

KIRSTEN FLAGSTAD

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The Americans were cruel to the great Kirsten Flagstad and abused her mercilessly accusing her of collaborating with the Nazis. This is to America's great and eternal shame.

She was the greatest and most glorious Wagnerian voice ever with Birgit Nilsson second. Flagstad was not always keen on her own top notes and Nilsson may have been more secure

Beauty beyond belief is how her voice was described.



Kirsten Malfrid Flagstad was born on 12 July 1895 at her grandparent's house in Hemar, Norway.



She was raised in Olso and was part of a musical family, her father being a conductor and her mother a soprano. Kirsten's debut was in 1913 in the Oslo Theatre as Nuri in d'Albert's Tiefland. She also sang in the chapel of the Oslo prison and the inmates were profoundly impressed.

She studied further in Stockholm with Dr Gillis Bratt who was a song specialist and an ENT specialist.

On 14 May, 1919 she married Sigurd Hall having broken her engagement to Gunnar Fredikson and in 1920 her daughter Else Marie was born. Also in 1920 she joined the Opera Comique whose director was Alexander Varnay the father of the soprano Astrid Varnay (1918-2006). The other director was Benno Singer.

Flagstad had the ability to learn roles quickly. She sang Desdemonia opposite Leo Slezak (1873-1946) and other lesser roles.

She sang regularly at the Stora theatre Goteborg in Sweden between 1928 and 1934. Her debut there was as Agathe in Weber's Der Freischutz. She played the role of Michal in Nielsen's Saul and David. On 31 July 1930, she married her second husband the industrialist and timber merchant Henry Johansen who encouraged her to sing Handel and so she made her Handelian debut in Rodelinda in 1932. After many years in operetta and light roles she decide to take on dramatic roles such as Tosca, Aida but it was as Wagner's Isolde that allowed her to find her real voice. His first performance of this greatest of all soprano roles was in 1932. She was introduced to Bayreuth with a few small roles in 1933 but, in 1934, she sang Sieglinde in Die Walkure and Guttrune in Gotterdammerung opposite Frida Leider (1885-1975)

She was seen by Otto Hermann Kahn of the Metropolitan Opera on his visit to Scandinavia 1929. She subsequently auditioned for the conductor Artur Bodansky and was offered the roles of Isolde, Brunnhilde, Leonora and the Marschallin in Der Rosenkavalier. But he debut was as Sieglinde in Die Walkure on 2 February 1935 which created a sensation. The soprano, Geraldine Farrar (1882-1967) hailed her as a star. Shortly after this triumph, Flagstad sang Isolde and all the major Wagner roles.

She was the supreme Wagnerian.



In 1936 and 1937 she performed Wagner roles with Beecham, Furtwangler and the great Fritz Reiner. She also appeared in lesser events such as the Bing Crosby Show and the Hollywood Variety show The big Broadcast of 1938 being introduced by Bob Hope.

She had a long standing feud with the tenor Lauritz Melchior (1890-1973) which started with an argument over some publicity picture during a game of bridge. There were disputes over her piano accompanists.

She returned to Norway in 1941 unaware of the political problems there. Because she performed in countries under Nazi rule public opinion went against her. She gave concerts for the United Jewish Appeal.

After her husband's death in 1946 it was discovered that he had been arrested and held for eight days by the Gestapo.

On 22 May 1950 at the Royal Albert Hall, London under Furtwangler she gave the premiere of Richard Strauss's Four

Last Songs surely the most beautiful song cycle ever written.

She returned to the Metropolitan Opera in 1951 having been invited by their general manager Rudolph Bing (1902-1997) who was vehemently criticised for this. American columnists abused Flagstad as a Nazi collaborator and were cruel to her. But she had decided that this was to be her last season. She had gained weight and felt she was unsuitable for young heroine roles.

She also sang at Covent Garden and her last appearance was in Oslo on 5 June 1953 although she continued to give charity concerts.

Her health deteriorated with psoriasis, arthritis and other ailments. She would say that the hospital was her second home. She became the first director of the Norwegian National Opera from 1958. She died of bone marrow cancer on 7 December 1962.

She wished to be buried in an unmarked grave.

There is a Kirsten Flagstad museum in Hemar.

One of the few all time great recordings was of Tristan and Isolde with Flagstad and Dietrich Fischer-Deskau and Wilhelm Furtwangler. And there are very very few really great recordings of anything!

Only the rare great sopranos can sing Wagner and as well as this.

There is nothing in all music that is as overwhelmingly beautiful as Flagstad singing the Liebestod which closes Wagner's Tristan and Isolde.