

Sharon *Tristan und Isolde* (Metropolitan Opera)

By Mark Golden, President, Wagner Society of Washington DC

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This is a visually stunning production simultaneously offered on two different planes: the shifting palette of tunnels above, where (for the most part) the operatic presentation is occurring, and a plain table below, generally populated by a silent couple acting out something related but different from what is happening above them. Occasionally, the two environments are merged, with upper field providing (via video) a telescopic focus on something happening on the table below.

Who the couple at the table are is left ambiguous - I think intentionally so. At some points they do embody Tristan and Isolde. At times perhaps merely archetypes of the every man and every woman coming to the table to participate in a ritual commonly shared that can be either quotidian, or in other circumstances, profound:

- In act one: a place to share a drink.
- in act two: a place to share a meal.
- In act three: a hospital table - a place we might come both to experience death and to experience birth (and at the opera's climax, we get both).

Sometimes, perhaps, as director Yuval Sharon suggests in his program notes, they might even be performers themselves who come to the table to create the roles of Tristan and Isolde.

And sometimes some combination of all these things. Or something entirely else that I just didn't grasp.

What goes on in the tunnels above is the actual drama, framed in what looks like the visual representation of the mechanics of the eye: how we see. It's not always clear whether what we are seeing is objective, visual perception or what we see in our mind's eye, for example when we dream.

There is something to be said for such a multivalent and open ended approach (although there is always the possibility that obscurity is less an indication of artistic depth and more an indication of directorial uncertainty or lack of clarity).

By and large, I would say a weakness in the production is that there is always too much going on simultaneously, creating an inevitable lack of focus. As an audience member, we are distracted by details and possibly missing the more significant thing happening elsewhere on the stage at that moment. (One wonders what could be made of this

production if it had the luxury of the old Bayreuth approach of workshopping a production over several seasons before it takes its final form.)

The most coherent thread to hang on to is the music. For as James Conlon once observed, in Wagner "the orchestra never lies." And with music of such grandeur as this, perhaps the best way to approach this production is focus on that and not become too distracted by the points of visual interest (often multiple simultaneous points of visual interest) cascading upon you.

The headline grabbing element was that this was only Lise Davidsen's second assumption of Isolde and her North American role debut. She did not disappoint. It is such a huge and artfully managed voice, and impossible not to be bowled over by it. (One of the deficits of the physical set were the tunnels, which I think sometimes acoustically interfered with audibility.)

Michael Spyres, in his role debut, was also impressive. In an opera world sometimes obsessively consumed by issue of fach, his voice is impossible to pigeon hole. It is useful to be reminded that the first Tristan in 1865 (Frederich Schnorr) was contemporaneously singing (and renowned) for heldentenor roles and in Mozart (Tamino, Octavio). Spyres had vocal precision throughout, volume and steel where required and baritonal gravitas where appropriate. And nearly the stamina the role required, showing only slight signs of running out gas by the end of the brutal third act.

Ekatarina Gubanova seems to have a monopoly on the role of Brangäne anywhere in the world the opera is performed today, and her performance here made that seem justified.

Tomasz Konieczny, a dominant Wotan on the world's stages today, was immensely satisfying as Kurewenal: brusque to the point of brutal in act one, compellingly vulnerable and empathetic in act three.

Ryan Speedo Green, an obvious audience favorite, also in a role debut, slightly paled, but only in comparison to his illustrious company. I think with a little more time to grow more comfortable in the role (and perhaps in a more straightforward production) he has the makings of a great King Marke.

There is nothing specific I can put my finger on to describe what I felt was lacking in Nézet-Séguin's reading from the orchestra. It just felt a little too generic and lacking in nuance. A kind of lowest common denominator approach where nothing was particularly wrong, but still something was missing.