



Kirsten Flagstad sings Wagner & Strauss

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[Fanfare](#) (James A. Altena - 2011.03.01)

Audite has performed an invaluable service in unearthing and making available these magnificent radio broadcast performances of the legendary Norwegian dramatic soprano Kirsten Flagstad. Despite being only a few weeks shy of her 57th birthday, with complete retirement from the stage only a year away, Flagstad's voice here is in miraculously intact condition. Better yet, the seeming coolness of temperament that could make some of her performances sound less than fully engaged is largely absent; the excerpts from *Tristan* and the *Immolation Scene* are rendered with noticeably more overt passion than in the contemporary studio recordings with Furtwängler, and the latter has vastly superior sound to the extraordinary *March 1952* live performance with Bruno Walter and the New York Philharmonic. Only the brief *Recognition Scene* from *Elektra* seems unsuited to her interpretive talents, though given that she did not record the role (was it even in her repertoire?) this rendition is still to be treasured for its sheer beauty of sound. The two sets of *Lieder* demonstrate the ease with which Flagstad could scale down her voice to far more intimacy and project the text with beguiling tone, long-breathed legato, clear diction, and interpretive nuance. The booklet notes, which discuss Flagstad's voice and later vocal estate in considerable detail, speculate that Flagstad omitted the first of the *Four Last Songs* (of which she gave the world premiere just two years before under Furtwängler) from these performances because its high tessitura was too taxing for her by this time. Whatever the reason, the omission is much to be lamented; had this been a complete cycle, it would have been an easy and immediate candidate for one of the two or three top recordings of the work ever made, as her command of the work is that of sovereign majesty.

Equally noteworthy is the first-rate conducting of Georges Sebastian. The defunct LYS label once released a two-CD set of his pre-World War II studio recordings of Wagner orchestral excerpts, which I've not heard, along with the *Wesendonck* songs offered here, but otherwise he is represented on disc primarily by several live opera performances from the early 1950s (*Werther*, *Iphigénie en Tauride*, *Mignon*, *Thaïs*, *Bluebeard's Castle*), and occasional recordings of arias in various vocal anthologies. Based on these performances, that scanty discography is our loss, for this is riveting Wagner conducting on a par with such immortal names as Furtwängler, Walter, Muck, and Coates; I found myself utterly engrossed in these performances from the first notes of the act I *Prelude* onward. These renditions possess an extraordinary combination of clarity, instrumental color, dynamic flow, and tension, despite some occasional lapses in ensemble and intonation that betray a second-tier orchestra.

The recorded sound of the reprocessed original master tapes—a significant improvement on the previous *Melodram* and *Urania* releases (I have not heard the *Simax* issue of the *Recognition Scene*)—is also remarkable, equaling or surpassing that of many studio recordings of the era for clarity, frequency range, warmth, and

absence of hiss or other background noise. The accompanying booklet is exemplary. Had all four of the Strauss songs been performed, this would immediately have secured a niche on my 2011 Want List. Even with that heartbreaking omission, it still carries my highest recommendation. If you treasure Flagstad, if you love great singing, do not pass this release by.

