

### "Thoughts on Tristan, the Heldentenor Voice, and Lauritz Melchior" - by Gilles Denizot

While searching for documents on the Heldentenor Lauritz Melchior I discovered an eloquent article signed by the eminent music critic Lawrence Gilman, published on March 21, 1929 in the New York Herald Tribune. This essay narrates the debut of the great Danish Heldentenor at the former Metropolitan Opera House of New York in the part of Tristan. It stimulated my reflection and I would like to present here some of these elements relative to Heldentenors or heroic tenors, more specifically in Wagner's Tristan.

Here is the article :

#### "A New Tristan at the Metropolitan : Lauritz Melchior's Performance, a Notable Event"



Yesterday was the thirty-ninth birthday of Mr. Lauritz Melchior, the Metropolitan's Wagner tenor and Mr. Melchior, evidently an unselfish and altruistic person, celebrated the occasion by making a present to New York operagoers of a new Tristan. The party, to be sure, was arranged by the Metropolitan for its Wagner Cycle subscribers; but the major gift of the occasion was the generous donation of Mr. Melchior.

It was one worth having. We see no need for making any bones of the fact that Mr. Melchior disclosed himself as not only the best Tristan in the Metropolitan's present company, but one of the best that has been heard here in a decade. In fact, we cannot recall a Tristan since the dim days before the war who has sung the music so well as Mr. Melchior did yesterday.

A good deal of it he sang more than well. There was often beauty of tone, beauty of phrasing, beauty and a delicate truth of sentiment, in Mr. Melchior's singing - especially in the quieter passages of the love duo ("*O sink hernieder*" was sung almost wholly in tune by both the enraptured lovers). In the Vision scene of the Third Act, Mr. Melchior's "*Siehst du sie? Siehst du sie noch nicht?*" was of rare tonal loveliness - even more poetic in timbre and texture than the tone-color achieved by the horn quartet in the succeeding cantilena that sustains the wondrous song of the dream-haunted lover.

Mr. Melchior's medium register is especially responsive, and when the music's tessitura favors him, and he can still sing *mezza voce*, the results are grateful to a degree that can be understood only by those who have suffered, as so many of us have, from the hideous brazen bawling, the tonal mayhem committed by a majority of the Metropolitan's Heldentenors during recent years.

Mr. Melchior did not yell, and most Tristans, sooner or later in that terrific Third Act, resort to yelling. He treated the great fortissimo outbursts of his part as Wagner expressly said that he wished them treated: that is to say, he sang the notes; he did not shout or declaim them, as certain of his Wagner colleagues at the Metropolitan indefensibly do. Even the desperate and terrible "*Verflucht, weh dich gebräut!*" which few Tristans can resist the temptation to deliver *parlando*, was really sung: one heard, wonder of wonders, the F, the D flat, the C and the

octave F.

This is scarcely to say that Mr. Melchior has nothing to learn as a "Tristan" singer. But the point, the important point, is that he delivered the music of the role - which is so essentially a prodigious adventure in impassioned song - with a sensitive perception of its shape, its hue, its symmetry; and he did this without depriving the music of its expressional significance. The song was packed with meaning - even exceptionally so: we do not recall that any recent Tristan has voiced the hysterical despair of his "*Verloren!*" in the scene of the arriving ship as Mr. Melchior did yesterday.

No doubt Mr. Melchior will convey to us more of the complexity and subtlety of the part as he continues to live with it (he made his first appearance in the role only two months ago at Barcelona). In action he is still a bit immobile, and he turned the necessary reserve of his first scene with Isolde almost into apathy. The sense of tension was insufficiently conveyed.

In aspect the new Tristan is surprisingly personable. His generous size is turned shrewdly to account. The face is bearded - acquiring gravity and a hint of epic romance. The costuming is felicitous. Altogether, a welcome Tristan.

We salute him, and wish him many happy returns. Surely Mr. Gatti will introduce this Tristan to his regular subscribers, now that he has met the fanatical Wagnerian band !

Lawrence Gilman, New York Herald Tribune, March 21, 1929

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I like the the tone and the manner of writing. The article shows respect for Melchior on his debut at the MET. It changes greatly from the false compliments or the mean criticisms the singers receive nowadays. The tone Mr. Gilman uses and the excellence of its writing allows a more pleasant reading. Besides, this article teaches something, rather than comments on a more less successful evening. It seems finally that Mister Gilman knows the operatic voice and its technique quite well, as well as the score. This certainly is an advantage when one claims to criticize the performance of a singer.

### **Heldentenor "Fach" or Vocal Category**

"Heldentenor" is the German word for "heroic tenor". Heroic as in heavy, weighty, solid, dramatic, forceful, robust, and - in Will Crutchfield's words - able to come back "again and again with immense power to the same few notes in the upper midrange, without fatigue, without faltering".

According to Richard Miller ("*Training Tenor Voices*" Schirmer Books, p.9 and following), the Heldentenor is primarily a Wagner singer. His repertoire includes Tannhäuser, Siegmund, Tristan, Siegfried, and Parsifal. His Passaggio notes are generally C4-F4, which is approximately a tone below those of the "lyric tenor", and half a tone below the "spinto tenor". On the other hand, they are identical to the register changes of the "dramatic tenor" and parallel to some Heldenbariton (heroic baritones) whose Passaggio notes can be close to Bflat3-Eflat4.

One must differentiate, in my opinion :

- the **lyric tenor**, who debuted as let us say Tamino or Rodolfo and who, when maturity allowed, approached a selection of more dramatic tenor roles. For instance :

Heinrich Knote, Walter Widdop (debuts as Radames in 1923, excellent in the Handel oratorios), Franz Völker, Ludwig Suthaus, Gotthelf Pistor (first actor then debut as Froh in Bayreuth in 1925), Fritz Wolff (debut as Loge in Bayreuth in 1925), Carl Hartmann (debuts as Tannhäuser in 1928), Max Lorenz, Torsten Ralf, Wolfgang Windgassen, Hans Hopf, Jon Vickers (debuts as Duca, famous Peter Grimes, Otello, and Tristan)

- the **dramatic baritone** or high baritone (sometimes wrongly categorized as middle-voice singer) who debuted in parts such as Jago or Escamillo, and who reaches the Heldentenor repertoire by pushing chest voice higher than health recommends. William Vennard ("*Singing, the Mechanism and the Technic*" Carl Fischer Music 1967, p.79, par. 283) mentions that the Heldentenor may develop from a "spinto tenor", but is more often a "pushed-up baritone". Despite this statement, Vennard acknowledges the rarity of such voices.

- the **robusto tenor**, whose voice is naturally heavier, slightly lower than lyric tenors, and whose "high-voice" category is not immediately diagnosed. This singer, when not recognized as a future dramatic tenor and deprived of an appropriate technical training (especially as regards to the higher Passaggio) will drown himself in a lower tessitura. Some of the greatest dramatic tenors have debuted as baritones, because of the incapacity of the

teacher to identify the tenor voice (heavier and darker than the light and solar quality more commonly associated to tenors) or to train the upper Passaggio and high register of the tenor. For instance :

Lauritz Melchior (debuts as Silvio in *I Pagliacci* in 1913, the tenor debuts in *Tannhäuser* in 1918), Ramon Vinay (baritone debuts as Conte di Luna, then tenor debuts as Don Jose, finally back to the baritone repertoire in 1962 as Telramund), Set Svanholm (debuts as baritone then tenor debuts as Radames), Paul Kötter, Jean de Reszke, Placido Domingo (debuts as baritone then Borsas in 1959).

This third category includes some impressive names. This is more than a simple mistake in Fach diagnosis. Singers presented a peculiar voice, whose true nature remained undetected at the beginning of their training.

### **The Transition from Baritone to Heldentenor**

The example of Lauritz Melchior is significant : Melchior had begun to study singing in 1908 (18-year old) supervised by Paul Bang at the Royal Opera School of Copenhagen. Five years later on April 02, 1913, he debuts as a baritone at the Opera of Copenhagen as Silvio. One can also hear him in *Germet Father* and the famous "Di Provenza". Among his other baritone roles, one finds Brander, Conte di Luna, Morales, and Ottokar. The first-performer of Mahler's "Lied von der Erde", Madam Charles Cahier, will catch Melchior singing a high C to help a colleague. On her recommendation, Melchior will obtain a sabbatical leave and a scholarship to study. Between 1917 and 1918, Melchior studies with the Danish tenor Vilhelm Herold who had sung Wagner at Covent Garden, in Chicago, and Copenhagen between 1900 and 1915.

Melchior's debuts as a tenor took place on October 08, 1918 in the title role of *Tannhäuser* in Copenhagen. Although he was also cast as Canio and Samson, he had to wait and work more. Another scholarship allowed Melchior to perfect his voice until 1923 with Victor Beigel, Ernst Grenzebach and the legendary dramatic soprano of Vienna, Anna Bahr-Mildenburg. Melchior was also close to Cosima and Siegfried Wagner in Bayreuth. The reopening of the Festspielhaus foreseen for 1924 approached and Melchior was committed to it as Siegmund and Parsifal. He also had sung in Berlin with Frida Leider in 1923.

In 1924, finally, after two years of "silence", he was ready to face the operatic world. His Heldentenor's real debuts happened on May 14, 1924 at Covent Garden as Siegmund. It was a considerable success. Some weeks later, he was in Bayreuth as Siegmund and Parsifal. Then he is *Tannhäuser* at the Met, without real enthusiasm from the audience. He will only sing during eight evenings. The second season offers him only one single performance. He will need another steady contract with the Hamburg Opera and his debuts as Lohengrin, Otello, Radames and Jean de Leyden (*Le Prophète*, Meyerbeer) before he is recognized. The real triumph at the Met is on the occasion of his Tristan on March 20, 1929 and the success does not stop until his farewell performance on the same stage on February 02, 1950 as Lohengrin.

The greatest Heldentenor thus needed a vocal development from 1908 to 1924 to really sing with his true voice and in his true Fach. Sixteen years during which he alternates roles on stage and shaping of his voice backstage. That is why Lauritz Melchior, convinced that one is not born Heldentenor but that one becomes one, created a program intended to help potential Heldentenors. He knew well that the transition from baritone (real one or wrongly classified as such) to Heldentenor requires time, money, and moral support, during the years of retreat from the stage. These years are necessary to the singer who has to humbly shape his new instrument and forget his past successes. He then needs to find a welcoming stage for his new debuts. These are, in my opinion, the most precarious. I often think of Melchior's history when I look back and observe the path of my vocal studies and what remains to be accomplished. This example inspires me confidence and patience.

### **Technical Specificities of the Heldentenor Voice and its Training**

The Heldentenor possesses the heaviest instrument of all tenors. He must face a long tessitura, sustain notes frequently situated in the Passaggio or in the medium register without thickening the voice, and all this mostly through a wide Wagnerian orchestra.

Because of their strengthened muscular structure (compared to most female singers), the vocal training of the male singers generally takes more time. In the case of the Heldentenor, one faces the most difficult case because one deals with the heaviest instrument in a high tessitura. Alan R. Lindquest considered the dramatic tenor the most complex voice to train. It is necessary to discipline the muscle structure in order to channel the voice without falling into the trap of pushing while trying to sing high and loud. My professor David Jones says that it is necessary to learn to sing "light and loud" simultaneously. One needs to gain flexibility in vocal training. It is also

the elasticity of the Heldentenor muscular system (especially of the rib cage) that one needs to train. My personal experience and research on this subject clearly indicated the necessity to obtain an increased yet supple physical resistance in order to sing this repertoire.

One should train the voice of the dramatic tenor "from the top down". The nature of the "tenore robusto" is to offer very rich low and medium registers. If the singer weighs down these two registers, it becomes impossible for him to lighten the mass of the vocal folds on ascending scales in the Passaggio and above. The burden laid on the cords is too important and prevents the healthy pivot of the larynx. There are two possibilities left : the singer has to stop singing or needs to compress the breath and force his vocal cords to phonate as high and loud as possible. This is damaging for the singer's vocal health. It is vain and suicidal to push the heavy mechanism (or chest voice) higher than reasonable. In contrast it is essential to favor skim tones in the low and medium registers (while keeping the color of the tenor voice), to ensure a flexible and fully-mastered Passaggio, and to release the high range just like any other lyric tenor, but with this special ring and laser-like quality demanded by the Heldentenor repertoire.

The incorrect technical training (beyond the appealing pitfall of singing wide in the low and medium registers) comes in my opinion within the very notion of "dramatic voice". When one sings well, then the voice possibly shows to be of dramatic intensity and color. It has nothing to do with singing dramatically by pushing breath pressure. When one releases totally one's voice, it reveals its real quality. The auditor may in turn qualify it as dramatic, whereas the singer does not perceive his own color. The Canadian tenor Ben Heppner declared once that he considered himself as a lyric tenor. I became aware of this phenomenon by working on Tristan and on Otello in New York. Every time the auditors spoke of important ring, of harmonious high notes, of dramatic power and color, I was only hearing a rather clear tenor voice (and vice versa) inside my own head. Once again, recording my sessions proved indispensable in order for me to hear and understand this reality in singing.

### **Wagnerian Singing**

Several years ago, during a production of Wagner's Ring at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, Jeffrey Tate - the conductor of the production - evoked the palette of nuances in Wagnerian singing. He notably mentioned the question of "piano singing" explicitly requested by Wagner. It is unacceptable that a Wagnerian singer does not respect the indications of the composer and does not know how to sing piano. It is necessary to remember that the early Wagner is closer to the Bel Canto composers such as Spontini, Weber, or Meyerbeer (even if Wagner had hesitations towards this last composer). Voice teachers of that time used to train singers according to this School of Singing so they necessarily mastered the Italian technique. It is true that Tristan is a more modern score. Yet certain arias for Heldentenor ask for a classic vocal technique, for example "*Allmäch't'ger Vater*" (Rienzi - 1842) with its typical Italian ornaments (the grupetto in the main theme) or Erik's cavatina (Der Fliegende Holländer - 1843) One knows as well that the role of Lohengrin was widely present in the repertoire of the "tenore di grazia" in the last century. They usually sang Lohengrin, along with Roméo or Des Grieux. I am fortunate to own the score of "Tristan und Isolde", with annotations by my great-grandfather : the dates of performances indicate that he alternatively sang Tristan, Cavaradossi, and Faust. The Heldentenor should thus protect the flexibility of his voice, even if the timbre of the voice sounds more like copper than silver or gold.

### **Tristan in Wagner, the Specificities of the Part**

François Grandsir writes in the indispensable "*Guide des Opéras de Wagner*" (Editions Fayard) that Tristan is globally the big dramatic tenor. However, since initiation occurs in him, it is necessary that he be at first a lyric tenor with a voice as sweet as honey. Then during the major part of act I, the singer should be capable of using this color without allowing any sign of a heavier voice, in spite of a wide range (C#3-A4), already employed, but diluted in flexible and pleasant vocal lines with short breaths. It is only in the fifth scene that he lets the mask fall and that he appears with force. Tristan suddenly gives more voice. From this moment on, the fracture is irreparable.

Singing Tristan implies the mastery of vast vocal capacities. The extensive singing in the area of the high medium (Passaggio) and the repetition of high and fortissimo notes (cf. the entry of the love duet) represent some of the characteristic difficulties of the role.

### **History of Tristan - Melchior**

World premiere of the part on June 10, 1865 in Munich, by Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld. Wagner held this tenor in respect for his unequalled vocal intensity, for his indefatigable energy, and for his magnificent vocal production. Lauritz Melchior sang Tristan 223 times, more than any other role of his repertoire. He recorded Tristan six times, without mentioning the live recordings :

1936 Fritz Reiner (with Flagstad) Covent Garden London  
1937 Arthur Bodanzky (with Flagstad) MET New York  
1937 Thomas Beecham (with Flagstad) Covent Garden London  
1941 Erich Leinsdorf (with Flagstad) MET New York  
1941 Identical cast (except Traubel instead of Flagstad) Golden Age  
1948 Fritz Busch (with Traubel) MET New York

### **Qualities of Melchior Singing Wagner's Tristan**

Ernest Newman speaks of a "rare spiritual quality" and Christophe Capacci of Melchior's capacity in "the softest diminuendo, melodious parlando, without any common measure - a sign of heroism - with the false Sprechgesang of whom can the least". Melchior's expressive range, notably in Tristan, is impressive. It displays, among several others, an essential facet, which balances the heroism of the role : the German typical "*Sehnsucht*" or longing. One needs only to listen to "*O König*" of act II. Melchior behaves as a musician and not as a large-voice singer. Melchior sang Tristan on 223 occasions. It proves his perfect knowledge of the dangers of the role. Melchior dominated the Wagnerian stage during more than thirty years. After the celebration of his 39th birthday at the MET in Tristan, Melchior sang Siegmund in a concert version of "Die Walküre" act I in Copenhagen on his 70th birthday in 1960. The recording proves in a stunning way that Melchior still mastered his voice. It is manifestly false to claim that singing Wagnerians parts kills the voice. Only the singers endowed with an instrument adapted to the requirements of the roles can approach Wagner with all the required vocal science and without risking their vocal health.

### **Conclusion**

Friedrich Nietzsche (who as a 17-year old discovered "Tristan und Isolde" in the piano score) once wrote, "What makes someone heroic? - To simultaneously face one's heaviest pain and one's highest hope". This may be the definition of the Heldentenor. He expresses with the heaviest tenor instrument the heroic desire to rise up to the highest solar notes of the male voice. Melchior reached this, without any doubt, notably in Tristan who is the mythical figure of this highest hope.

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Please address all questions to [denizot@operalab.org](mailto:denizot@operalab.org) Thank you !

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Articles

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