OVERTURE MUSIC SERIES

PLAYING MY PART

FRIDA LEIDER

TRANSLATED BY CHARLES OSBORNE

PLAYING MY PART

PLAYING MY PART

FRIDA LEIDER

Translated by Charles Osborne

OVERTURE PUBLISHING

Overture Publishing is an imprint of

ALMA CLASSICS LTD
London House
243-253 Lower Mortlake Road
Richmond
Surrey TW9 2LL
United Kingdom
www.overturepublishing.com

First published as *Das war mein Teil – Erinnerungen einer Opernsängerin* by F. A. Herbig Verlagsbuchhandlung Berlin–Grunewald in 1959
Playing My Part first published in Great Britain by Calder and Boyars Ltd in 1966
This edition published by Alma Classics Ltd in 2012

Printed and bound in Great Britain

ISBN: 978-0-7145-4380-2

CONTENTS

	page
PLAYING MY PART	9
Discography	211
Index	215

ILLUSTRATIONS

facing page

Frida Leider — *Frontispiece*

Frida Leider at the age of five (top left) · During her studies at the age of twenty (top right) · At the Luisen-Lyzeum, Berlin. Frida Leider third from left, front row (below) — *16*

Frida Leider as Martha in 'Tiefland,' Rostock, 1916 (top left) · As the Countess in 'The Marriage of Figaro', Rostock, 1917 (top right) · As Kundry in 'Parsifal', Bayreuth (below left) · As Santuzza in 'Cavalleria Rusticana', Hamburg, 1921 (below right) — *17*

Frida Leider as Isolde, Hamburg 1923 — *32*

Rudolf Deman and Max von Schillings (top) · Party at Deutsche Grammophon-Gesellschaft, Berlin, 1923 (below) — *33*

Frida Leider as Leonore in 'Fidelio', Chicago — *64*

Stage Door, Paris Opera House 1931: Frida Leider, Wilhelm Furtwängler and Lauritz Melchior (top left) · Frida Leider and Lauritz Melchior on board the 'Bremen', 1930 (top right) · In front of Covent Garden Opera House, London, 1928: Emil Schipper, Lotte Lehmann, Otto Helgers, Bruno Walter, Ivar Andresen, Frida Leider, Herbert Janssen, Maria Olczewska and Lauritz Melchior (below) — *65*

Frida Leider as the Marschallin and Maria Olczewska as Octavian in 'Der Rosenkavalier', Chicago, 1931/2 — *80*

Programme for the Metropolitan Opera, New York for January 16th 1933 — *81*

Frida Leider as Isolde, Berlin State Opera — *144*

Frida Leider as Amelia and Grosavescu as Ricardo in 'Un Ballo in Maschera', Berlin State Opera (top left) · As Brünnhilde in 'Die Walküre', Bayreuth, 1927 (top right) · Frida Leider as Donna Anna and Richard Tauber as Don Ottavio in 'Don Giovanni', Berlin State Opera, 1927 (below) — *145*

Frida Leider, Wilhelm Furtwängler and Max Lorenz, Bayreuth, 1934 (top) · Frida Leider and Lauritz Melchior (below left) · Rudolf Deman and Frida Leider (below right) — *160*

Frida Leider and Sigrid Onegin, Bayreuth, 1934 (top left) · Programme for Covent Garden Opera House, London for May 1st 1928 (top right) · On board the 'Conte di Savoia' (below) — *161*

Frida Leider with her mother in her country house, Pausin, 1944 (top) · Frida Leider in a Studio at the Berlin State Opera, 1947 (below) — *192*

Three Oil Paintings by Frida Leider — *193*

A few errors in the German edition, mainly dates and singers' names, have been corrected here. I am indebted to Mr. Harold Rosenthal for his help in this connection.

C. O.

The Publishers are also indebted to Mr. Harold Burros for compiling the discography.

I

UP IN THE NORTH of Berlin, in a quiet and modest flat, a little girl is industriously embroidering an old maxim on to linen bands to be put on the inside of the *Vertiko*, as linen cupboards were called in my young days:

Blossom in the summer wind,
And in the green fields dried,
Laid to rest now in the press,
The German woman's pride.

It was the beginning of the twentieth century. Since the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–71 Berlin had been a small, *gemütlich* town. The idyllic village-names of Schöneberg, Schmargendorf, and of course the Grunewald, were known only as places to head for on a Sunday excursion. But now the town was beginning to lose its provincial aspect. It was extending in all directions and was on the way to becoming a big city. Building was flourishing, firms and businesses were being founded, and the city's pulse was strong and healthy. The new, rising Metropolis was a strong attraction for people of the surrounding countryside, and intelligent youngsters found it easy to get on if they were able and industrious.

My mother came from the Lausitz district to Berlin while she was quite young, in order, as she used to say, 'to look at the big shop-windows'. Her father, a country school-teacher, had died very young, and she had determined with all the strength and optimism of her youth to make the most of her life when she had finished her schooling.

My father came from Angermünde, and, as the eldest son of a large family, had had to start work very young. His skill as a carpenter stood him in good stead in the ever-expanding city of Berlin.

My parents married young, and I, their only child, was born in Berlin on April 18, 1888. My mother was very homesick during the early years of her marriage, and she was happy when my father sent us to the country to stay with her relatives on account of the cholera outbreak in Hamburg in 1891 which, it was feared, might spread to Berlin. It was my first journey; I was just three years old.

A few years later—I was already going to school—I was sent by myself to my mother's family, and again the reason for the journey was sickness. I was very ill with diphtheria and scarlet fever. In those days vaccination was unheard of, and many children died of these diseases. As my condition became worse, and I refused to gargle because the pain was unbearable, my mother in despair poured the undiluted mixture down my throat. A somewhat radical cure, but it worked.

My mother's relatives owned a large farm with plenty of cattle and land, and it was there that I recuperated after my illness. My aunt, the very personification of kindness and gentleness, spoiled me completely, and I soon felt very much at home there. I did nothing but eat all day long, and sleep most afternoons in the hayloft. It was a very hot summer, and for weeks on end there was no rain. What little conversation there was at meals, after Grace had been said, was about the harvest and the daily round on the farm. The family, who had lived on this soil for generations, was so closely tied to it that a day devoted to work without any diversions was considered a matter of course. Work in the country was difficult and unending. There was neither gas nor electric light, let alone machinery. The fire had to be kept alight the whole day, and needed a lot

of attention. I can remember my aunt sitting at the butter-tub, working the pestle up and down for hours on end to produce a small amount of butter from the carefully skimmed-off cream. She made marvellous bread in the oven which stood in the back garden. Even today I have a deep-rooted respect for the 'daily bread' which probably stems from that time.

The peaceful Sundays, when the country people came from near and far in their local costumes to meet at church, made something of a change. I had to accompany my aunt to church, and I often used to complain of the long, tiring walk to Dolzig, two hours in the summer heat. Princess Auguste Victoria, who later married Kaiser Wilhelm II, was born in the castle there. My aunt, who doubtless was much more uncomfortable than I, in her tight-laced bodice and her many black taffeta petticoats, always spoke kindly to me, explaining that in summer we could not drive to church in the wagon, as the horses needed their rest on Sunday.

Refreshed and healthy I travelled back to Berlin, all trace of my illness gone. My mother met me at the Alexanderplatz Station and was startled to discover that, thanks to all the loving care I had received, my clothes were now too tight for me. Even my boots were half unbuttoned, which embarrassed me terribly. We immediately decided to take a hansom cab home —which for people like us was a great luxury—and off we drove proudly.

My childhood motto was 'Economy and Industriousness', so it was natural that I should take my school life very seriously. Admonishments to work hard were repeated daily, and if I felt contrary I would be told at breakfast-time, 'You should be happy to go to school and to learn'. I enjoyed school. It was just as well that I did, as there was to be no end to learning in my life.

How can one remember the first day at school without think-

ing of one's first teacher? Mine was Fräulein Cabus, a neat elderly woman with short grey hair. With her understanding nature, she was the right person to introduce frightened little children, for we were certainly all frightened, to the dry stuff of study. She completely allayed our fears within a few minutes by taking her violin and playing children's songs to us. She ruled only by kindness, and I loved her very much. Even when I was almost grown up, we were always pleased to meet each other, and she never failed to ask how I was getting on at school.

Like any other child, I did not find it easy to sit quietly over my books, for my longing to be free from restraint was often uncontrollable. At such times only the thought of my mother's stern eyes or my father's worried face kept me at work.

As long as I was at primary school I had plenty of spare time for relaxation. And although my parents were strict about my schooling, they were generous and understanding about my childish games and pleasures. We lived on the Arkonaplatz which, with its lovely gardens, made an ideal playground for us city children. Yet I much preferred exploring new streets and unknown squares, wandering past ever bigger and more beautiful houses. I could never see enough, was never tired and often did not notice time passing.

My parents' peaceful though busy daily routine was interrupted in winter by a visit to the Renz Circus, and in summer by a visit to the Berlin 'Prater'. To my great distress, we could afford only cheap seats. I could neither see nor hear properly, and right away I then decided that when I was 'big' I would have only the best seats.

The Renz Circus represented the supreme pinnacle of horsemanship. The old director Renz, who rode into the ring superbly posed with his top hat raised in greeting, had not only the finest horses but also the best clowns in the world. Later,

his company was succeeded by the Busch Circus who performed in a building by the Börse Railway Station and presented many new attractions. Paula Busch, a beautiful girl, was not content to perform the usual circus riding feats in the same old way. Instead of the traditional black costume with top hat, she wore a fantastic many-pleated white outfit in which she balanced on her horse's back. A thousand light-effects played on the shimmering silky costume. I was fascinated. At the end of the programme the management presented for the first time their water pantomime which later became so famous but which I thought terribly boring. I merely puzzled over how they managed to conjure up water from the sand-ring for the 'fontaine lumineuse'.

The highlight of the summer for me was our visit to the Berlin Prater. I was never told the day in advance in case it affected my sense of duty and industriousness—ideas that were hammered into me every morning. But when the much longed-for day arrived, I couldn't be controlled. Usually it was a half-holiday and I had finished school by ten o'clock. Then my friend Elly would appear, and off we'd go to the Prater.

Elly Fechner was my inseparable childhood friend, the daughter of a friend of my mother and, like myself, an only child. We were almost the same age, and Elly loved me like a sister. She adored everything about me, and since I began school six months earlier than she did, she would walk with me every morning, then meet me again after school at mid-day. For Elly and me the visit to the Prater was *the* experience of the summer. To my regret we had to be there by mid-day to reserve the best seats at the cheap tables, whereas the performance didn't begin until four. We defended our places like lions, for people were too apt to chase us children away. Thank goodness our mothers would arrive at two, heavily laden with bags of cakes. Even then I could hardly sit still, and waited excitedly for the curtain

to go up. Arthur Seelen and his wife and daughter were for years the stars of this genuine Berlin popular theatre.

They would begin with a folk-play which I could only partly understand, followed by a vaudeville show in which the comedian predominated. His choruses such as 'When Eve did the laundry, she only had to wash a fig-leaf', were always greeted with cheers. My father's reaction can be imagined when I sang him this chorus in the evening and asked him what it meant. The greatest attraction for Elly and me, however, was the dance-hall in front of the beautiful old garden. For hours on end we would watch the couples dancing. In the middle of the most beautiful waltz the master of ceremonies would interrupt the dance, and an elegant gentleman in tails with Kaiser Wilhelm-whiskers would collect from each couple a groschen for the dance. A barbaric custom, I thought, and ruinous to the atmosphere. In the evening, of course, there were hot sausages, and at last, around ten o'clock, we were literally dragged home protesting.

We also enjoyed ourselves visiting the Eierhäuschen at Treptow, a favourite excursion amongst Berliners. I was always the enterprising one, and Elly accompanied me everywhere. We would take the horse-drawn tram way out to the east, past the city gates, and then go further on foot till we came to a marvellous natural garden on the river Spree. Little vaudeville shows which were also put on there in the afternoons were part of the Berlin *Kaffeekochen*. The programmes were pretty rough in taste. I still remember a soubrette, her over-ripe charms squeezed into the then popular laced corsets, and dressed in a short, bright red skirt. At the end of her patter-song she lifted her skirt with an ambiguous gesture as she sang the line '. . . . who's been bitten in the leg by the stork'.

We used to see the most wonderful magicians at Puhlmann's Vaudeville-show, opposite the Prater. At the wave of a magic

wand, snow-white doves fluttered on to the stage to be transformed into cones of newspaper by the magician dressed in the traditional magic cloak and pointed hat. Then he seemed to wring the doves' necks, but—hey, presto!—out they flew from the wide sleeves of his cloak. He would light fires in huge pans and throw in silk handkerchiefs, bunches of flowers and so on, then the flames would die down and he would draw out again everything that we had thought must by now be in ashes. We were absolutely enchanted by him.

Sometimes on Sundays we would go with our parents to the brass band concert at Bötzow, a brewery with a huge park. Here the children would often wander away under the trees and be unable to find their parents again. Then they would be called for from the Bandstand, and they would cry with shame as though their hearts were breaking. Once it happened to me. There was another concert-garden near the Pfefferberg Brewery where, over the huge entrance-gate, one could read this inviting if rough piece of verse:

If you're in a state of woe
Twelve pints of beer will help,
But then, alas, you'll need to go
And make another pint yourself.

It was on these Sunday visits that I first became acquainted with music from the more popular operas.

Usually, however, Sunday was very tedious for us city children. Our stiff Sunday clothes, starched frocks with lots of rucks and panels which our poor mothers had sweated over red-hot irons to press that morning, were most uncomfortable, and hindered us at our games. Our parents were weary after the week's toil, and wanted only to rest. Sport and cinema were practically unknown, so what did we do? Whenever we saw an empty hansom cab appear in the Arkonaplatz, we'd ask if we could have a little ride, as we had no money. Often we were

allowed to get in, then with much hallooing off we'd go at least as far as the Brunnenstrasse where the first electric trams already produced some of the atmosphere of city life.

For me, a further attraction was the Church of Zion, quite close to us. Countless weddings I watched there, shedding many tears of emotion in secret. Every bride, whether young or old, beautiful or ugly, thrilled me completely, especially if she wore white silk with a bouquet and veil. The supreme moment for me was when the couple left the church after the wedding to the sound of organ music, and stepped into the bridal coach bedecked with myrtle wreaths.

Not far from the Church of Zion stood an old house with large stables attached to it. One day I heard that the owner had a horse that could count, and that every day he gave a performance with this marvellous animal. One warm afternoon, after school was over, we decided to acquaint ourselves with this phenomenon. A number of people had already gathered in front of the house, and by eager questioning we learnt that the performance would not begin until the famous actress Rosa Poppe had arrived. And indeed shortly she appeared in an open cab, the height of elegance with a gigantic feathered hat. The performance began. Easy sums were written on a large blackboard, and were answered by the horse banging with one of its front hoofs. Both horse and owner performed splendidly, and we children had enormous fun.

By autumn we were already looking forward to the Christmas market which was held in the Arkonaplatz, just opposite our house. Usually it was terribly cold then, but under the low awnings of the booths with their bright paraffin lamps one was sheltered from the icy wind. The market women wrapped themselves deep in their clothes, kept little charcoal stoves under their skirts and thrust their hands into thick mittens. An indescribable smell of Christmas pervaded everything. There


Frida Leider
„Tiefland"

were spiced cakes, carob, manna, Turkish honey which stuck deliciously to the teeth, dolls, rattles, clockwork mice and everything a child could desire. Later, when the beautiful fir-trees were added, the Christmas atmosphere reached its peak.

But my greatest pleasure in winter was skating. I was good at it, and, particularly in the evenings, enjoyed myself on the ice which glittered under the electric lights, moving to the rhythm of the music in the clear winter air. I used first to store up my strength with mulled wine and pancakes which were cheap. Blissfully I would glide over the mirror-smooth surface beneath the starry-clear winter sky. The ice-rink slowly emptied, the band played a final waltz, and then I finally thought of going home.

We Berlin children were enthusiasts for every kind of music. For hours on end we would run from courtyard to courtyard with the barrel-organ player. The drum hanging from him, the cymbal, a red-coated monkey that finally disappeared obediently under his master's jacket, these were the marks of his calling. And the groschen were flung down from the windows while we children danced in the courtyard.

In March, the basket market on the Arkonaplatz was an event of special interest to housewives, for in my youth one did one's shopping with proper baskets with handles. There were all kinds, from the daintiest children's baskets to the big linen and travelling baskets with iron rods and padlocks, often very artistically and imaginatively devised.

I can mention only a few episodes from life in and around the Arkonaplatz. But a novelist would have found material enough there for a long book, particularly if he had studied the histories of the wealthy firms beginning to grow up in that district or the great talents that came to birth there. A famous contralto of the time, Marie Goetze of the Imperial Opera, came from the Wolliner Strasse. Her performances as Amneris and Azucena

were unforgettable. Her successor, Margarete Arndt-Ober, who is still today a symbol of Berlin's musical world, came from the Swinemünder Strasse. Her parents had a large fruit and vegetable business, and my mother used to shop there. She would often tell me about the mysterious Gretchen Ober, who was never allowed to serve in the shop, went to High School and was learning the piano. To my great regret we didn't possess a piano.

My parents paid little heed to my musical desires; it seemed to them much more important that I should be prepared for High School. One of my teachers who was interested in my progress gave me French lessons privately. Almost every afternoon I went to her cosy little flat in the Vinetaplatz. For me her living-room symbolized everything that was interesting. Along the ledge of the porcelain stove stood countless souvenirs which her brother, a sea-captain, had brought her from all over the world. There were bizarre starfish, sailing-ships in bottles, multi-coloured shells, and all kinds of things. There was also a gaily-coloured parrot sitting motionless on a perch, which on my first visit I thought was stuffed. The lesson began by the light of the paraffin lamp, and I was busily copying out French vocabulary with a red pen that I was very proud of. Suddenly I heard a harsh screech and a loud beating of wings. I was scared to death. My teacher, however, was quite used to her pet's behaviour. Calmly she lit the lamp again, and sat the parrot back on his perch, speaking kindly to him all the while. I was terribly frightened but didn't dare show it. Later, when the parrot had got used to my presence, he used to climb over my arms and shoulders during the lessons, nibbling at my black pigtails and occasionally pecking at my red pen whose bright colour fascinated him. We never really became great friends, I didn't trust him. I had the unselfish efforts of my teacher to thank for the fact that I did well in French in the examination

for entry into my High School, the Luisenschule.

With the Luisenschule, childish pleasures came to an end, and I became interested in more serious matters. Visits to museums and organ concerts in the Marienkirche became my greatest joys, and I soon knew every room in the National Gallery, and exactly where the most famous paintings were. Above all else I loved beautiful paintings and music.

When I was thirteen I went to the opera for the first time, not imagining what a fateful visit this was to be. Popular operas were performed at the *Theater des Westens* in the Kantstrasse, and I pestered my mother until she bought two seats for a Sunday matinee. The opera was *Il Trovatore*. I was so enraptured, particularly by the Azucena, that I forgot my surroundings. Long after the curtain had fallen, I remained in my seat until I was gently but firmly requested to leave. Outwardly, everything went on as before. I was diligent at school, since, in accordance with my parents' wishes, I was to become a teacher. But I could not stop thinking about opera; the first musical spark was struck. At school, my favourite period was the singing lesson. Our singing-teacher was a marvellous pianist whose playing I very much admired. He was a distinguished-looking man, and carried his beautiful artist's head proudly, but—he drank. To my great horror I once saw him slip into the natural history laboratory next to the music room to have a quick swig. The rest of the staff avoided him; I would see him walking alone in the playground. I was terribly sorry for him, but he went completely under. It wasn't long before the bottle was to be seen sticking out of the pocket of his jacket, and one day he disappeared without a trace. It was certainly he who first recognised that I had a voice. He would often stand near me, listening to me as we sang. I was given little solos, which made me very happy. Yet all my musical desires were being pushed into the background by demands made by the school schedule.

While I was at the Luisenschule, which was a highly respected establishment attended by the daughters of the Berlin *bourgeoisie*, I was made aware of what was for me a completely new kind of social and intellectual life. Since, in spite of my seriousness, I was also a cheerful and companionable creature, I made friends with a few pleasant fellow-pupils, some of whom are still my friends today. The nicest thing was our coffee circle. My friends' parents used to do their best to give us children a pleasant afternoon. Of course there were delicious Berlin pastries and splendid coffee, but again and again I was astounded at how simply and cheaply the real middle-class Berliners lived. We played lots of music together, and, of course, only good music.

I shall never forget one friend I had in those days, Annie Pietschmann. Her parents had a big music business in the Brunnenstrasse, where they sold the first horn gramophones. One afternoon Annie showed me a brown wax cylinder, one of the first primitive recording machines. We sang a duet from *Guillaume Tell* and listened most enthusiastically to the playback. To our great regret, the performance had to be wiped off afterwards.

Dear, well-remembered Luisenschule! But what a long distance it was to walk. In winter my face was completely covered with lanolin, and when it was particularly cold I wore my grandmother's hood as well. I would walk from the Arkonaplatz to the Brunnenstrasse where I met my friend Ilse Damköhler. A little further we were jointed by Annie Pietschmann, and then across the Koppenplatz to the Hakeschen Markt where the Keilich sisters met us. It took about an hour to get to the Ziegelstrasse. Those who knew Berlin in those days will remember the famous toy-shop 'Puppen-Keilich' with its sixteen gaily decorated windows. Five of the Keilich

girls went to the Luisenschule, and one of them, Luise, was my classmate.

I was also very friendly with Else Langenscheidt of the Toussaint-Langenscheidt family, a very talented girl. We had at that time a young teacher, Dr Wiehr, on whom the whole class had a crush. Else, a beautiful blonde, was always falling in love, and her infatuation for Dr Wiehr soon reached alarming proportions. Unfortunately he didn't reciprocate, so one morning as he was strolling in the playground she spat on his head from a window. The consequences were dreadful. Our Principal, Professor Ritter, prophesied a shameful future for her, and for a time she had to leave the school. But this youthful peccadillo had no harmful effect on her later life.

I often visited my friend Ilse Damköhler and her parents, in whose house a great deal of good music was played. Her father, a bookseller, was an excellent pianist. He was also a great Wagnerian, which was something quite strange to me then. He played us the Magic Fire Music from *Die Walküre*. It was the first Wagner I had ever heard, and I was transported. I was just fourteen years old.

The senior classes of the Luisenschule sometimes were taken to performances at the Hoftheater. We saw the complete Wallenstein trilogy[1] on two afternoons. Rosa Poppe, Amanda Lindner, Adalbert Matkowsky, Rudolf Christians were the finest leading players, names that have become part of Berlin's theatrical history. Though we were given only a few such artistic treats, they were of the highest standard, and left deep and lasting impressions upon us.

My youth coincided with the full flowering of the Imperial Opera. Since the high prices put the Opera House beyond my reach, I had to content myself with the posters, and soon I knew all the casts by heart. A stationer in our building sold postcards

[1]The three *Wallenstein* plays by Kleist (Tr. note)