

Outline

# THE VOICE OF THE CENTURY

A BIOGRAPHY OF KIRSTEN FLAGSTAD

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## Part I: The making of a singer (1895-1935)

This initial part recounts the story of Flagstad's upbringing. It looks into the inherited traits that form the basis for her development into the most capacious dramatic soprano the world has so far heard. On her mother's side one can trace innate musicality of the highest order, with perfect pitch. But Flagstad is alone among her siblings in inheriting this. Reminiscent of a little Mozart, she is able to correct and supervise professional singers that are rehearsing with her mother.

The reader is given vivid descriptions of how her voice, which began as a frail soubrette, gradually develops through hard work and by singing an array of diverse parts at variety theatres. Flagstad is awarded a scholarship which allows her to go to Stockholm for song studies, but only for a year's time. Life is no walk in the park since it is difficult indeed to earn a living as a singer in Norway at the time.

She breaks out of an unhappy marriage, which leaves her as the sole provider for her child. With the economic recession of the 1920s her parents end up bankrupt, and so she ends up having to support them too. Flagstad goes to the banks for loans and accepts any theatrical roles she is offered. This work as a common variety singer gradually grinds her down. However, the press and people of influence slowly begin to take notice of her talent. This culminates in a public outcry over how the theatres are making use of Kirsten Flagstad's talent. Norway simply has no stage to suit her format. It is only when she is hired by Gothenburg's *Stora Teatern* (Grand Theatre) that she is finally given parts that are worthy of her voice.

Her fame is on the rise and foreign agents and singers begin spreading the word about her, which reaches the Metropolitan and Bayreuth. The end of this chapter sees her successfully taking up the challenge of parts such as Elsa in *Lohengrin*, Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser*, and finally, Isolde.

She falls into the arms of a substantially older, but wealthy wholesaler. She marries him, but this is to prove fateful.

In 1933-34 she performs some lesser parts at the Bayreuth festival, but is still seen as a potential successor to Frida Leider, the leading soprano of Bayreuth. Flagstad's soprano solo in Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> symphony, conducted by Richard Strauss on August 4<sup>th</sup> 1933, is duly noticed. Adolf Hitler, who has recently made himself the political leader of Germany, is

present at the festival, which is ominously festooned with swastikas on black banners.

The biography places her life and the lives of her musical contemporaries in this historical context, caught in the tension that arose between art and politics.

She came close to getting trapped by the Nazi's politicisation of Wagner's works and characters. The composer used ancient Nordic myths as the raw material for his operas. What do these myths convey, exactly, and how was this archaic wisdom reinterpreted and used in the service of a Nazi ideology? What were the consequences for Jewish singers and musicians in Germany after 1933? What were the consequences for culture in general? These are some of the questions the book explores.

Continuing to work in Bayreuth could have had dire consequences for Flagstad. Hitler's regime interpreted and deployed Wagner's opera's as Nazi propaganda, and the message proved difficult to separate from the performer. In 1934, a contact at the Metropolitan in New York saved her from a career in Germany.



Adolf Hitler and Winifred Wagner in Bayreuth Festspielhaus juli 1936. Göring in front and Goebbels in profile. Arkiv: Bayerische Staatsbibliothek.

## **Part II: The voice of the century (1935-1941)**

From 1935 until 1940, Wagner was not politicised in the same way in the USA. The American public experienced his operas outside of the German and Nazi context, as purely mythological dramas, cloaked in formidable music. Flagstad was permanently engaged at the Metropolitan from 1935 to 1941. It's claimed that she saved the opera house from bankruptcy and at the same time renewed opera as an art form in America.

Flagstad makes her New York debut at the Metropolitan in 1935 and experiences overnight fame. So, from this day onwards the programme at the world's largest opera house is tailored around Flagstad as the centrepiece. She becomes one of the USA's most prominent celebrities, handbills about her are distributed all over New York and she is featured on the cover of Time Magazine. Each year, after the end of the annual opera season in New York, she travels to London, to perform at Covent Garden, where as early as in 1935 she is pronounced the voice of the century.

At the Vienna Staatsoper she makes a huge success of her part as Isolde and moves on to reap great acclaim in Paris and Milan. Subsequently, Flagstad also becomes the main attraction of the festival in Zürich. Now every major opera house and concert hall in the world wants to put her on their stage.

However, her shy, stubborn and blunt character – far from the standard image of the prima donna – creates all sorts of misconceptions; especially in America where society has certain expectations of her as a celebrity.

Her demeanour also causes an array of situations and conflicts of the more comical kind. Every summer, she grants herself a two-month vacation, which she spends with her husband in Norway. In 1939 she decides to terminate her engagement with the Metropolitan. She wants to move home to Norway and restrict her performing to Europe. The date of departure is set for June 1940. But the German occupation of Norway, on April 9<sup>th</sup>, puts an end to all traffic at sea. In light of this, Flagstad decides to extend her tenure with the Met.

Personal differences result in an increasingly bitter conflict with the Norwegian ambassador in Washington, Wilhelm af Munthe von Morgenstjerne. He spreads a rumour that she is pro-Nazi and advises the Norwegian Crown Princess Märtha – who is at this time living in US-exile with her children – not to take part in Flagstad's charity concerts for the benefit of Norway.

Flagstad's husband is a member of the Norwegian national socialist party, NS, and his timber enterprise is doing business with the occupying power. He is in poor health, and in a number of telegrams he puts pressure on her to return home. But the Norwegian embassy refuses to issue her with a visa that will allow her to travel via German-occupied countries. Flagstad's Jewish impresario finally manages to organise a journey through Europe, which is to become very dramatic. She has made him and herself a promise never to let her voice be heard in Norway or to Nazis in occupied countries.

In the meantime, the ambassador has launched a campaign against her through the channels of the Norwegian foreign service. Agents clandestinely follow her on her voyage, sending back frequent reports about her.



Flagstad as Kundry, Metropolitan 1935. Arkiv: Flagstad-museet.

### **Part III: The years of struggle (1941-1950)**

Flagstad returns to a Norway divided into two opposing camps. The larger is made up of patriotic Norwegians, but a small minority of people have thrown in their lot with Quisling's party NS, which is cooperating with the Hitler-regime. Flagstad puts pressure on her husband, who leaves NS.

The German occupying authorities have established a propaganda central, the purpose of which is the cultural edification of Norwegians. The supreme head of this operation is Joseph Goebbels, and the goal is to develop deeper cultural affiliation and bonds of friendship between Germany and Norway. By sending the very best German musicians, singers, and orchestras to the occupied territory, Goebbels believes that the Norwegians can be won over. Nazi ideologists, and in particular SS leader Heinrich Himmler, harbour fantastical notions about Norwegians and Norwegian culture. Himmler is one of the most powerful

figures in the Third Reich. He is Adolf Hitler's right-hand man and one of the architects of the Holocaust. He views Norway as the cradle of the primordial Germanic race and Norwegians as its prime living exemplars. Blonde and blue-eyed Norwegians, direct descendants of the Vikings, are an unalloyed people. Himmler embarks on a number of race-safaris in the country to study «racially pure» Norwegians in remote valleys.

This illusory fascination with Norway and the Nordic region means that the occupying forces initially show great restraint and care towards the civilian population. The aim is not to vanquish the Norwegians, but to win them over, and then duly integrate them into German high culture.

Flagstad finds herself in a terribly difficult situation. When celebrated artists she has previously shared the stage with, in Europe and America, are now performing under the auspices of Nazism, she has to stay away. She rejects all German requests to sing at important occasions. Norway was the only occupied country in Europe where the Nazis established an Opera House. In 1943 they planned to stage *Der Fliegende Holländer*, and wanted Flagstad to sing the part of Senta. Towards the end of 1943 Flagstad finds the pressure so invasive that she takes refuge on a remote farm near the Swedish border. On this farm she gives a concert to members of the resistance. And in secrecy she establishes a generous fund for musicians. Many of them are out of work since they refuse to perform for the occupying power. A «musical front» has been opened, demanding the complete boycott of all musical activity directed by the Nazis.

Flagstad gives two charity concerts in Sweden and she and Wilhelm Furtwängler are the big attractions at the war-time festival in Zürich in 1942-43. These appearances constitute her only official performances in Europe during the war. The Norwegian foreign service has its spies tailing her while she is in Switzerland. Due to her husband's former membership in NS and his business dealings with the occupying power, they suspect her of Nazi sympathies. Her renown as a world leading interpreter of Wagner does not help her in this regard, as both Norwegians and others have come to witness how Richard Wagner's music has become a tool of Nazi propaganda. Brunhilde, one of the mythical protagonists in Wagner's operas, has almost been turned into a Joan of Arc-figure for Hitler's Germany. The problem for Flagstad is that her interpretation of Brunhilde, with Paramount and Big Broadcast having made films of her in the role, singing the Valkyrie war cry *Ho joto-ho*, has made her indelibly associated with the character.



In her husband's business operation, there are dramatic developments. Wholesaler Johansen has one foot in each camp. He does business with the occupying power and maintains a cordial relationship with the Germans. But at the same time, he supports the resistance. He has two grown-up children from a previous marriage, both of whom are involved with the underground movement. His son produces illegal newspapers, counterfeit identity papers and zone-passports for Jews and members of the resistance who are forced to escape to Sweden. The young man has more than one death sentence to his name and must in the end flee the country himself.

Flagstad's husband is imprisoned in 1944 and just barely avoids a death sentence from the military court. And then, in 1945, he is jailed again, this time by the home front, as a consequence of his previous membership in NS and his trading with the occupying power. His fortune, as well as Flagstad's own, is confiscated.

The singer is denied a passport and the right to leave Norway.

A clandestine campaign is mounted against her by prominent people in the foreign office and the first UN secretary general Trygve Lie, who is a former foreign secretary. And they are joined in this cause by two former Gestapo agents who are now working as informants for the new Norwegian secret police. They concoct a story of conspiracy in which Flagstad and her husband are said to be members of an underground organization bent on derailing the Norwegian treason trials and disgracing leading figures in the process.



NICKOLAS MURRAY  
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The organization supposedly has considerable funds abroad, and the investigation leads to the confiscation of Flagstad's cross-border fortune. Norwegian authorities write to her former employers asking for information, something which creates suspicions in the US. Her husband dies in prison in the summer of 1946. Then a well-known Norwegian lawyer, who was the prosecutor in the trial against Quisling, intervenes and secures her a passport. Desperately poor, she leaves Norway in a hurry in December 1946, having been held back by Norwegian authorities since May of 1945.

At this point the foreign service, in lockstep with certain media outlets, do what they can to stop her. They issue a number of press releases and convey packages of fake news to the American press. The ensuing coverage swings the American popular opinion against Flagstad. She is accused of Nazi sympathies, of having performed for Hitler during the war and of being a major war profiteer.

The campaign is successful and creates the most all encompassing controversy that any artist has endured in the USA post World War Two. It stirs up thousands of Americans who believe what the papers are saying about Kristen Flagstad. This results in commotion and protests at her concerts. The situation reaches its climax during a concert in Philadelphia on 22<sup>nd</sup> April, 1947, where stink bombs are thrown into the concert hall and the police have to intervene when a veritable fist fight breaks out between Flagstad's supporters and detractors. The Metropolitan is unwilling to bring her back on the stage, and she lives under a heavy burden of stress, at times even under police protection. During this period Flagstad is on the brink of collapse. Nevertheless, she is able to rebuild her career and return to greatness.

In Europe the circumstances around her performances are of a different, and more agreeable nature. An organization called The Jewish Relief Appeal has conducted a careful audit of Flagstad and found that she has done nothing wrong. They approach her while she is residing in London and ask her to give charity concerts to raise money for Jewish children orphaned by the Holocaust. They also make an effort in the American press, trying to correct the unjust portrayal of Flagstad. This calms the waters somewhat, and a prominent American writes a letter to the Norwegian prime minister demanding that the dirty

campaign pursued by the Norwegian ambassador and the embassy in Washington must come to a halt. It has a destabilizing effect on American society and is discrediting Norway, he writes.

Flagstad gives a number of concerts in Europe and performs at the major opera houses, including the festivals in Salzburg and Zürich. After the festival in Zürich in 1949, the 85-year old Richard Strauss is told in vivid terms how magnificent Flagstad's voice still is, and how she has interpreted several of his *lieder*. And so, on May 13<sup>th</sup> he proceeds to write her a long letter, enclosing his latest composition: *Vier letzte Lieder*. It would give him great pleasure, he writes, if she would premiere the piece with an orchestra and conductor of the first order. Strauss dies four months later, on September 8<sup>th</sup>, 1949; too soon to hear his music premiered at the Royal Albert Hall in London on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1950. The singer is Kirsten Flagstad, and the Philharmonic Orchestra is conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler.

From 1945 Flagstad has severe health issues, both physical and mental. Anxiety, insomnia and occasional aggressive bouts of psoriasis, make her life difficult.

In 1950 a comprehensive investigation conducted by the Norwegian chief prosecutor concludes that no underground organization of the kind Flagstad was accused of being involved with, was ever established during the war. The court-case seeking compensation from her deceased husband's business is closed, and Flagstad's fortune, which was illegally confiscated in 1945, is finally released.





#### Part IV: Last years (1950-1962)

The ideological protests against Flagstad eventually die down. She emerges victorious in the battle to prove her innocence and trustworthiness, and the Metropolitan engages her anew in 1950. Upon her entry on stage, the audience gives her a 20-minute long round of passionate applause. There is a large contingent of police present, as there is still concern for her safety. She makes her final performance at the Met on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1952.

In London, Sir Bernhard Miles creates a mini theatre for Flagstad, the Mermaid Theatre, where she sings the part of Dido in *Dido and Aeneas*, conducted by the renowned Geraint Jones. This is to become her final part. She gives a number of farewell concerts across Europe, but her relationship to Norway is still strained. When she is asked to sing at the opening of the International festival in Bergen in 1953, the ageing King Haakon refuses to attend. And at her farewell concert at the National Theatre in Oslo the same year, the royal box is empty.

Flagstad's final and most famous farewell concert takes place at the Royal Albert Hall on September 7<sup>th</sup>, 1957, while her last recording is made with the Wiener Philharmoniker in Sofiensaal, in May of the same year. During this recording session the musicians all laid down their instruments – *en bloc* – as a gesture of reverence to her voice and her musicality. In 1958 she is appointed the first head of the newly established Norwegian Opera and Ballet. But she never receives a salary, and in fact pays two extra singers out of her own pocket. At the opening ceremony on February 16<sup>th</sup>, 1959, she barely manages to carry out her duties, including escorting King Olav out of the building, before she breaks down in the elevator on her way back up to her office. The years of abuse and persecution have broken her health. For a time, she is able to lead the opera, partly from her sick bed, but must eventually give up. Her final years are tainted by severe pain and numerous hospitalizations.

The bitter relationship she still has to her mother country is inscribed in her testament, where she states that she wishes her death to be kept secret until her body has been cremated. She does not want anyone to attend her funeral and the ashes are not to be retained.

Kirsten Flagstad dies on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1962. Against her will, an urn containing her ashes is put into the earth at an anonymous memorial grove at the Western Cemetery in Oslo. She leaves behind a great legacy of recorded music. Recordings that have never been deleted from catalogues, several regarded as the foremost in global music history.

## Statement

The legendary Norwegian soprano Kirsten Flagstad enjoyed one of the greatest careers in the history of the Metropolitan Opera. Her debut in 1935, broadcast live on the radio across America, created a sensation. At the Met, Flagstad sang most of the great Wagner roles for dramatic soprano, quickly establishing herself as the pre-eminent Wagnerian soprano of the time. Flagstad reinvigorated public interest in opera and the operas of Wagner in particular. It would be hard to exaggerate Flagstad's fame in America. Reviewers competed to lavish praise on the singer's luxuriant, unforced, voluminous voice as well as on her elegant stage presence. Flagstad was one of the most praised singers in the history of opera, and critics named her *The Voice of the Century*. While the memory of her great singing lives on, what is missing is an accomplished biography of her compelling life story. I hope such a book is written. It would be welcomed by opera lovers throughout the world.

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The Metropolitan Opera.