

**Kirsten Flagstad** was born in Hamar to a musical family; her father was a conductor and her mother a pianist. She received her early musical training in Oslo and made her stage debut at the National Theatre in Oslo as Nuri in Eugen d'Albert's *Tiefland* in 1913. Her first recordings were made between 1913 and 1915.

After further study in Stockholm with Dr. Gillis Bratt, she pursued a career in opera and operetta in Norway. In 1919, she married her first husband Sigurd Hall. Later that year she signed up with the newly created Opera Comique in Oslo, under the direction of Alexander Varnay and Benno Singer. Varnay was the father of the famous soprano Astrid Varnay. Her ability to learn roles quickly was noted, often only taking a few days to do so. She sang Desdemona opposite Leo Slezak, Minnie, Amelia and other lesser roles at the Opera Comique. She sang at the city theater of Göteborg, Sweden, between 1928 and 1932. It was there that Flagstad made her debut singing Agathe in *Der Freischütz* by Weber. In 1930, a revival of Carl Nielsen's *Saul and David* featured Flagstad singing the role of Michal. On 31 May 1930 she married her second husband, the Norwegian industrialist and lumber merchant Henry Johansen, who subsequently helped her in expanding her career. In 1932 she made her debut in *Rodelinda* by George Frideric Handel. Some critics claimed that her voice was too big for Handel and much more suited to Wagner.

After singing operetta and lyric roles such as Marguerite in *Faust* for over a decade, Flagstad decided to take on heavier operatic roles such as Tosca and *Aida*. The part of *Aida* helped to unleash Flagstad's dramatic abilities. In 1932, she took on the role of Isolde in Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* and appeared to have found her true voice. Ellen Gulbranson (1863-1946), a Norwegian soprano at Bayreuth, convinced Winifred Wagner to audition Flagstad for the Bayreuth Festival. Flagstad sang minor roles in 1933, but at the next season in 1934, she sang the roles of Sieglinde in *Die Walküre* and Guttrune in *Götterdämmerung* at the Festival.

Flagstad's debut at the Met, as Sieglinde in Wagner's *Die Walküre* on the afternoon of February 2, 1935 created a sensation, though it was not planned as a special event. Flagstad was virtually unknown in the United States at the time, and the Saturday afternoon slot was usually reserved for lesser-known singers while the top stars performed in the evening. The performance was, however, broadcast nationwide on the Met's weekly syndicated radio program, and the first inkling of the deluge of critical praise to come was given when intermission host and former Met star *Geraldine Farrar* discarded her prepared notes, overwhelmed by what she had just heard, and breathlessly announced that a new star had just been born. Days later, Flagstad sang Isolde, and later that month, she performed Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre* and *Götterdämmerung* for the first time. Later that season, Flagstad sang Elsa in *Lohengrin*, Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser*, and her first Kundry in *Parsifal*. Almost overnight, she had established herself as the pre-eminent Wagnerian soprano of the era. According to most critics, she still remains the supreme Wagnerian dramatic soprano on disc by virtue of her unique voice. It has been said that she saved the Metropolitan Opera from looming bankruptcy. *Fidelio* (1936 and later) was her only non-Wagnerian role at the Met before the war. In 1936, she performed all three Brünnhildes in the San Francisco Opera's Ring cycle. In 1937, she first appeared at the Chicago City Opera Company.

In 1936 and 1937, Flagstad performed the roles of Isolde, Brünnhilde and Senta at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, under Sir Thomas Beecham, Fritz Reiner and Wilhelm Furtwängler, arousing as much enthusiasm there as she had in New York. She toured

Australia in 1938, while her rendition of Brünnhilde's Battle Cry from Wagner's *Die Walküre* was captured on film in a segment of the Hollywood musical anthology *The Big Broadcast of 1938*.

However, her career at the Met was not without its ups-and-downs. Flagstad got involved in a long-running feud with tenor co-star Lauritz Melchior after Melchior took offense to some comments Flagstad made about "stupid publicity photos" which Flagstad felt Melchior had pressured her into doing. Flagstad also feuded with the Met's general manager, Edward Johnson, after conductor Arthur Bodansky's death, when she wanted to be conducted in future by her accompanist, Edwin McArthur, rather than by Erich Leinsdorf. When she left the Met during the early 1940s she had patched up her differences with both Melchior and Johnson. Melchior and Johnson, however, did little to help. In response to repeated entreaties from her husband, Flagstad had returned to Norway via Berlin in 1941, though she only performed during the war in countries (such as Sweden and Switzerland) not occupied by German forces. Her husband was arrested after the war for war-time profiteering in Germany. This, together with her decision to remain in occupied Norway, made her unpopular, particularly in the United States. The Norwegian ambassador and the columnist Walter Winchell spoke out against her, and the anti-Nazi conductor Arturo Tiscanini bypassed her for his NBC radio broadcasts, choosing the American dramatic soprano Helen Traubel instead. In a conciliatory gesture, in 1948 she performed several benefit concerts for the United Jewish Appeal. Flagstad eventually returned to the Metropolitan Opera, invited by its new general manager, Sir Rudolf Bing, who was furiously criticized for this choice: "*The greatest soprano of this century must sing in the best opera*", he replied.

During four consecutive Covent Garden seasons, from 1948 to 1952, Flagstad repeated all her regular Wagnerian roles, including Kundry and Sieglinde. It was also during this time that she gave the world premiere of Richard Strauss's "Vier letzte Lieder" under the baton of Wilhelm Furtwängler at the Royal Albert Hall. The final rehearsal on 22 May 1950, was a legendary performance and was captured on tape and is commercially available today. She toured South America in 1948 and returned to San Francisco in 1949 but was not invited back to the Met until Sir Rudolf Bing became manager. In the 1950-1951 season, although she was aged well into her 50s, Flagstad showed herself still in remarkable form as Isolde, Brünnhilde and Leonore.

She gave her farewell operatic performance at the Met on 1 April 1952 in the title role of Gluck's *Alceste*, and in London as Dido in Urcell's *Dido and Aeneas* at the Mermaid Theatre (in the 1951 Festival of Britain season): the portrayal was recorded (in studio), and issued by EMI in January 1953 (see: Recordings).

After her retirement from the stage, she continued to give concert performances and record, primarily for Decca Records. She even made some stereophonic recordings, including excerpts from Wagner's operas with Hans Knappertsbusch and Sir Georg Solti conducting the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. In 1958, she sang the part of Fricka in Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, the first installment in Solti's first complete stereophonic set of the Ring Cycle, released by Decca on LP and reel-to-reel tape.

From 1958 to 1960, Flagstad was the general manager of the Norwegian National Opera. She died in Oslo from bone marrow cancer in 1962 at the age of 67.