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In Pursuit of a Total Art, the Paris Opera Adds Video to 'Tristan und Isolde'

By Alan Riding



Ben Heppner and Waltraud Meier as the title characters in "Tristan und Isolde," beneath video scenes by Bill Viola at the Paris National Opera. Photo by Pascal Gely/Enguerand. Copyright 2005 The New York Times Company.

PARIS, April 13 - Huge, dense, taxing, with almost all the action taking place in the heart, Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde" is notoriously difficult to stage. Indeed, the composer himself abandoned his first attempt in Vienna in the early 1860's after no fewer than 77 rehearsals. Now, in a daring experiment, the Paris National Opera has invited the American video artist Bill Viola to accompany the work with his own visual commentary.

On a 30-foot-wide screen above and behind the somberly lighted space peopled by the singers, images that recall some of Mr. Viola's well-known video pieces variously offer literal, metaphorical and even spiritual complements to one of mythology's most famous and tragic love stories. With only the preludes played to a closed curtain, Mr. Viola's multi-toned video poem runs for some 3 hours 40 minutes, a full-length spectacle in its own right.

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The production, first performed in a concert version at Disney Hall in Los Angeles in December, is directed by Peter Sellars, with Esa-Pekka Salonen conducting the Paris Opera Orchestra.

Its seven performances at the Bastille Opera through May 4 are to be followed by seven more in November, with Valery Gergiev at the podium. It is to return in concert version to Disney Hall in March 2007 and to be staged in New York in April 2007.

Central to this production are the German mezzo Waltraud Meier as Isolde and the Canadian tenor Ben Heppner as Tristan, both given a rousing reception after Tuesday's opening night. In the view of French music critics, the Swiss mezzo Yvonne Naef as Brangäne, the Finnish baritone Jukka Rasilainen as Kurwenal and the German bass Franz-Josef Selig as King Marke also contributed to the high quality of singing.

But the true novelty lay in Mr. Viola's videos, which the artist said in an interview were inspired more by the text than the music. "I listened to it, various versions, for a month and I was stunned, I couldn't see anything," he said. So, no less than Wagner, he started with the myth, the story, the text. "The images tell the inner story in a similar way the music tells the inner story of the emotional and, I would say, spiritual life of these people."

As a result, Mr. Viola shot most of the images before turning back to the music. "I realized the music is not useful to me while I'm shooting," he explained. "The music becomes absolutely necessary in the editing process. So music became for me the last stage. It was then that I tried to fit the images onto this pre-existing landscape that Mr. Wagner has beautifully provided us."

As such, the images echo rather than illustrate the story, with many sequences slowed to harmonize with the protracted development of the plot. For instance, it takes most of Act I, as well as a magic potion, for Tristan and Isolde to recognize they love each other. They enjoy their love in Act II, but it ends with Tristan stabbed by a follower of Isolde's new husband, King Marke. And Act III is devoted to Tristan's extended death and Isolde's decision to join him.

Perhaps the central image used by Mr. Viola for Act I involves a split screen in which two tiny lights gradually take the form of a man and a woman, Tristan and Isolde's surrogates, who slowly strip and then are purified with water. The sequence ends with close-ups of their faces under water, as if they - like Tristan and Isolde who have drunk the love potion - have passed into a new reality. Two other figures then caress each other as they float under water.

With Tristan persuaded that the night is benevolent and the day is evil, Act II opens with an image of sunset and closes with another of dawn, but the most powerful sequences involve fire and water, two of Mr. Viola's preferred opposites. In one, a man slowly approaches a fire from a long distance and finally walks through the burning logs; in the other, a woman - again in slow motion - lights some 150 candles before herself walking through water.

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Water too is at the heart of the final near-mystical scene when the now frustrated love of Tristan and Isolde becomes, in Mr. Viola's words, "something more profound, something you can't even describe." Here, by reversing the high definition film he has shot, Mr. Viola uses water to lift the dead Tristan from a stone slab and raise him to eternity. "You're looking at death, and in the editing room, it becomes a kind of birth," he noted.

The question already raised by some critics in Los Angeles last December and echoed by some spectators here Tuesday is whether the powerful images distract from the singing. Views seem divided, with the criticism applied mostly to Act I. Mr. Viola recognized the problem. "The images can overwhelm," he said. "It seems like a huge amount to take in, but a lot of them are quite slow and on the screen for quite a time. They function at times as backdrops."

Unusually, Mr. Sellars began working on his production only after seeing Mr. Viola's images. "The staging is built around Bill's images and of course Waltraud Meier and **Ben Heppner**," he said in an interview, "because the depth they bring to the first rehearsal means you're starting at an advanced level. Waltraud is the reigning Isolde of her generation. Ben is now truly without peer."

With the images in place, Mr. Sellars said, "Bill gives me permission to ground the singers in an emotional depth because I don't have to have them run around the stage and be 'interesting.'" The result is a minimalist staging, with only a square platform as décor and all the intensity reserved for the voices.

Still, with the combination of video, orchestra, singing, acting and text, Mr. Sellars likes to think the team has come up with something resembling a modern Gesamtkunstwerk, the concept of total art that was Wagner's lifelong musical and theatrical objective. "Of course," he added, "Wagner's music alone gives you more than you can possibly take in."

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