



Sons of Norway
HERITAGE PROGRAMS



MiniPresentation#56

KIRSTEN FLAGSTAD

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On **February 2, 1935** a Norwegian singer conquered the music world of the United States with a grand performance that swept the audience completely off its feet. It was soprano Kirsten Flagstad's legendary debut at the Metropolitan Opera. As Sieglinde in "Die Walküre", she stepped from the ranks of unknown singers into the limelight reserved for truly great performers.

She had been singing Wagner roles in Bayreuth, Germany, when she was approached by the Met. She had been in contact with them several years before but had not been interested at that time. **Kirsten Flagstad** never really pursued an international career—it more or less happened to her.

Born in **Hamar, Norway**, to a very musical family, she became an accomplished singer as well as pianist and score-reader at an early age. Her mother was quite ambitious on her behalf, making sure that her musical education was broad and thorough. Later, Flagstad used to say: "My musicality is inherited. What I have done is to develop my voice."

At the age of ten she already knew several large operatic roles by heart and was already studying Wagner roles, starting with Elsa in Lohengrin. A few months before her **23rd birthday** she had her official debut as a soloist in Oslo and spent the next years singing operas and operettas in Norway and Sweden. Scandinavian critics soon became well aware of her exceptional voice, but she was not known outside of Scandinavia. She was happily married and enjoyed her family life and her music the way it was.

But this idyll did not last. Her private life came to a crisis in the late 1920s when her marriage broke down. This—combined with her success as a singer and the process of maturing in general—made her set new priorities and change her goals. This was the situation when she met with representatives from the **Metropolitan** in 1934. She was soon to become America's—and the world's—leading Wagnerian soprano.

Kirsten Flagstad continued to be a celebrated Metropolitan soprano for six years. She was at times their most expensive singer, but also their most reasonable—in more ways than one. She never canceled a performance and never threw temper tantrums or put on prima donna airs. Her golden voice carried the Met from success to success and continued to result in **sold-out houses**.

The **Flagstad era** at the Met came to an abrupt end in 1941 when she returned to Norway—a Norway which at that time was occupied by the Nazis. Her decision to go home was heavily criticized both in the United States and in Norway. Flagstad herself felt it was a private matter. She wanted to be with her husband, a Norwegian businessman whom she had met some years after her first marriage broke up. But according to public opinion, her action was inappropriate and unacceptable, and her name was not cleared until the war was over.

Then she started a second career. She was past fifty; she had been off the stage for several years; she was still accused by some of having been a Nazi collaborator; her concerts were picketed—but Flagstad surmounted all of these difficulties with her great personal integrity and her vocal brilliance. She returned to the Met and continued to delight American opera lovers until she retired in 1952 at the age of 57. The following year she gave her farewell performance as an opera singer in London. But she continued to give benefit concerts until she took on another great task: that of becoming the first director of the **Norwegian Opera**.

She looked forward to utilizing her expertise and experience in helping her native country build a strong opera tradition. Regretfully, illness forced her to resign after two short, yet productive and promising years. She was only in her sixties and still had so much to share and give, but time was running out. In **December 1962**, Kirsten Flagstad died, but through recordings her magnificent voice can still delight and amaze us.