

# Birgit Nilsson Centenary 2018 Meeting with Isolde

By Stefan Johansson

The first time I saw and heard Birgit Nilsson on the stage of the Royal Swedish Opera is now more than 60 years ago, the 16th of March 1958. I had started my career as a member of the opera audience in the autumn of 1957 with a holiday afternoon performance of Wagner's *Parsifal*, in the first Swedish staging from 1917... Really I had wished to see a fairly recent production of *Carmen*, much talked about and broadcast in the then single channel of the Swedish Radio. But *Parsifal* neither made me fall asleep nor scared me off from further opera going. After experiencing *Carmen*, *The Barber of Seville* and *The Magic Flute* — all of them (like *Parsifal* in this period) performed in Swedish, I felt already felt like a connoisseur — it was time for a meeting with Sweden's — and soon the world's — reigning Isolde, Birgit Nilsson. The March '58 performances of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* were the first time the Stockholm audience could meet her Isolde again after her first Bayreuth stint in the part in the summer of 1957.

Apart from now being sung in German, "my" first *Tristan* in this 1958 revival was essentially the same production as the Swedish première of February 11th 1909. From the beginning, it was directed (and translated) by composer Wilhelm Peterson-Berger in the sumptuous settings by Thorolf Jansson, chief designer of production of the RSO in the early years of the 20th century. The production was 49 years old when it was finally put to rest after 72 performances, a couple of months after the matinée which was my first meeting with both Wagner's artistically most advanced creation and with Birgit Nilsson. However the program now listed as director the German Georg Hartmann, who had been responsible for the 1953 revival which was veteran Brita Hertzberg's last and Nilsson's



first assumptions of the female title role. Nor was Jansson now mentioned — settings and costumes were described as "from the workshops of the Royal Opera".

What did I remember when I set myself to write about this performance 60 years later? The first act — on the ship carrying Isolde as a reluctant bride from Ireland to Cornwall — as well as the third — where the dying Tristan waits for his loved one at home in Brittany — were both played in glaring daylight. The second act, — the palace garden where the lovers meet in secret — was in near total darkness as I remember it. There was none of the magic paradoxically still lingering in the antiquated spaces of the 1917 *Parsifal*.

This time I also remember — as I do not from my even earlier visits to the opera house — being influenced by the intermission opinions of the grown-ups around me. And they were convinced that Herbert Sandberg, (the RSO's resident German wing conductor, successor and son-in-law of world-famous Leo Blech, incidentally the

conductor of Nilsson's debut in 1946), was just boring. Why didn't the Stockholm audience favorite, the exciting modernist Sixten Ehrling, ruling music director of the house, already with a hundred performances per season, take over all Wagner as well? (The 1957-58 season's repertory consisted of 37 different operas apart from a host of ballets and two "plays with music"! None of these more experienced opera buffs who were pleased to talk to the novice, soon eleven, this time cared to explain to me that Set Svanholm, Sigurd Björling and Sven Nilsson — the *Tristan*, *Kurwenal & Marke* — were not just RSO veterans but internationally famous Wagner interpreters from Bayreuth, Vienna, London and "the Met." And the budding star mezzo-soprano, Kerstin Meyer, who at 30 essayed her first *Brangäne* — as she shortly would do at Bayreuth — did she not already exhibit a too wide vibrato? And Birgit Nilsson? Didn't she mainly use the maledictions of the thrillingly dramatic first act to sing herself in? And why did a heroine of ancient Celtic myth aimlessly move back

and forth on stage in a pair of black pumps well visible under her blue art nouveau reform dress?

What really made an impression, lingering to this day, on the novice in his first *Tristan* were quite different things: Tristan/Svanholm's attack and his absolute clarity of articulation in his first answer to Brangäne, "Müh't sie die lange Fahrt", which echoes in my ears to this day. The elemental force in Sigurd Björling's Kurwenal when mocking Isolde in the first act as well as when tenderly caring for Tristan in the last. The warm tones of Meyer in Brangäne's anxious warnings. The almost embarrassing pain in Sven Nilsson's voice in the lament of the betrayed king. The blackness in Arne Hendriksen's traitor Melot — put over in just two lines. Olle Sivall's simple, down to earth shepherd, which I some years later would have called "Brechtian." And last but not least the first voice heard after the magical prelude: the big but somewhat brittle Heldentenor of Svanholm's known successor, Norwegian debutant Kolbjörn Höiseith, as the Young Sailor, who sings "from the mast" of his "irische Maid" (and so provokes Isolde's first outburst).

Of course, the "subtext" of the drama and the "sub-tones" of Wagner's musical web mainly passed above me; they could not be grasped at the first meeting by so very young, inexperienced an observer. There was nothing of *Parsifal's* epic à la Tolkien to feed the imagination. This star-studded performance of a unique masterpiece — with an importance for the evolution of music and stage-craft that is impossible to overestimate — just did not impress me in the way other things did which I saw and heard at the same tender age. In no way did it have an effect on me like my first *Wozzeck* (1958), Göran Gentele's "Swedish" version of *Un ballo in maschera*, or the world premiere of Blomdahl's "space opera" *Aniara* (1959). It was soon put in the shadow by a similarly ancient and star-studded *Die Walküre* with Nilsson, Svanholm, Aase Nordmo, Meyer and Sigurd Björling, conducted by Ehrling, some weeks later. Or, more exotic fare, somewhat later in the spring of 1958 a cru-

elly abridged version of Berlioz's *Les Troyens* with Svanholm, Meyer and smashingly beautiful Kjerstin Dellert in a brand new monumental (and terribly old fashioned) production by 80-year-old Harald André, the same who had produced "my" first *Parsifal* 40 years before I first set eyes on it.

But this article would not have been possible to write if — more than 40 years after my first meeting with *Tristan* and Nilsson — I had not suddenly got the chance to listen to that very performance of March 16th, 1958. As head of dramaturgy ("Chefdramaturg") of the Royal Swedish Opera from 1997, I was encouraged by one of the librarians of the house to explore a deposition with the then Swedish National Sound Archive — a couple of boxes inscribed "Old tapes. Royal Opera. Low speeds, inferior sound." A treasure-trove of recordings on magnetic tape, mainly from the late '50s, recorded from the audience or the wings. Together with unknown radio recordings from the same period from private collectors, they became the base for a number of CD boxes, issued by *Caprice*, with important moments from one of several "golden ages" of the Stockholm Opera.

This very performance of *Tristan und Isolde* of March 16th, 1958, was among the finds of the forgotten deposition but was in the end judged to be of too inferior sound quality to be published. But when I again 20 more years later finally sat down with the score before me and my first *Tristan* in my ear-phones, I heard the unjustly criticized Herbert Sandberg conduct the Royal Orchestra — who in 1958 had too few strings but knew their Wagner after playing most of his works every year since their local premieres — with a flexibility of tempo and eruptive dynamics which I of course could not appreciate at first hearing. Yet remarkable that adults "who knew their Wagner" only heard routine? Sandberg also follows his singers in a totally convincing way when they apply a discreet freedom of attack, slightly before or after the first beat of a phrase, which I so much later learnt to identify (and appreciate) as authentic in Wagner, from recordings of the "golden ages" of Bayreuth, Vienna State Opera or the New York Metropolitan.

Sometimes with Svanholm, Joel Berglund, Sigurd Björling, Kerstin Thorborg and other Scandinavian giants in this repertory, in the company of the even more illustrious Flaggstad, Melchior & others.

Birgit Nilsson reigns supreme from her first line — no "singing-in" before an audience there. She has already at this stage an outstandingly rich palette of colors for Isolde's fluctuating moods, an interpretation which fears no hidden depths of drama. She masters her voice without any restraint, even in ranges of nuances which later would cost her some obvious maneuvering. She crowns her performance with a "Liebestod" which is pure *bel canto*. After just eight Isolde's in Stockholm, beginning in 1954, first in Swedish, then in the original German, and five at Bayreuth in the summer of 1957, this is already the masterly interpretation of the role, with which she would triumph at her "Met" debut of December 1959. And this I could now appreciate when after more than 60 years of experience as a listener/spectator (of which almost 50 as a theatre professional), I was finally able to re-live my first meeting with Isolde and with Birgit Nilsson.

### Post Scriptum

*Having memories of many other Nilsson performances, having written about, criticized and interviewed her and done research about her background, her studies, and the Swedish and international world of opera and music which formed her — in an age when operatic tradition was not transmitted via CDs or Youtube (!) — I could have elaborated on many other things à propos Nilsson, as I have done elsewhere as a writer, critic, lecturer and teacher. But my first memory of Birgit Nilsson on stage is what I choose to share with you. I am sure each one of you knows the meaning of similar immensely important and often very acute memories, which follow us for the rest of our lives. ■*

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