

### Between Worlds

*The new Seattle 'Tristan' explores the threshold between life and death, reports Andrew Moravcsik*

*Tristan und Isolde*. Clifton Forbis (Tristan), Annalena Persson (Isolde), Greer Grimsley (Kurwenal), Margaret Jane Wray (Brangäne), Stephen Milling (King Mark), Jason Collins (Melot), Simeon Esper (Young Sailor/Shepherd), Barry Johnson (Steersman); Seattle Opera Chorus and Orchestra/Asher Fisch; Peter Kazaras (director), Marion Tiedtke (dramaturg), Robert Israel (set designs and costumes), Duane Schuler (lighting). Seattle Opera, 4 August 2010

What are we to make of *Tristan und Isolde's* paradoxical premise that romantic love is realised only in death? The couple's amorous sincerity leaves no doubt that even ill-fated love permits us, if only briefly, to transcend the limitations of material and social life. Yet Tristan's lacerating self-analysis in Act III, in which love seems just another burden to be cast aside, implies more sombre Schopenhauerian pessimism: we can transcend worldly desires, even romantic love, only through separation and death. To 21st-century ears, Wagner's philosophical resolution of all this – death as metaphysical transfiguration – is so much mumbo-jumbo.

The result: contemporary productions of *Tristan* simply duck the issue. Some are naively realistic. Others, in the tradition of Wieland Wagner, adopt a studied neutrality, emptying the stage of recognisable objects and leaving the audience to free-associate on the varied pathologies of romantic love or psychological evasion. Still others, in the tradition of modern German *Regietheater*, use deliberately alienating settings – a glitzy cruise liner, for example – to undermine the romantic premise that love and death are big issues at all, leaving us to ruminate on our solitary existences. None of this does justice to the opera's central tension.

In his recent Seattle Opera production, director Peter Kazaras proposes something new. The drink is indeed the death potion Isolde ordered, and from then on we observe the hallucinations that pass through the lovers' minds in the moments before death – a notion borrowed from Ambrose Bierce's famous story *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*. This concept promises to make sense of the tension between love and death, underscores Tristan and Isolde's uncanny spiritual separation from their surroundings, and highlights the opera's uniquely distorted subjective sense of time.

While Kazaras's stage direction, backed by Duane Schuler's innovative lighting and Robert Israel's set design and costumes, ultimately fails to realise this ambitious concept fully, it provides new insights into the music drama. The blocking of Act II, in which Tristan and Isolde slowly follow one another across a dark stage, like Orpheus and Eurydice, evokes their ghostly state between worlds. Tristan and Isolde's costumes shift from mortal red to half-red, and finally to pure white, as if the blood is slowly draining from them. Tristan sings his first lines in Act II while apparently fully encased in a large slab of solid stone – one of many striking lighting effects, and one that highlights the idea that Isolde is summoning the knight only in her mind. Kurwenal is not killed in a pointless battle, but simply recedes from Tristan's consciousness into darkness.

Yet much else is jumbled, undermining the production's core concept. Semi-realistic elements – large wrapped paintings, a tree, furniture and the little model ship (mandatory, it seems, in contemporary *Tristan* productions) – coexist uneasily with abstract ones, such as laser-like red cords and a 'stage within a stage' curtain behind which characters intermittently disappear. Blocking, lighting and costuming of characters fail always to delineate unambiguously their status from the perspective of the dying couple: to the first-time observer, some aspects seem arbitrary, others over-subtle, still others blandly realistic. A future revival should give Kazaras a second chance to realise its promising central premise more starkly and with greater rigour.

Musically, while perhaps not reaching the epochal standards of Seattle's 1998 production, in which Ben Heppner and Jane Eaglen made their debut in the lead roles, the production was deeply satisfying. Clifton Forbis is a true dramatic Heldentenor whose clarion top rests on a dark baritone base. While somewhat restrained in Act I, perhaps by design, he trumpeted the Act III high notes (no cuts) with apparent ease – as if, in the Birgit Nilsson tradition, he could sing it all again. Those with a historical perspective might quibble, calling here and there for warmer timbre, gentler *piano*, subtler phrasing, clearer diction or deeper psychological insight. Yet who today sings a finer Tristan?

Keen anticipation attended the American debut of the young Swedish soprano Annalena Persson. Young, blonde, comely and (by Wagnerian standards) slim, Persson looks Isolde's part. Her silvery voice can be thrilling or moving, particular in swiftly paced, exciting moments, such as the Act III Lament. On sustained (particularly rising) notes in the upper-middle register, however, the voice spreads, curdles and slides out of control. The Liebestod, almost entirely comprising such passages sung against full orchestra, was rendered anti-climactic.

Seattle favourites took the secondary roles. Stephen Milling nearly stole the show with a world-class King Mark of deep feeling, his rich bass effortlessly filling the hall with exemplary German. Margaret Jane Wray's soprano approach to Brangäne – slightly steely at the top, but cleanly projected and delivered, with plenty of volume – vindicated her recent success at the Met and elsewhere. Greer Grimsley, Seattle's resident Wotan, made a more convincing Kurwenal for its elegant understatement.

The company's Principal Guest Conductor Asher Fisch is not one to pepper this score with excessive *accelerandos*, overweight accents or bloated brass. He strives instead for classical restraint, impressively achieved through long lines, subtle details, transparent textures and smooth blend. The intimate mood suited this production's exploration of dreams at the threshold between life and death.