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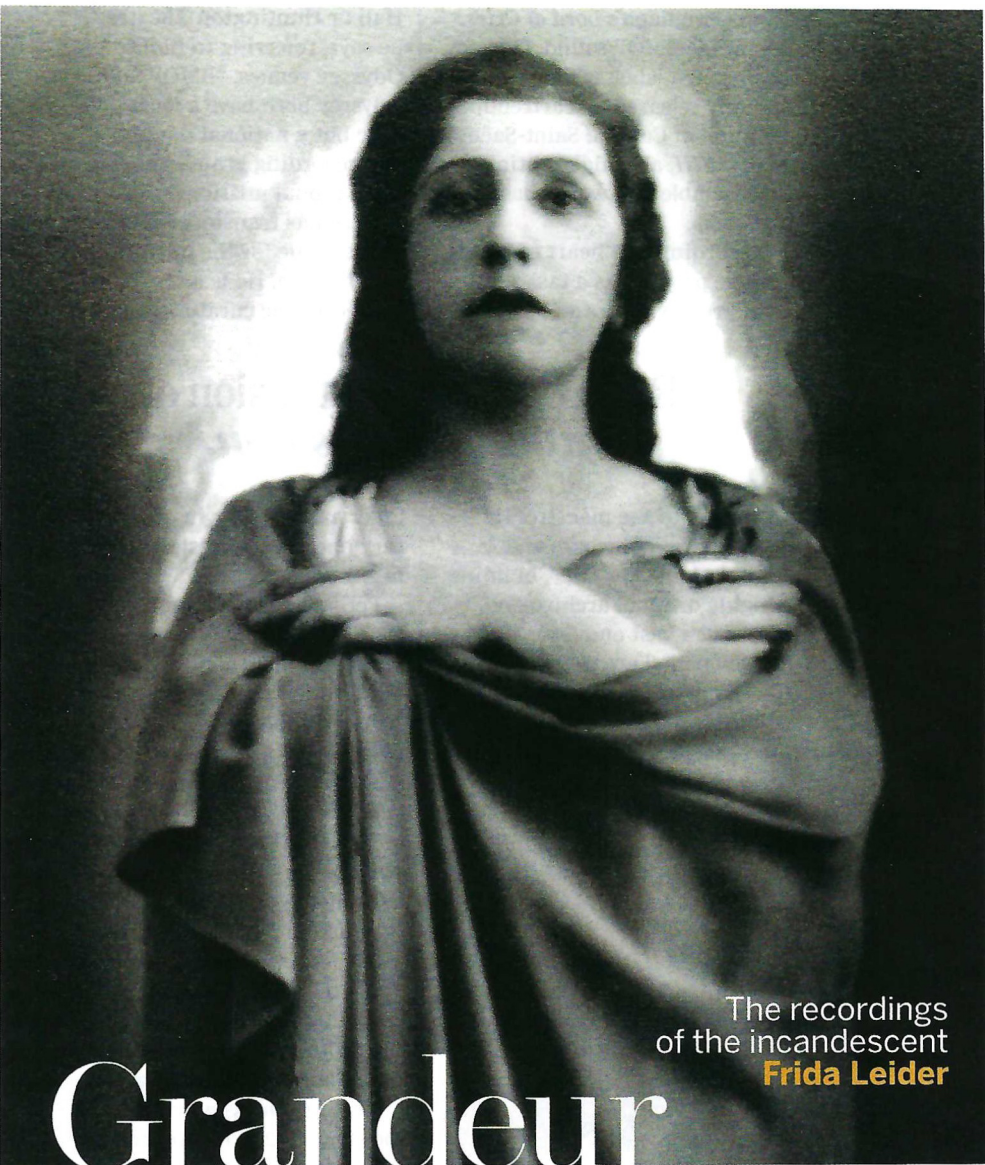
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The recordings  
of the incandescent  
**Frida Leider**

# Grandeur of Style.

► **SOPRANO FRIDA LEIDER** shone onstage in many parts, well beyond the Wagner heroines that brought her world renown. Leider's voice and artistry remain as riveting today as they were a century ago, thanks to a varied discography illuminated by her radiant timbre, grandeur of style and abundant femininity.

Born in 1888, the Berlin native studied singing privately before making her debut in opera as Wagner's Venus in Halle in 1915. Leider made her way to other German provincial theaters before arriving at the Berlin State Opera as Beethoven's Leonore. Beginning in 1923, that company became her true artistic home; she starred there for fifteen years. Idolized in London and Chicago, Leider didn't bow at the Met until 1933, as Isolde, and she sang there for only twenty-eight

performances in two seasons. After her Jewish husband fled to Switzerland in 1938, the resulting emotional stress for Leider—worsened by the onset of war—ended her stage career. In the early 1940s, she returned to singing, but as a recitalist. After retiring from performance in 1946, Leider served as Berlin State Opera's artistic adviser, founded that company's opera studio and directed several productions before devoting herself exclusively to teaching voice. She died in Berlin in 1975.

Leider's studio and live recordings present an instrument contrasting notably with those of Kirsten Flagstad and Birgit Nilsson, the two vocal phenomena who succeeded Leider in Wagner roles internationally. Leider's sound—gold in the lower-middle, silver at the top—seems instead halfway between “jugendlich dramatisch” (a.k.a. spinto) and “hochdramatisch” (dramatic soprano). Already in her early recordings, such as “Ozean, du Ungeheuer” (1921) and “Ah, perfido!” (1922), Leider's effortless vocalism and unique womanliness are striking. Interpretively, she isn't yet especially detailed, but she communicates with sincerity that can't be taught.

Leider reveled in her versatility. One of her Covent Garden roles was Gluck's Armide; her warm tone is matchless on her noble recording of the monologue, “Ah! Si la liberté.” (It's disappointing that she never recorded anything of Berlioz's Didon, one of her Berlin roles.) Chicago audiences acclaimed Leider in eleven operas, among them works as varied as *Don Giovanni*, *La Juive* and Max von Schillings's *Mona Lisa*. There's nothing on disc of the latter two, but we can hear Donna Anna's “Or sai chi l'onore”

—  
Frida Leider  
as Brünnhilde  
at Bayreuth

twice; the earlier performance (in German) is thrillingly incisive, the second more sedate but on an even grander scale vocally.

In every recording, Leider anchors her singing with true bel canto technique. *Trovatore* excerpts reveal pinpoint staccatos (“Di tale amor”), spellbinding legato and a dulcet pianissimo high C (“D’amor sull’ali rosee”), with exhilarating rhythmic precision across Leonora’s wide range. (The duet with Count di Luna is a stupendous collaboration with Heinrich Schlusnus.) Surprisingly, Leider is similarly at ease vocally and thoroughly convincing emotionally as Eboli, offering a majestic, fervent “O don fatale.” Her instinct for Italianate phrasing also extends to the only Puccini she recorded—“Vissi d’arte” and the Tosca-Cavaradossi duets (with Hamburg’s resident spinto tenor of the 1920s, Carl Günther). Her Tosca isn’t exceptionally passionate, but the glowing tone, unaffected musicality and womanly appeal prove captivating nonetheless.

Leider’s studio recordings of Wagner exhibit true greatness everywhere. As the *Walküre* Brünnhilde, her “Hojotoho!” is dazzling, with fearless top



*Tribune* hailed for its “richness of feeling” and “poetry of the imagination.” Those qualities pervade the love duet—recorded in 1929, in an abridged version, alas. Leider later cited this as her finest record, recalling that conductor Albert Coates inspired her and Lauritz Melchior to surpass themselves. Heard today, the singers’ unanimity of style and interpretation remains awe-inspiring.



As Isolde at the Met, left, 1933; offstage in London the same year, right

## Leider anchors her singing with *true bel canto technique.*

notes, infectious vitality and spot-on trills (unheard even from Flagstad and Nilsson). The low-lying opening section of the *Todesverkündigung* doesn’t faze Leider, and her Act III confrontation with Friedrich Schorr’s masterful Wotan finds her as moving in “War es so schmähhlich” as she is blazingly courageous in the Valkyrie’s final exhortation to her father.

Few other singers have so vividly embodied Isolde, a portrayal the *New York Herald*

Leider is, if anything, even more compelling “live.” Wagner enthusiasts dream of hearing the end of Isolde’s narrative and curse (Met, 1933) dispatched with such fire. In *Götterdämmerung* (Covent Garden, 1936), Act II in particular is instructive for all aspiring Brünnhildes, as Leider brings out the feelings from her innermost depths. Listen, for example, to her scathing “Einen Ring sah ich an deiner Hand.” At the start of the Brünnhilde-Hagen-Gunther

scene, no one has equaled the bleakness of Leider’s despair, before her full voice floods with agony at “Ach, Jammer!”

Returning to the recording studio in 1940 and 1942, Leider performed Schubert, Schumann and Wolf very effectively indeed. The words are crystal-clear, and the voice is bracingly fresh, with each interpretation utterly assured yet unfailingly natural. Leider sounds like a medium-weight lyric soprano: not once does she allow Wagnerian amplitude to overwhelm the vocal line.

While treasuring her singing in opera, let’s also remember Leider in Schumann’s “Meine Rose,” the gem among her song recordings. Here in full are her honesty and her dignity—and the selfless dedication to the needs of music and text that only the greatest artists can provide. ■

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