

There have only been eighteen performances of Gluck's *Alceste* at the Metropolitan Opera House, with each iteration designed to showcase a star soprano. In 1941 it was the Australian Marjorie Lawrence, in 1961 Eileen Farrell and between them in 1952 Kirsten Flagstad. Although world famous as Isolde and Brünnhilde, Flagstad first sang *Alceste* in German during a wartime visit to Zürich in 1943. On her return to the Met in 1951 Flagstad sang Isolde, all three Brünnhildes and Fidelio but for her final farewell season she only agreed to sing five performances of *Alceste*, reflecting a new found interest in the classical era. In 1951 she had added a new operatic role to her repertoire, Dido in Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, performed in London's tiny Mermaid Theatre, something she later described as the ideal preparation for *Alceste*. The performances of *Alceste* were given in English, something Flagstad was particularly proud about, though she also sang the role in Italian (BBC 1956) and Norwegian (Danish Radio 1957).

Flagstad was, naturally, the star of this broadcast. The Met was packed for every performance since it was known they would be her final ones in the house. The critics were unanimous in their praise, lauding her vocal splendour and nobility as being ideally suited to the role. Indeed, one can perhaps see why she chose this role rather than Isolde as her farewell. The smaller orchestra supports the Flagstad's vocalism, allowing her to enchant the listener with simple, yet glorious, tone. There's no need to try to over-power a Wagnerian orchestra (though Flagstad had done that plenty of times in her career), just deliver a very moving performance through her voice alone. In addition to the music, the story of *Alceste*, with a wife willing to die for her husband, clearly attracted Flagstad, making it 'the perfect role for me at this state of my life and career.' Virgil Thomson, writing in the *Herald Tribune*, summed up what most people thought: 'she is unique among living vocal artists; and hearing her is a privilege, as remembering her will for all our lives be a pleasure.'

Playing Admetus is American tenor Brian Sullivan. Sullivan was a versatile singer, making his Met debut as Peter Grimes in 1948 and later going on to appear as Lohengrin and Andrei Khovansky in the Met premiere of Mussorgsky's *Khovanshchina*. Critics thought Sullivan 'sang handsomely' even though he lacked Flagstad's extensive experience. Another American, baritone Frank Valentino is the High Priest. Valentino had a twenty-one year career at the Met between 1940 and 1961, appearing in more than four hundred and fifty performances. He sang all the leading baritone roles in the Italian opera repertoire but *Alceste* and *Boris Godunov* were the only operas he performed in English. Found among the minor parts is Lucine Amara who went on to have a stellar career at the Met for over forty years.

Italian Alberto Erede conducts. Best known as an operatic conductor, Erede held posts all over the world, and conducted periodically at the Met between 1950 and 1975. Olin Downes in the *New York Times* wrote that he brought 'a rare and excellent understanding of the music' and as a result 'the orchestra pulsed and throbbed with color.'

The last word about this masterful performance of *Alceste* goes to Robert Sabin in *Musical America* who revelled in 'the memory of a great performance and of music that remains unsurpassed in its beauty, meaningfulness, and economy of utterance. Mme. Flagstad's Alcestis, like her *Götterdämmerung* Brünnhilde, is one of the few really great performances of our times.'



disc one
(58:09)

1. RADIO Introduction (3:21)
2. Overture (7:41)
- ACT ONE
3. Hear me, loyal friend (2:22)
4. Sigh no more (3:41)
5. My friends, the king (2:56)
6. Oh Gods (5:22)
7. Follow me to the temple (6:06)
8. Turn away, oh Phoebus (2:36)
9. You who from heaven's highest portal (5:00)
10. Pantomime (1:24)
11. Phoebus does not remain unmoved (4:25)
12. Where am I? (5:54)
13. Your demand is fulfilled (2:16)
14. Gods of eternal night (5:06)

disc two
(73:50)

- ACT TWO
1. Let delight follow hardship (1:20)
2. Ballet - Andante - Allegro - March (5:26)
3. Ah, the king (4:01)
4. Alceste (0:54)
5. Adorn your brows (5:20)
6. Alceste you are all (3:43)
7. Gods! Alceste, you're crying (1:51)
8. Life without you is not worth living (1:52)
9. You love me, I adore you (2:47)
10. Alceste, I must die if you should leave me (2:28)
11. Oh Gods, I turn to you (7:46)
12. Now nothing is left but tears (3:52)
- ACT THREE
13. Oh Gods, that defy trepidation (5:33)
14. Gods, who have no heart (2:25)
15. Oh! Admetus! (2:07)
16. My dear, do have pity (3:00)
17. The voice of Charon (4:17)
18. You need no longer cry (2:10)
19. Ballet - Andante - Allegro (3:54)
20. Yes it is true - Oh children dear (0:32)
21. Ballet - Andante - Andante - Chaconne (7:17)
22. RADIO Conclusion (1:15)

Chorus and Orchestra of the Metropolitan Opera
conducted by Alberto Erede

PRISTINE
AUDIO

PACO 199

CAST

Alceste - Kirsten Flagstad
Admète - Brian Sullivan
High Priest - Frank Valentino
Oracle - Alois Pernerstorfer
Évandre - Emery Darcy
Herald - Norman Scott
Woman - Anne Bollinger
Thanatos - Osie Hawkins
Leaders of the People - Lucine Amara,
Margaret Roggero, Thomas Hayward,
Luben Vichey
Dance - Maria Karnilova, Socrates Birskey

Ambient Stereo XR remastering by: Andrew Rose
Front cover artwork: Kirsten Flagstad as Alceste

Original Italian libretto by Ranieri de' Calzabigi,
based on the play *Alceste* by Euripides
English translation by John Gutman

Total duration: 2hr 11:59

For a full catalogue visit
www.pristineclassical.com
or call : (00) 33 967 391 857

© 2023 Pristine Audio