Alexander Kipnis on Repertoire, Singing in German Opera Houses, His Discovery of Kirsten Flagstad and More

Note: This is the text of a handwritten essay written by Alexander Kipnis in about 1970. It does not adhere to a single theme, but ranges across several that are of great interest and show his humor and great intellect.

During my career I was guided by two important elements in selecting my repertoire. One of these was the music, and the other was the poetry, drama or comedy. In many cases the music and poetry merged into one - then it became a simple, and very rewarding challenge for me. But quite often the music alone was so forceful that the poem or drama had no real meaning - in such a case I had to decide, and weigh the strength of the musical composition to establish whether the music by itself would be strong enough to compensate for the weak text. This was true in choosing operatic parts as well as songs.

As an example of the aforementioned, I would like to point this out in two operas, which ran through my entire career: *Boris Godunov* and *Parsifal*. *Boris* is a perfect drama even without music, but with the music it is a unique masterwork. There is no guessing about how to sing or act the role of Boris - every melodic phrase, every desperate outcry of the character of Boris - half coward and half tyrant - is logically indicated to the performer the way to interpret this part. The music by itself is so emotional, that one cannot get tired of singing, performing, or listening to it.

Another matter is the part of Gurnemanz in *Parsifal*. The music is so beautifully written for the voice that one cannot help loving singing this part. Unfortunately, the dramatic elements in the libretto of *Parsifal* do not give a clear key to the performer of Gurnemanz, about how to act this character.

I was very lucky to find the right man who gave me the key, and help, to penetrate into the drama of *Parsifal.*  I would like to speak of this man. There was a period in Germany, and particularly in Bayreuth, in which men were trying to cultivate a resemblance to Wagner. Some of the conductors didn't shave under the chin and even grew side whiskers to underline the resemblance to Wagner and when it happened that their chin was protruding, as well as the forehead, the problem of great resemblance to the master was solved!

During the course of an evening in the house of music lovers, thundering sounds were heard from a piano playing the ride of the Valkyries, a little later, the same performer played with great warmth and tenderness Isolde’s Liebestod. I was asked to sing, and being under the spell of Wagnerian music, I sang King Marke’s monologue from *Tristan*. The same pianist who preceded me played accompanist. Later on he introduced himself saying, “My name is Ludwig Dingelday, I am a former student of Liszt and as you can see, I am related to the Wagner family.”

In fact, he had all the characteristics of Wagner.

“I must tell you,” he went on, “that I have studied singing, and I was coached at Bayreuth under the supervision of the master himself.”

Needless to add, I was tremendously impressed. He offered me his help as coach for the entire Wagnerian repertoire.

My lessons with Mr. Dingeldey lasted as a rule between two and three hours, at a cost of four marks a lesson! I began to realize that this man's knowledge was miraculous; The phrasing in the role of Gurnemanz, King Mark in *Tristan*, and Hagen in *Götterdammerung* started to have a new meaning for me. I became convinced that a moan could be as eloquent in a dramatic scene as a big sustained tone.

After several weeks of hard work with this remarkable man, I learned how to act with my voice, and not merely with my body and face. Now since the character Gurnemanz has little personal drama, but such a great spiritual force, this new experience opened for me a whole new conception in art.

Let me illustrate this: the scene in the first act when Gurnemanz berates Parsifal for his cruelty and killing the swan, and also when Parsifal is about to faint after choking Kundry, she quickly brings him water - the phrasing of Gurnemanz in these two examples should have a serene, soothing quality as if the heavenly power of the grail is present.

In dramatic parts like Hagan, Mephistopheles, Boris, or King Phillip (*Don Carlos*) it is simple to create the characters of the aforementioned roles, for these parts are of such dramatic impact that the performer cannot possibly miss the point - each bar, each phrase has dozens of possibilities. A different matter is parts such as Gurnemanz, King Marke, Sarastro (*Magic Flute*) Landgraff (*Tannhäuser*) or King Arkel (*Pelleas*), etc.. The performer is on his own, with virtually no indication of a dramatic path; if the performer cannot act with his voice and has no imagination to make these characters interesting and alive, they usually become a huge bore. How often have critics everywhere bemoaned the tediousness and endless monologues of Mark and Gurnemanz?

I think that my entire artistic career was extremely lucky, I met all the right people with whom I should work, and be guided by some of them to achieve my artistic goal. Conductors, stage directors, theater managers, assistant conductors and colleagues have mostly been kind and helpful to me.

I would like to relate a short episode from the period of my association with the Royal Opera in Wiesbaden Germany. This was my second contract with an Opera House. I was young, and full of ambition and dreams of my future. The theater in Wiesbaden was one of the most beautiful in the world - costumes, scenery, productions, etc., were all donated by the Kaiser. From the first day of my activity in this house, title was given me formally Kaiserliche-Sänger (Imperial Singer). One can imagine how proud and happy I was.

Wiesbaden at that time had a population of about 100,000, and the main thoroughfare Wilhelmstrassse was the meeting place of all the music lovers and townspeople, who were interested to hear the latest theatrical gossip, as well as casting of operas, etc.

This street must be described: it was very wide, tree-lined, with many benches, and a park in which the opera house stood and beautiful gardens. Among the opera lovers at the time was a man highly successful and well known by name Max Brings. He was the sole owner and founder of a chemical concern and possibly more devoted to music than to his own business. I was introduced to him, and was invited frequently to his luxurious mansion. The walls of the music room were covered with red silk damask and in this room we had singing contests. Max Brings offered prizes to the performers who had the ability to sing the loudest, the sweetest, the highest, the lowest and the softest. We had lots of fun, and I'm glad to say I won many prizes!

Among my friend’s hobbies was a racing stable. Several stables in Germany had named their horses for famous actors, so, my surprise was great to learn that Brings named a two-year-old stallion for me - not long after this, Stallion Kipnis was scheduled to make his debut. Through many of my operatic roles in Tristan, Parsifal, Mignon, Carmen, Pagliacci, etc., I'd become well known in town so that many people place bets on “Kipnis.” To the greatest disappointment of myself and my friends, Kipnis lost his first race. The effect was disastrous. Some people were heard to say, “Kipnis may be a good singer, but he is definitely a poor horse!”

My popularity waned consistently thereafter. It took me many months of outstanding singing to make the public forget my activities as a horse.

My contract with the Royal Opera lasted five years, and the next logical step was the Imperial opera in Berlin. There I sang the entire bass-baritone repertoire. One evening, during a performance of the *Magic Flute* (Mozart) in which I sang the part of Sarastro, finishing the aria “In diesen heligen Hallen,” the audience applauded warmly. One of the chorus singers approached me on stage and heartily congratulated me, surprised as I was. It rarely happens that chorus singers compliment soloists. I asked him why he did. His answer was: “Don't you know you won the race and obstacle racing course.” “You see,” he continued, “as a flat race horse you were no good, but as an obstacle racing horse, you are outstanding, and for the 10 marks I bet on you, I won 100.” Such is fame.

In contrast to this sort of scholarly theme, let me add a little episode from my early days on the stage, which I hope will prove amusing. It was during my second operatic engagement at the Royal Opera Wiesbaden, Germany. Among opera lovers there at that time was a certain Max Brings – a highly successful and dynamic person. He was the sole owner and founder of a chemical concern, and dedicated to music and the theater in general. I was a frequent guest in his palatial home, and we became good friends.

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I was attracted for the first time to the great monologue of Kng Marke, principally by its melodic line, and the usual and the unusual dramatic modulations which give the singing voice a great opportunity to develop color and drama. Later on when I became thoroughly acquainted with the entire libretto of this masterpiece (*Tristan und Isolde*) the music of this monologue became very clear to me.

I studied it for a long time, once my voice absorbed all of the unique intervals, my voice and I decided to use king Marke's monologue for an audition. I sang it for the first time for the director and general manager of the Hamburg Opera, and to my great surprise I was engaged for two years at this great house. My first stage performance of this opera took place in 1917. The conductor was a certain Professor Sklar who was a close friend of Kaiser Wilhelm II, and also a protégé of Count Hülsen.\* Unfortunately Sklar couldn't play the piano and during my first rehearsal with him he played a permanent tremolo in D minor, not paying attention to any modulation. I simply pretended to be deaf and sang the entire monologue as if there was no instrument. I later sang this opera with many great conductors, including Arturo Toscanini, and the music and words were clearer, understandable, very strong, and tragic.

At Bayreuth 1930 I arrived late because I had sung *Tristan* there several times previously. Toscanini was waiting very impatiently. He wanted to be the judge as to whether I was good. I sang the monologue without interruption and without correction and after finishing, Toscanini took me by the hand, and quietly led me to the stage. Siegfried Wagner was at that time the head of Bayreuth. Daniella Tode (said to be the daughter of von Bülow) was the stage director, though she claimed that Richard Wagner was her father. I considered that most of Marke's monologue was an intimate reproach to Tristan, but when I stepped up to Tristan with the words “Dies wundervolle Weib,” Miss Tode shouted, “Not so! The master wanted it differently.” At that moment Siegried Wagner said to her “Let him do it his way. It's wonderful, I like it” This is my conception of King Marke.

Norwegian musicians had their own ambition in trying to perform *Tristan* with an entire Norwegian cast, including the conductor. The singer of King Marke regrettably became very thirsty at this time so they asked me to replace him. Since Marke has nothing to sing in the first act, I always listened in the wings because I loved the music so much.

I was just astounded and impressed to hear an outstanding soprano voice of unlimited range, with the timber mixed of an English horn and clarinet. After the Second Act, I introduced myself to this Isolde. I tried to talk to her, only to find out that she spoke no German or English. The Brangäne served as translator, and I asked her where she had sung outside of Scandinavia. I was greatly surprised to learn that she had sung nowhere else! I asked if she would be interested to singing elsewhere, to which she answered very definitely yes. I told her, “You will hear from me. What is your name and address?”

She answered “Kirsten Flagstad, Grand Hotel Oslo.”

After returning to Berlin, I told my Intendant Heinz Tietjen of my discovery. He promised to get in touch with her in a few days. Later, Tietjen informed me with the words “You were right I engaged your protege for Bayreuth, to sing the third Norn, one Walküre, and to be a substitute for Sieglinde.” There she was heard by Gatti Casazza and Bodansky who immediately engaged her for the Met. The rest is history!

\* This could be a reference to Dietrich von Hülsen-Haeseler (1852-1905), a noted military hero and close associate of the Kaiser. von Hülsen-Haeseler was a patron of the arts in Hamburg.