

DER FLIEGENDE HOLLÄNDER SEMINAR/WEBINAR

JUNE 29, 2020 and JULY 1, 2020

SENTAS: KNOWN AND UNKNOWN

JOE PEARCE

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|---|--|-----------------------------------|
| 1. KIRSTEN FLAGSTAD, soprano (1895-1962)
HERBERT JANSSEN, baritone (1892-1965)
MAX LORENZ, tenor (1901-1975)
LUDWIG WEBER, bass (1899-1974)
MARY JARRED, m. s. (1899-1993)
Royal Opera Chorus, Covent Garden
London Philharmonic Orchestra
Fritz Reiner, conductor | a) Act II: - "Wohl kenn' ich
Weibes heil'ge Pflichten"
b) Act II: - "Verzheit!
Mein Volk...."
c) Act III: - "Zahllose Opfer
fielen diesen Spruch"

(June 11, 1937) (6:29) | Golden Age
of Opera
EJS-515 |
| 2. ASTRID VARNAY, soprano (1918-2006)
HERMANN UHDE, bass-baritone (1914-1965)
Bayreuth Festival Orchestra
Joseph Keilberth, conductor | Act II: - "Wohl kenn' ich
Weibes heil'ge Pflichten:

(August 1955) (3:28) | Voce Della
Luna
2012-2 |
| 3. INGRID BJONER, soprano (1927-2006)
FRANZ CRASS, bass (1928-2012)
SVEN OLAF ELIASSON, tenor (1933-2015)
KARL RIDDERBUSCH, bass (1932-1997)
REGINE FONSECA, m. s. (1932-)
RAI Rome Chorus and Orchestra
Wolfgang Sawallisch, conductor | Act III: - "Zahllose Opfer
fielen diesen Spruch"

(February 2, 1969) (2:50) | Hamburger
Archive
10613 |
| 4. HELEN TRAUBEL, soprano (1898-1972)
RCA Victor Orchestra
Frieder Weissmann, conductor | Act II: - "Traft ihr das Schiff"

(1950) (5:10) | RCA
Victor
49-3148/49 |
| 5. MARIA MUELLER, soprano (1898?-1958)
JOEL BERGLUND, bass-baritone (1903-1985)
LUDWIG HOFMANN, bass (1895-1963)
Bayreuth Festival Orchestra
Richard Kraus, conductor | a) Act II: - "Wohl kenn' ich
Weibes heil'ge Pflichten"
b) Act II: - "Verzheit!
Mein Volk..."
(July 18, 1942) (4:22) | Preisler
90232 |
| 6. LEONIE RYSANEK, soprano (1926-1998)
FRANZ CRASS, bass (1928-2012)
CLAUDE HEATER, tenor (1927-2020)
KARL RIDDERBUSCH, bass (1932-1997)
ANNEMARIE BESSEL, m. s. (1933-1995)
La Scala Opera Chorus and Orchestra
Wolfgang Sawallisch, conductor | Act III: - "Zahllose Opfer
fielen diesen Spruch"

(February 2, 1966) (2:55) | Living
Stage
40-35125 |
| 7. NINA STEMME, soprano (1963-)
JOHN TOMLINSON, bass (1946-)
KIM BEGLEY, tenor (1952-)
ERIC HALFVARSON, bass (1951-)
PATRICIA BARDON, m. s. (1964-)
Geoffrey Mitchell Choir
London Philharmonic Orchestra
David Parry, conductor | Act III: - Final Scene -
"It's hopeless!
Ah! It's hopeless!"

(January, 2004) (8:30) | Chandos
3119(2) |

SOME NOTES ON OUR SENTAS AND ON THE SOMEWHAT UNHAPPY HISTORY OF *THE FLYING DUTCHMAN* AT THE METROPOLITAN OPERA

KIRSTEN FLAGSTAD – It is hardly necessary to expound on this greatest of Wagnerian sopranos, often referred to as “the voice of the century” (her only possibly rival would be Birgit Nilsson, not so much a voice of the century as a force of Nature). Almost from the day of her unheralded debut at the Met as Sieglinde on February 2, 1935, she was recognized as the world’s reigning Wagnerian soprano, a position she maintained until she retired at about 60. During 9 seasons at the Met between 1935 and 1952, she sang 262 performances of 11 roles, 9 of them in Wagner. However, just about no one associates her name with the role of Senta, as she sang it only 8 times in 2 seasons at the Met, and a few times at Covent Garden. Amazingly, the *Dutchman* was not a particularly welcome opera at the Met, especially in its first 8 decades (!), and apparently even the great Norwegian couldn’t redeem it there; either that, or they just considered that glorious voice wasted on Senta, when box offices filled up for her Isolde and Brünnhildes. Worse for us is that not one of those 8 performances was heard in a broadcast, so that if this Reiner-led Covent Garden *Dutchman* had not been preserved, we would have nothing of her in the role. (Following the notes on our sopranos, there will be some figures on their Met performances and of the *Dutchman*’s semi-sad fate at the Met; for now, suffice it to say that those 8 Flagstad performances of the opera were the only ones heard at the Met between 1932 and 1950, years often called the Company’s “Golden Age of Wagnerian Singing”.)

ASTRID VARNAY – Except for the accident of having been born in Sweden, Astrid had not a drop of Swedish blood in her, her parents being Hungarian and just working in Sweden in 1918. In this day of higher musical education and sopranos still entering contests in their thirties, it is sobering to recall that Varnay made her actual operatic stage debut as Sieglinde on the stage of the Met, age 23, in a Saturday afternoon broadcast heard all over the country, the day before the Pearl Harbor attack. At the time, she knew at least 15 operatic roles and was ready to sing them, and she did, quickly, as the back-up Wagnerian soprano for Helen Traubel, who had assumed all of Flagstad’s roles (except Senta, be it noted) upon the Norwegian’s return home. Those roles, plus many others, would keep her at the Met through 1955, with occasional later returns. Altogether, she sang 200 performances of 24 roles with the Company. We are told that the Met had been planning to cast Ljuba Welitsch (whose Met debut [as Salome] had been as phenomenal as had been Flagstad’s own some 14 years earlier) as Senta in a new *Dutchman* production, for the second night of the 1950 season (right after the legendary Bing opener, *Don Carlo*). If that was the plan, it fell through, and Senta was given to Varnay, who sang 6 performances of it that season. Of the fate of *Dutchman* at the Met, even with a new production, it would not be heard there again until 1960! But it was excellent training for Varnay, who would assume the role again in the 1955 Bayreuth Festival, and leave a powerful interpretation of it for posterity. Possibly too powerful, as, impressive as she is in it, she sounds less like a dreamy young girl than like a budding Ortrud. But such an overwhelming interpretation is fun to hear, and she certainly has a willing partner in Hermann Uhde.

INGRID BJONER – One of our lesser-known Sentas, and one who never essayed the role at the Met, Bjoner is an excellent example of a true world-class and world star soprano who had a long and important career (1956-1990) but who has now been somewhat forgotten by both time and the fact that she recorded very little. The Norwegian soprano made her professional debut with Flagstad, as one of the Norns in Flagstad’s 1956 radio broadcast of *Götterdämmerung*, which was later issued by London/Decca. In short order, she was singing a core repertoire of Mozart, Strauss, and Wagner (initially, the lighter roles, but by the late 1960s all of them, possibly one of the few sopranos who could successfully sing Eva and Isolde in the same season). There simply was no major opera house in the world that she did not appear in (including the Bayreuth and Salzburg Festivals), which may be why her Met performances were relatively few in number and stretched out over 14 years. It is hard to name a dramatic soprano role she did not sing, but at the Met we got only 48 performances of 9 roles over 9 seasons, the last of them in 1974 being Turandot; having heard one of those performances plus others from elsewhere, it is my opinion that she could hold her own with just about any Turandot in the world. Her Senta was denied us, but it was a role she sang often, and in many venues (our selection was from Rome). Interestingly, she was still singing it at home in 1989 (at 62), the year before her retirement from Opera.

HELEN TRAUBEL – Another famous soprano too well-known to need much biography here, Traubel was a tremendously self-critical singer who sang intermittent concerts around the country, but didn’t make her opera debut until 1937, when she was 39. At that time, she thought she wasn’t quite good enough. After a ‘false’ start at the Met in the awful *The Man Without a Country*, she suddenly found herself good enough to be Flagstad’s successor for a dozen years after the Norwegian soprano’s return home, taking the lead in the heavier Wagner repertoire with newcomer Astrid Varnay as an able and often exciting back-up. Traubel sang only 176 performances of 10 roles (all but two in Wagner) during 16 seasons at the Met, and was one of

the few opera stars of her day to make inroads into any kind of pop culture (most especially with Jimmy Durante, which gave Rudolf Bing conniptions!), especially on early TV. But she absolutely refused to sing Senta (although we are not certain it was ever actually offered to her), saying that, all other things being equal, she still could not see herself prancing about in a dirndl. Except for a season in South America, and occasional concerts in Canada (and elsewhere after her operatic retirement), Traubel's was a totally American career, and she never appeared in Europe. But she was kind enough to leave an RCA Victor recording of the *Ballad*, and it is quite lovely, if a bit mature in vocal aspect.

MARIA MUELLER – Wagnerites and opera lovers in general are so used to seeing Maria Mueller's name in German casts of the 1930s and 1940s (if they are used to seeing it at all), that they usually forget that Mueller was a star for 11 seasons at the Met (1924/25 – 1934/35), one of four sopranos who rather ruled the roost in lyric-spinto roles (the others being Rosa Ponselle, Elisabeth Rethberg, and Maria Jeritza) for most of the time she was there. Rethberg specialized in very much the same repertoire as did Mueller; she was one of the truly great singers of her time and may have somewhat dulled Mueller's impact. Nonetheless, Mueller did well there. Unusually for German sopranos of that time (Mueller was actually Czech, having been born in a town that would acquire a dire reputation in the 1940s – Terezin), both she and Rethberg sang as much Italian repertory as they did German (between them, they did 95 *Aidas*; Ponselle did 14!). Mueller sang 196 performances of 19 roles, 67 of them in 6 Wagner works, during her 11 seasons, dividing them out nicely between Italian and German ones, and it was she who in 1932 created Maria in the American premiere of *Simon Boccanegra*, in legendary performances with Pinza, Tibbett and Martinelli. Meanwhile, in 1930 she had started an association with the Bayreuth Festival and this would last through the end of WW2 (in 1930 producing the first truly complete recording of a Wagner opera, *Tannhäuser*). She returned for good to Germany in 1935, where, among other things, she sang many Sentas, a role denied her at the Met. And she sang long enough to partner Wolfgang Windgassen in the first LP recording of the complete Act I of *Die Walküre* (1950-51). From the 1942 Bayreuth Festival, this may be the most heartfelt Senta to be heard tonight.

LEONIE RYSANEK – This program could not have been possible without recourse to the Great Leonie, who was surely the most famous Senta of her time, and may have been the most famous Senta of the entire 20th century! It's hard to think of any other soprano whose name is so closely associated with the role. No need to go into all her other accomplishments, except to remind people that she debuted in 1949, starred in the opening production of *The New Bayreuth* in 1951 (at 25) and remained a top-flight star for the next 45 years. As a somewhat doubtful replacement for Maria Callas as Lady Macbeth in 1959 at the Met, she came, saw, conquered, and remained there for 31 of the next 37 years, singing 299 performances of 24 roles. If anything solidified *Dutchman's* success at the Met, it was Rysanek's and George London's assumptions of the lead roles. Of the 21 *Dutchmans* London did there between 1960 and 1965, Rysanek was his Senta in 17 of them, and of course they sang it elsewhere in addition to making their near-iconic commercial recording of the opera; all of this probably made them the nearest thing to a Wagner team that the Met could offer. When due to health reasons London had to retire at the end of 1965, Rysanek sang only 10 more Sentas at the House (with good, but lesser partners), although she continued to sing it elsewhere. But in that one decade, the opera was performed 53 times (a full third of all the Met performances in its 137-year history) and Rysanek sang 32 of those outings, with 8 other sopranos doing the remaining 21, including 4 by no less a personage than Regine Crespin. Yes, others sang it, but she owned it. (In those 137 years of Met history, they've had 33 Sentas; only two – Maria Jeritza and Janis Martin – did even a third as many as did Rysanek; all others are in single digits.) And of course, she sang it all over the map, as she did most of her repertoire, so that tonight we find her doing it at La Scala in 1966, and sharing Ingrid Bjoner's *Dutchman*, Franz Crass. Rysanek's longevity was quite phenomenal. She had the *Frau* Empress in her repertoire for 32 years and Sieglinde for 37 years. They made giants in the old days!

NINA STEMME – Arguably the world's leading Wagnerian soprano today, Stemme's career to date has not been quite the kind of career you got from Flagstad and some other famous Wagnerians, but it is steady and solid. She has sung rarely at the Met, only 32 performances of 5 roles in 4 seasons (out of 20 years). For me, nothing she has done since taking on the heavier dramatic roles quite equals the very first time I heard her, as Senta in a Met broadcast in 2000. It was as impressive a performance of *anything* as I have ever heard in a broadcast; I was transfixed. To me, it wasn't only that she sang so gorgeously, but that (at 37) she was able to convey a tonally youthful Senta such as no other in my experience. Leonie Rysanek was my great Senta, but when Leonie started her career, she probably already sounded like a 40-year old great soprano, and Senta should probably be about 18 to 20. With Wagnerian sopranos, sounding 18 to 20 is only wishful thinking. Anyway, Stemme, who had a family to raise, stuck close to home, and didn't appear again at the Met for ten years, and after that not for six more; since 2016, nothing. Her *Isolde*, *Ariadne*, and *Isolde* are excellent, but her Senta, for me, was unique and perfect, and we were denied the possibility of hearing it again while she

was in perfect vocal estate for that particular role. Happily, though, we are met halfway by her, for in early 2004 she made a complete recording of the role for Chandos, in English yet. This is not really a drawback, for if her voice is not as perfectly attuned to Senta's thoughts and sounds in 2004 as it was in 2000, it is still closer than is anyone else's who is around today. I thought to end the program with the full finale, from the Dutchman's arrival back on the stage and misunderstanding what he sees before him, to the very end of the opera. It works very nicely in English because John Tomlinson is a quite stupendous personality as the Dutchman, and Kim Begley does sterling work as Erik in what I call the full unabridged finale (in other words, it includes the full Senta-Dutchman-Erik trio). Anyway, it is a fitting conclusion to our program, as the last notes you will hear sung are from *the* leading Senta of two decades back, one from whom we should have heard much more (and may still).

MISCELLANEOUS THOUGHTS ON THE MET'S *FLYING DUTCHMAN* HISTORY
AND ON A FEW OF THE SINGERS APPEARING ABOVE

Until working on this presentation, I had never realized how much the Metropolitan Opera has treated *The Flying Dutchman* as a barely wanted stepchild of Richard Wagner. I had not known it was the least performed of his ten post-*Rienzi* operas, having received fewer performances than even *Das Rheingold*, an opera that was at one time rarely performed outside the entire *Ring* cycle. Here are the statistics for the ten operas:

	<u>Number of Seasons Performed</u>	<u>Number of Performances</u>
LOHENGRIN	71	618*
DIE WALKÜRE	87	542
TANNHÄUSER	67	478
TRISTAN UND ISOLDE	70	463
MEISTERSINGER	70	416
PARSIFAL	72	302
SIEGFRIED	66	274
GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG	64	239
RHEINGOLD	61	172
FLYING DUTCHMAN	24	162

*The Met's most popular Wagner opera, LOHENGRIN, has not been performed in 14 years!

DUTCHMAN was out of the Met repertory from 1908 to 1950 except for 2 seasons with Jeritza and the 2 seasons that included Flagstad's 8 performances. In all but the last two performances, Friedrich Schorr was the Dutchman, but for those last two, Flagstad's London partner Janssen did the honors.

In 1950, hearing it perhaps for the first time, a NY critic called *Dutchman* a work of genius and mediocrity! They thought exactly the same thing about the prior night's *Don Carlo*, which just goes to show how much critics know or can be influenced by an opera's apparent lack of popularity.

In an age where Ring Cycles are so rare, we might recall that the Met did the entire cycle every season from 1898 to 1917, and again every season from 1924 to 1944. If not for WW1 and the years after, when no German opera was performed at the Met, it is probable that there would have been an uninterrupted period of some 46 seasons with a full *Ring* on the boards. These may not have been fully integrated *Rings*, but all 4 operas were done every season!

Final thought: In 1920, Kirsten Flagstad was hired for the Oslo Opera-Comique by one of its two directors, Alexander Varnay, the father of Astrid Varnay. When Flagstad got to the Met, she was coached through many of her roles by Hermann Weigert, who later similarly coached Astrid Varnay in her German repertoire. He and Varnay were married from 1944 until his death in 1955. He also occasionally accompanied Flagstad, and conducted a number of his wife's recordings. Small world!

Joe Pearce