

The Kirsten Flagstad Memorial Collection

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THE Kirsten Flagstad Memorial Collection, established in the library of the California Historical Society in 1964 as a part of one of the largest California theater collections in the State, not only records the career of one of the foremost singers of all time but also reflects the momentous span of history in which she was so inextricably involved. Mme. Flagstad's career covered a period of 40 years, from December 12, 1913 (in the role of Nuri in "Tiefland"), to her farewell concert (with the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra) on December 12, 1953 (on both occasions in the National Theater, Oslo).

During her long career she appeared often in recital throughout California and in performances of opera in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Sacramento. She was scheduled to sing for the first time with the San Francisco Opera Company on Monday night, November 4, 1935; and on Sunday afternoon, November 3, she wrote, ". . . I am very happy to be here. I think it is a marvelous place." And in 1960 she wrote to another young friend, "I nearly envy you the sights of San Francisco, my favorite city in the U.S.A." Her friendships in California were deep and lasting and, combined with her career in that State, have provided an intimate documentation of unique personal achievement. She was history's child, sometimes joyously but often to her utter dismay and bewilderment, particularly from the day of her debut at the Metropolitan Opera on February 2, 1935, during the Great Depression. She was thenceforth in a spotlight of sustained, fantastic intensity until her death, which made headlines 9 years after her formal farewell as a singer and 7 years after her last public appearance in the United States.

The nucleus of the collection was furnished by Mrs. Milton H. Esberg, Sr., of San Francisco, whose friendship with Flagstad began in 1935 and ended only with the singer's death on December 7, 1962. The cofounder of the collection is a young native Californian, Prof. Samuel Draper, whose friendship was particularly precious to Mme. Flagstad in the last decade of her life.

The author is administrative assistant and secretary to the dean of the graduate division, University of California, Berkeley. Her friendship with Mme. Flagstad, which began in 1947, has enabled her to work closely with the founders of the collection and to make generous contributions to it.

The first "obvious" area in the enormous span of the collection is that of the "fountain of voice" itself—in recordings; in Flagstad's personal scores; handwritten tour schedules; newspaper reviews; magazine articles; photographs and programs from concert, opera, radio, television, and the one motion picture she made; books of autobiography and biographical letters; informal photographs on tour; and telegrams.

Second, dramatic issues of acclaim and conflict are presented as they developed between the depression of the 1930's and the cataclysm of the Second World War. Flagstad's career and life became inseparable from the controversy surrounding her return to Norway in 1941 and her residence there until 1947. The collection contains both paeans that will never die and the uninformed hysteria that will always find its audience.

A third striking area of the collection is in those items that show Flagstad's universal appeal, her ability to inspire total devotion and loyalty, and her firm though sometimes strained friendships with people of every age and background, from youngsters to people many years her senior. These friends came from every walk of life and from backgrounds both musical and nonmusical. Her gift, as an artist and as a woman, for tenderly and vitally touching people who never saw or heard her in person was phenomenal, and it is clearly present in these papers.

Finally, these documents reveal Mme. Flagstad as a human being of rare charm, complete honesty, and a sometimes childlike trust and delight. She endured deeply abrasive jealousies from innumerable friends, enemies, and fans; most of the last (it must be admitted with some justice) felt that they had to fight for the time and attention they wanted from her and sometimes mistakenly believed they deserved to have. Although at times she appeared cruel or thoughtless or selfish, she was only impatient with sham and determined to preserve, even within her family, the kind of wholesome dignity that she felt privacy alone could provide. She was generous to a fault and at the same time puzzled by shyness in those she liked; apparently she never really understood that she was awe inspiring!

These "areas" of the collection are, of course, inseparable, but they indicate to some small degree its extent and importance. A description of specific items perhaps most logically begins with mention of Flagstad's personal scores for "Tristan und Isolde," "Tannhäuser," and "Die Walküre," although her working scores were edited copies of only her own roles. These are priceless, especially

since she was not at all disposed to philosophize or discourse on role interpretation or study methods (despite numerous "interviews" published over the years). The scores provide some clue, perhaps not to interpretation but to those elements that demanded extra concentration even from a supreme artist. The markings are relatively few, some in very light lead pencil, others in different colors, identifying words that brought difficulty in pronunciation, underlining phrases and extended passages, and using penciled-in Norwegian as a guide in "Walküre" and "Tannhäuser." There is the famous notation in red in "Die Walküre" (the most heavily marked of the scores we have), "E, nicht D," and "Jederfalls tempo!" where Brunnhilde begs her sisters for a horse. Her score for "Tristan" as it has come to us is so worn that pages are loose and the spine is bare. One cannot wonder at this!

A copy of the first review of her singing to appear in an American publication is here (Oscar Thompson sent it from Oslo in 1932): "In another direction, Norway gave me more than I had hoped to find. . . . The evening of my arrival brought 'Tristan und Isolde,' sung in German at the National Theater. . . . Outstanding in the generally creditable performance was the really distinguished and beautifully poised singing of Isolde by the Norse soprano Kirsten Flagstad." A copy of the article from *Time*, December 4, 1939, describes the performance of "Tristan und Isolde" at the Chicago Opera in which Giovanni Martinelli sang Tristan to Flagstad's Isolde and McArthur's conducting. And we have Claudia Cassidy's telegram to Flagstad on the occasion of the Chicago "Tristan und Isolde" on November 16, 1947, together with a program she autographed for a young friend she had met only 6 months before, "In remembrance of Chicago . . ." There is the beautiful letter written to her by Neil Tierney, critic for the *Liverpoolian* in Liverpool, who was privileged to hear there, on July 25, 1951, the last Isolde of Flagstad's career. Indeed, there are programs, reviews, letters, photographs, and news items from much of the world.

On September 23, 1964, Leif Stake wrote: "I have examined the various papers being left and am sorry to say that as Mme. Kirsten Flagstad was no collector she replied to all letters very quickly [open to some dispute by friends who waited anxiously to see her handwriting on an envelope] and after some time she burned both the letters she received and her answers." Disponent Stake was able to find and send, however, a letter she received from Joseph Leftwich, Director of the United Jewish Relief Appeal, London, July 1948; a letter from "The Bohemians" (the distin-

guished Metropolitan Opera men's club), January 6, 1938; a telegram of thanks from Edward Ziegler, Springfield, Ohio, April 21, 1937; two letters from Malcolm Sargent; a telegram from the Symphony of the Air; a letter from Wilhelm Furtwängler; the letter from Neil Tierney and the telegram from Claudia Cassidy, both mentioned above; a letter from the National Arts Foundation; a letter from Rudolf Bing; and a letter from Victor de Sabata. Stake also sent a great many 8" × 10" photographs from performances, most of them carefully identified on the back by Mme. Flagstad, and it was Stake also who sent the scores, all in faithful cooperation with the request of Else and Arthur Dusenberry, daughter and son-in-law of Mme. Flagstad.

From the Dusenberrys also have come copies of the citations for decorations conferred on Mme. Flagstad by King Haakon in 1935, 1937, and 1939 and copies of original photographs from her pre-1935 career as well as snapshots at home in Norway and in America. The Dusenberrys, while retaining family remembrances, have been generous and most helpful and will continue to cooperate with the society as may be appropriate in the future.

Others also have been cooperative. Bernard Miles has promised tape copies of his recording of "The Truth about Tristan" and a copy of his forthcoming book on Flagstad, which tells of his great personal and artistic friendship with her and of the establishment of the Mermaid Theatre, where she spent some of the happiest days of her life. Miles, of course, will keep unique materials in the archives of the Mermaid Theatre, but we are hopeful that a description of these will eventually be available to those who study our collection. For most of the news clippings, programs, and photographs from England we are indebted to Donald Bateman of London. Edwin McArthur has contributed a magnificent set of enlarged private snapshots, each with a complete and detailed identifying description; here again we hope that our collection will also acquire in the future a description of the materials with which the McArthurs would naturally not choose to part. John Clark, whose friendship with Flagstad began when he was a child, has donated a letter from Fiorello La Guardia, written in November 1944, referring to her unforgettable "Fidelio." Robert D. Strohmeyer, of San Francisco, has given photographs from performances in that city from 1935 to 1950. Mme. Flagstad's housekeeper, Beret Stabben, has donated many personal items, including a few hand-carved dolls (Tristan, Isolde, Brangaene, Brünnhilde), and the singer's desk calendar, set as it was on the last day (May 14, 1962)

on which she was able to sit at her writing table in Kristiansand.

Just as she was "not a collector," Mme. Flagstad was not a prolific correspondent, but to Mrs. Esberg of San Francisco she did write, from 1935 on; and Mrs. Esberg has donated all the letters, including one she received, tattered and torn, opened by censors, dated November 12, 1942, from K. Johansen, Konsert Bolaget, Stockholm. Arrangements for tours are documented in a voluminous collection of correspondence between, among, and about the various concert agents and opera administrators who were involved in Mme. Flagstad's career in the United States both before and after the Second World War; and Mme. Flagstad's letters to Mrs. Esberg from South America on a tour in late 1948 explain some of the difficulties she encountered in attempting to handle her own arrangements and affairs in accordance with her natural inclination for this kind of independence. We have also three reviews from Caracas newspapers that she herself clipped, marked, and sent to Edwin McArthur.

Other letters include a number she wrote, several in the last months of her life, to friends. Of special interest is the statement by former President Hoover detailing his participation in the efforts of Mme. Flagstad's friends to facilitate her return to Norway in 1941. Because of concern for her safety none could give their wholehearted approval to her determination—a determination, however, that one of them described as "morally heroic."

Flagstad's passion for privacy is made clear in innumerable ways. We have, for instance, the letter she wrote about 3 weeks after her husband's death (in June 1946): ". . . I have not been left alone yet so I have not been able to cry out." A decade later she apologized for not writing to her dearest friend, saying that she had been ill and one does not wish to burden one's friends.

There is a 1965 letter from a Stockton, Calif., friend of Annie Johansen (Flagstad's stepdaughter). Annie stayed with this friend after she had fled Norway by way of Siberia and Japan in October 1940, in order to see Flagstad in the United States. And there is a photograph of Flagstad and her "little family" in Bozeman, Mont., March 23, 1947, signed by Else and autographed by Flagstad for herself and Sigurd, who was then 6 months old and sitting on his grandmother's lap. There are innumerable private snapshots, in black and white and in color, taken in Norway and in America, including a portrait taken by Judith Anderson in Carpinteria, Calif., on October 28, 1949. We have the program from her second post-war appearance, in Paris, January 25–26, 1947 (at the second Paris

concert the conductor sought to distinguish himself by having the orchestra solo in the "Liebestod" with Flagstad sitting in the wings; he did distinguish himself!).

Flagstad continued to sing as long as her health would permit (she never stopped trying to improve her breathing!), and she took great joy in the singing of those last years, which involved fulfilling wartime promises to sing when freedom came to the congregations of the churches of Norway. The collection includes two commercial recordings of sacred songs. Much to her regret, these never received the publicity given to her other recordings; they are supreme evidence of the emotional and vocal range of her voice very near the end of life itself.

Her sense of humor is revealed in many of the items of the collection: "You do not like Kraft Cheese, you told me. I probably sing for Kraft again in September."—— "I must tell you big news. Else is going to get married in Montana 10th or 11th of August. I had to give in instead of letting her wait until May when she becomes 21. She asked so nicely." —— To a friend who suggested that a loss of weight had resulted from traveling to hear her in recital and opera around the country: "It doesn't have that effect on me."

The collection also includes articles from Norwegian-American and Scandinavian-American newspapers and Norwegian newspaper accounts of her farewell concert, of the opening of the National Opera under her direction in 1959, and of her funeral services in 1962. It is of interest to note not only that she was honored again and again by two kings of Norway, but also that Haakon was present at her debut in 1913 and Olav sent a funeral wreath in 1962. Set Svanholm, distinguished Wagnerian tenor and director of the Swedish Opera, had his wife write for him in March 1964: "Unfortunately I have been seriously ill since a brain operation last fall and am not yet capable to write an article about our friend and great star Kirsten Flagstad. As soon as I can write again you will hear from me." This great man died before he was able to "write again," but his letter is an incomparable tribute to Flagstad.

Though scholars will be able to study the collection free from descriptive commentary such as this and to take their research in the directions they find meaningful, the California Historical Society is especially grateful to have in its keeping not only the comprehensive and unrestricted content of the collection but also documentation of the "personal" Flagstad, who was at once more complex and more articulate than publications to date have been able to suggest.