

ASTRID VARNAY

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Astrid Varnay's parents were both Hungarian, but they were living in Sweden during World War I when Ibolyska Astrid Varnay was born in Stockholm on 25th April 1918. She was named Astrid after the teenage Princess Astrid of Sweden.

Astrid's mother was Maria Junghens, who changed her name to Javor when she became a singer. She was born on 15th October 1889 and became an influential colouratura. Astrid's father, Alexander, was born on the 11th September 1889 and grew up backstage of the world's opera houses. He was also a tenor and he and his wife ran the Opera Comique in Oslo from 1918-1921. Kirsten Flagstad sang there and there is an account of baby Astrid asleep in a lower drawer in Flagstad's dressing room.

The Varneys moved to Argentina and then to New York. Alexander died in 1924 at the age of 35. In 1926, his widow married the tenor Fortunato de Angelis.

At the age of eighteen, Astrid, who was studying the piano, decided to become a singer and had lessons from her mother. Then Flagstad arranged for young Astrid to prepare roles with Hermann Weigert (1890-1955), a staff conductor and vocal coach at the Metropolitan Opera. Varnay knew five languages and fifteen dramatic opera roles, eleven of which were Wagnerian roles... and she was only 22! She was a truly intelligent and intellectual person!

Her triumphant debut was as Sieglinde in Die Walkure at the Met on 6th December 1941. She was 23. The indisposed Lotte Lehmann was to sing this role and Astrid had to undertake it having had no significant rehearsal. Six days later, Helen Traubel was ill and Varnay took over the role as Brunnhilde in Die Walkure.

Varnay and Weigert were married in 1944 and she had further lessons with the tenor Paul Althouse (1889-1954)

Her debut at Covent Garden was in 1948, and, in Florence, she made her debut in 1951 as Lady Macbeth. That year she also made her debut at Bayreuth after Flagstad had turned down an invitation and, instead, recommended that Wieland Wagner engage Varnay who sang at Bayreuth for seventeen successive years. She also appeared regularly at the Met until 1956.

It seems that the Met's general manager, Rudolph Bing, did not like her. However, she was the mainstay of other opera houses and was loved everywhere especially in Germany. She made Munich her home and her main roles were then those of Wagner, Richard Strauss and Verdi.

Like many other soloists, she had a difficult relationship with Karajan who was an arrogant and narcissistic conductor and a thoroughly unpleasant man. He was also a lousy conductor ([see article about him on this site](#)). He was a pig according to many who 'had the misfortune to work with him'.

In 1969, she relinquished her dramatic soprano roles and began singing mezzo roles. She excelled as





Klaemnestra, the mother of Elektra in Strauss's opera. One of her other main roles was Herodias in Salome and she gave 236 performances in this role.

She returned to the Met in 1974 and her last performance there was in 1979 in Weill's Rise and Fall of the City of Mahogany.

In 1998, she published her autobiography Fifty Five Years in Five Acts. It is witty and never bitchy. But she does tell the truth about Karajan.

A documentary about her life and work was made in New York.

She was not only a superlative opera singer but a first rate actress. Her murder scene as Klytemnestra is really scary, chilling and thrilling. Karl Bohm, who conducted

Strauss performances with her, said that her demonic performances used to frighten him and most of the orchestra... they were that good!

But she could be lyrical, expressive and very moving. Those of us who heard her sing Isolde will never forget it. Her Liebestod was unashamedly and overpowering beautiful. Her immolation scene in Gotterdammerung is mesmerising and poignant. Her Elisabeth in Tannhauser was, and remains, unforgettable.

Her performances cannot be bettered!

She adored Reiner as the best conductor she ever worked with.

She sang Kosteinicka in Janacek's Jenufa and also sang in Cavalleria Rusticana, Don Carlos, La Gioconda and Fidelio.

She died in Munich on 4th September 2006.

Among her recordings are Lord Byron's Love Letter by R de Banfield, Wagner's Flying Dutchman, Lohengrin with Leinsdorf and Salome with Krauss.

Those of you who never saw her perform have missed out on one of music's greatest experiences.

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