponselle, to name two), and so might Kirsten Flagstad had it not been for the Metropolitan engagement that brought her international celebrity overnight. For seven seasons she was the Met's brightest star. Then in the spring of 1941 she returned to Norway, and for six years stayed in virtual retirement.

Many of us thought we had heard the last of her; it is perilous for a singer to attempt a comeback in her fifties. But in 1947 Flagstad did come back and proved to be a more cultivated artist than ever. The years had dealt kindly with her well-schooled voice and had discernibly matured her musical conceptions. She pursued an active public career

until December 12, 1953, when she gave a concert in Oslo that was billed as her last. But singers sometimes have a graceful way of saying farewell without quite meaning it. Flagstad reconsidered, and early last year agreed to sing the role of Brünnhilde in a Norwegian radio performance of *Götterdämmerung*—quite an undertaking for a sixty-year-old "retired" soprano.

A New Beginning in the Twilight

The broadcast, heard in England by officials of the Decca-London record company, started Flagstad on a busy post-retirement career. She had at that time no recording commitments, because her old exclusive contract with RCA-HMV had lapsed. Decca-



London proposed issuing the Flagstad *Götterdämmerung* on records (the broadcast had of course been taped), provided she would take part in some further sessions to restore two long scenes and repair a few small mishaps in the original performance. The lady was willing, and Decca-London dispatched a recording crew to Oslo for what was essentially a patching job.

But that was only a beginning.



While the *Götterdämmerung* retakes were in progress, Decca-London's artistic directors suggested an ambitious program of new recordings. The results of this collaboration between Miss Flagstad and Decca-London already include a complete recording of Gluck's *Alceste*, with Flagstad in the title role; the Wesendonk lieder and some arias by Wagner, with the Vienna Philharmonic; a program of Bach and Handel arias, with the London Philharmonic; and several song recitals. Much more is to come.

The *Götterdämmerung*, which started it all (London A-4603), is neither an ideal statement of the score nor an ideal recording from a technical standpoint. The conducting is undistinguished, much of the cast is mediocre, and Flagstad—possibly influenced by her ineffective associates—sometimes seems ill at ease. But the performance has its unique moments, particularly in the second act. Flagstad's brilliant, imperious B flat on the phrase "*dem Manne*," when she denounces Siegfried before the assembled Gibichungs, should be enough in itself to make this recording a touchstone for heroic singing. The Wagner record made in Vienna with Hans Knappertsbusch conducting (London 5259) is more uniformly successful, for Flagstad's dazzling quality of tone and robust projection are superbly reproduced, and the warm-hued orchestral accompaniment is incomparable. Best of all, the soprano is in wonderful form; surely "*Im Treibhaus*" (the third of the Wesendonk lieder) has never sounded more affecting, nor has "*Elsa's Dream*" from *Lohengrin* ever been purer.

Alceste (London A-4411) is both a delight and a disappointment. The role is well suited to a singer who

excels in the expression of chaste, classic nobility. In fact, the performances of *Alceste* with which Flagstad closed her Metropolitan career were probably the most artistically rewarding she gave in that house. It is sad that they were never captured on records. What we are offered now is of a lower order. For some reason Flagstad was persuaded to record the opera in Italian, and this seems to have posed problems of vocal production and musical communication that she could not entirely overcome. Certainly her 1956 performance does not recapture all the ringing ardor of the English-language performances at the Met five years earlier. Moreover, she is hobbled by Geraint Jones's stolid, oratoriolike conducting. But again, despite the reservations one must make, the recording remains of great value. The "Grove of Death" scene, with its vaulting, long-lined declamation, will be particularly treasured by anyone who responds to clean, unadorned vocalism.

UNADORNED is the word for Flagstad's kind of singing. She does not overwhelm the listener with interpretative insights or carry him away with the force of magnetic passion. Indeed, she rather tends to hold him at arm's length. This chilly manner prevented her from ever making much impact as an interpreter of lieder during her recital-giving days. Flagstad's recent recording of songs by Richard Strauss and Hugo Wolf (London 5292), however, forces at least a partial reevaluation. Doubters should listen to the sustained line in Strauss's "*Mit deinen blauen Augen*" or the radiant climax in "*Ich trage meine Minne*."

No one, of course, has ever doubted Flagstad's mastery of the song literature of Edvard Grieg, and it is good to have further evidence of it in two new LPs (London 5263 and 5290) and to marvel again at the smoothly sung portamentos in "*En Drom*" and at the impeccable opening of "*Fra Monte Pincio*."

Flagstad is to singers what Heifetz is to violinists—the embodiment of clear, precise, forthright musicianship. Hers is not the only way of making music, but it is a good way, and nobody has yet come along to take her place.

MOVIES: *A Prisoner's Tale*

HARRIS GREEN

IN HIS FILM *A Man Escaped*, French writer-director Robert Bresson tells the story of a young Resistance worker who is captured by the Nazis and of his subsequent attempts to escape. Bresson, himself a prisoner of the Germans in 1940, has eliminated any personal involvement in the film and instead has based his film on an autobiographical account of capture and escape by Commander André Devigny, published in *Le Figaro Littéraire*. With such material and experience behind it, the film could have become a flamboyant, highly subjective documentary, complete with overwrought narration and an irresponsible hero hurling taunts through the bars at his torturers. Happily, Mr. Bresson has realized that such stuff would narrow the scope of *A Man Escaped*. He has kept his approach to the tale scrupulously objective, even to the point of detachment.

In fact, in the opening scene (which an introductory note has curtly identified as "Lyons, 1943"), there is such an impersonal manner in the direction that for a moment one wonders if a director is functioning at all. Here the young Resistance worker in the custody of the Gestapo is making his first frantic bid for freedom by bolting from the car that is taking him to prison. Bresson allows his camera to sit impassively by—to stay in the car waiting—not venturing forth to investigate or even to turn slightly to see the scuffle that is obviously taking place outside. Eventually the prisoner is hustled back, handcuffed,

and given a thorough beating. But at this point the camera discreetly fades into the next scene. Violence and excessive melodramatics have been excised from *A Man Escaped*.

THERE ARE no professional actors. The young prisoner is played, and quite well, too, by François Leterrier, a philosophy student who attends the Sorbonne. The others, whom we gradually meet emerging from their cells or exercising in the prison compound, are likewise amateurs.

Instead of commonplace background music, Bresson has used a superb sound track that re-creates in haunting fashion all the despair and loneliness of the place, along with an almost abstracted blend of restrained narration (by Leterrier) and prison sounds (clanging doors, echoing footsteps, distant volleys). When a scene must be underlined or elevated, it may be graced by a choral passage from Mozart's *C Minor Mass*.

A Man Escaped is a series of separate scenes arranged to fit into a large, over-all pattern. By never overstating the contrast Bresson heightens it with his own restraint. His montage of short scenes, in which three minutes of viewing time may encompass either continuous action or a span of weeks, adds an aura of timelessness to a film whose very essence is time—the time it takes to saw through a door or to scale a wall or to wear a soul down to defeat. The German, heard barking his incessant command "*Pas parler!*" or glimpsed from the rear and at a distance, emerges not as an individual but as a force. The young hero (about whom we know so little) becomes its opponent. Bresson, carefully selecting and molding sights, sounds, and scenes, makes their contest not an excuse for thrills but, instead, an allegory of captor and captive, in which the implications transcend, as they must in all works of art, the individuals themselves.

