

WAGNER NEWS

Wagner News is published by the TORONTOWAGNER SOCIETY

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INSIDE

Monday, January 13

7:30 p.m.

Opera by Request! returns. This time to discuss with us how they prepare to present a 16-hour *Ring* in half the time. Bill Schookoff will demonstrate on the piano and a number of his singers will be present

Monday, February 24

7:30 p.m.

Roundtable Technical Discussion

on the making of *The Flying Dutchman*, with the COC Head of Wardrobe, Head of Hair, Wig and Makeup, the Stage Manager and the Associate Director

Monday, March 30

7:30

The great **Adrianne Pieczonka** in conversation

Monday, April 20

7:30 p.m.

Stephan Bonfield discusses *The Flying Dutchman*

April - May

Singers' Roundtable -
The Flying Dutchman cast
Date to be determined

**ALL MEETINGS:
ARTS AND LETTERS CLUB
14 ELM STREET**

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Wagner's *Lohengrin*: Third Time's A Charm?

Joseph So

Klaus Florian Vogt (Lohengrin); Johanni van Oostrum (Elsa); Wolfgang Koch (Telramund); Karita Mattila (Ortrud); Christof Fischesser (Heinrich); Martin Gantner (Heerrufer). Lothar Koenigs, conductor; Richard Jones, director. November 24, 2019.

Joseph So

There's something to be said about seeing a production several times. Details and nuances overlooked initially are uncovered, adding to the overall experience. Sometimes it means our original thoughts on the work may have changed, for the better or worse. One thing for sure, with the additional exposure and passage of time, it invariably gives us greater insight, and a fuller understanding of the production and the director's intentions.

In the case of the Richard Jones *Lohengrin* in Munich, the Nov. 24 performance was my third. The first was ten years ago, back in its first season in 2009, with Jonas Kaufmann and Anja Harteros, conducted by Kent Nagano. Second time was in 2016, with Klaus Florian Vogt and Anne Schwanewilms. I saw Vogt again this November, with South African soprano Johanni van Oostrum replacing Harteros who cancelled. Both times the conductor was Lothar Koenigs.

Have my thoughts on it changed? Musically, all three performances were on an extremely high level. Nagano (2009) gave a crisp, clean if somewhat clinical reading of the score. Lothar Koenigs' approach was more dramatic and more exciting, not sparing the decibels. Kaufmann and Harteros (2009) was the ideal pair of lovers. Compared to Kaufmann, Vogt was a gentler and more restrained Lohengrin, in what is now his signature role. His tenor is more lyrical, with a softer, almost choirboy timbre, albeit with volume. Vogt's portrayal of the Swan Knight was more aristocratic, and I find myself liking his take on the character more and more.

Of the three Elsas, Anna Schwanewilms (2016) was vocally a bit frayed at the top. While I was disappointed Harteros didn't sing this time, van Oostrum (2019) was a sensational replacement, offering a beautifully fresh, youthful soprano, with power and security at the top. Karita Mattila, once a celebrated Elsa, took on Ortrud. She chewed scenery as only she could, her "Entweihte Götter" had enough venom to peel paint. That said, her covered, nearly straight tone took some getting used to.

Wolfgang Koch reprised his Telramund from 2009, singing with a baritone that's perhaps too beautiful for the evil character. Heerrufer, the first solo voice in the opera, was sung beautifully by Martin Gantner, who has sung to distinction at the COC. Christof Fischesser, a fine Munich Opera fest artist, reprised his sturdy and reliable Heinrich. All in all, a vocally and musically satisfying evening.

For me, the Richard Jones production remains problematic. As I had written in a previous review, the centrepiece of the production involves the building of a house for the soon-to-be-married couple. When things take a turn for the worse in Act 3, Lohengrin takes gasoline and set fire to the baby crib and the bed! It was a bit shocking, although the staging has been toned down now, compared to 2009, when Kaufmann wrecked the place! Also, I can't help observing it's a house built the stage floor, with no foundation. Well, you know what they say about a house with no foundation – no wonder their marriage is doomed!

It appears to me that German nationalism is at the core of Richard Jones' vision. The set, the costumes, the uniforms, the symbols, all harken back to German society in the 1930's, an unfortunate moment in their history. The staging of Heerrufer's decree, the uniforms, the mass suicide of the townspeople at the end, all makes for uncomfortable viewing, especially given the rise of the far right in Germany today. When it premiered in 2009, there was booing. In 2016, the people next to me sat in stony silence, only applauding the artists at the end. This time around, everyone applauded – I hope I'm not reading too much into this. In any case, I went to *Lohengrin* for the music, and I came away enormously satisfied.

Lohengrin and Ortrud - Klaus Florian Vogt and Karita Mattila
Photo: Enrico Nawrath



Wagner's *Lohengrin*; Third time...

Richard Rosenman

After ten years and through several revivals of Richard Jones's Munich *Lohengrin*, the public learned not so much to love it, but, rather, have found what to love about it. The production, the staging, these have not changed, nor the public's reaction to them; however, something must account for its longevity and the full houses in spite of the reservations.

It is my view that the public has not stopped disliking it; it just decided to move on and ignore it. This change of attitude is obvious if one traces it through the three iterations I have attended.

Since its premiere in 2009 this *Lohengrin* has been through a revival several times now. I remember how the premiere was met with some of the most violent booing in the history of this opera house, and not just at the final curtain.

The second time I saw it, in July 2016, the attention had already shifted away from the greatly disliked concept and concentrated on the music making, singing and acting. The third coming, this past November, 2019, witnessed a total shift in attention - it was primarily the singing - the cast has been rewarded with six curtain calls and a standing ovation. It was in great part due to the spectacular vocal performances of everyone in the cast and the unexpected success of this Elsa, Johanni van Oostrum, a last-minute substitute for Anja Harteros.

One may say that this is the usual history - there is a long list of hostile reception turning into deliriums of adoration in later revivals. In this particular case, it seems the direction of this opera house has not lost faith in this *Lohengrin*. The old principle is: if it works, don't change it! And, judging by the fervorous reception, it still works.

But will it stay in the repertory? The bar has been raised for amazement. New goers are lured in by great voices not by concepts. As for the meaning of it all, when those who just came in, ask me what's with the railroad bridge and the two alarm lights over the tracks, I, the triple veteran, just say 'never mind, let's get on'.

The idea behind the production, of course, remains the same. Lohengrin and Elsa build a house, raised block by styrofoam block by them and a crowd of t-shirted assistants. We watch it grow in successive curtain rises, the completion marked by topping with a prefab roof, lowered by a giant crane, all coinciding with the signing of a marriage contract. One of the few blessings of this production is that this simple ceremony replaces the boring and protracted ceremony of the Wedding March.

The house on stage, sliced open in an unforgiving way, reveals the two emblems of expected domesticity - a cradle for the never-to-be-born baby and a portrait on the wall of the missing young brother.

The only *gemütlich* touch is the flower bed in front of the house, which spells the quotation engraved above the door to Wahnfried: '*Hier, so mein Wahn Frieden fand, "Wahnfried" sei dieses Haus von mir benannt*'. (In Ernest Newman's translation: 'Here where my illusion found piece, be this house named by me Peace from Illusion'.)

The mirage of future happiness disappears with Elsa's betrayal of her oath. Telramund, heedless of his previous failure to kill Lohengrin, tries again and dies in an uneven match of his sword against the magic of Lohengrin's raised hand.

What with the cranes, and styrofoam building blocks and mixing mortar and patching joints, it is perhaps overstating it, but it is too much of a good thing. The dark goes on with Telramund and Ortrud, the matching of evil Ortrud against the innocence of Elsa, bring us back to the dark reality of the work. Then, the sort of happy ending where almost all of the concerned die.

There are many aspects to criticize in this production. What works against it? The inconsistencies of historical periods, the anachronism in the mix of the past and the contemporary, (the pastiche of the past and the 21st-century technology). The indiscriminate mix and superposition of symbols, historical periods and such. So, we get the stock military uniforms and gala princely dress against t-shirts and sweatpants; swords against handguns; tv cameras and tv screens. The poor metaphor - which is, I suppose, a parable of building a house to stand-in for building a stable, positive society for Brabant under a benevolent rule, as the alternative to what Telramund and his kind represents.

The highlights are, as always, the confrontation between Elsa and Ortrud which morphs here into a most glorious duet, mindless of the gravity of Ortrud's manipulation - a confrontation of evil and virtue; the painful unravelling of Lohengrin's and Elsa's love, tinged by disappointment, regret and sorrow; and, finally, Lohengrin's rather dour, self-confessionary monologue.

The set of characters here show their own personal leanings, beyond those written into the role. Previously, in the other two performances I have seen, it was clear how the change in principals changed the stage personality of the role, how the style and personality of the characters played on stage mirrored those personal traits of the actor / singer and how these determined what we saw on stage.

Lohengrin - Klaus Florian Vogt; he repeats his 2016 role here and the many in other venues, so is a true veteran. Vogt does not cease to amaze. Although the face shows his age, his prepubescent voice, so clear of wobble, has not lost its uniqueness, its unique timbre, nor its choirboy innocence. Truly understanding his role, his authority and assurance at the start turn into a mixture of self pity and disappointment and finally rage.

Telramund - Wolfgang Koch, repeats here his 2009 role, bellicose but weak, malleable and manipulated but also fundamentally evil. Full of doubts and contradictions with vocal delivery perfectly reflecting it. Perhaps his voice deteriorated over the intervening ten years; it is hard for me to remember.

Ortrud - Karita Mattila, an unyielding character, driven by persistent self interest who stops at nothing. Her strong vocal delivery mirrored her persona, a triumphant debut in this role, except for her body language and constant fidgeting, exaggerated to the point of embarrassment. Having seen and admired the 2016 Evelyn Herltius's restrained and thus so much more effective cold snarl, this was to me the one wrong note in the whole performance.

Elsa von Brabant - Johanni van Oostrum, a truly last-minute replacement for cancelled Anya Harteros; South African soprano, not much known despite her extensive experience (in Wagner roles she has sang Senta, Elsa and Eva), so it was a potential disappointment. Her opening notes were awaited with trepidation which turned into a sigh of relief. She did a pliable and vulnerable in character (as is expected) Elsa but with a full range voice of clarity and authority that belied it. She triumphed in the two most beautiful vocal parts of this opera; firstly in Act 2 duet with Ortrud, when the beauty of the music belies the evil plotted, and the later one, with Lohengrin, which foretells the breakup. In the multiple curtain calls of remarkable enthusiasm, the loudest cheers were for van Oostrum.



Lohengrin -
Klaus Florian Vogt

Photos: Enrico Nawrath



Telramund and Ortrud - Wolfgang Koch and Karita Mattila



Johanni van Oostrum

Viewers are still struggling with Richard Jones's vision and some doubt if there is a vision at all. I am one of them. So, you will surely ask why, if the production is not to my expectation, I saw it for the third time, why did I go back?

To answer, let me quote a gentleman I remember, in the seat next to me at the close of *Götterdämmerung* in the the Richard Jones's London *Ring* production of 1996. He said in desperation: "This *Ring* is rubbish! I saw this *Götterdämmerung* before; I don't know why I came back. We always come back!"

Yes, we always come back.



Robert Wilson

at TWS September 2019

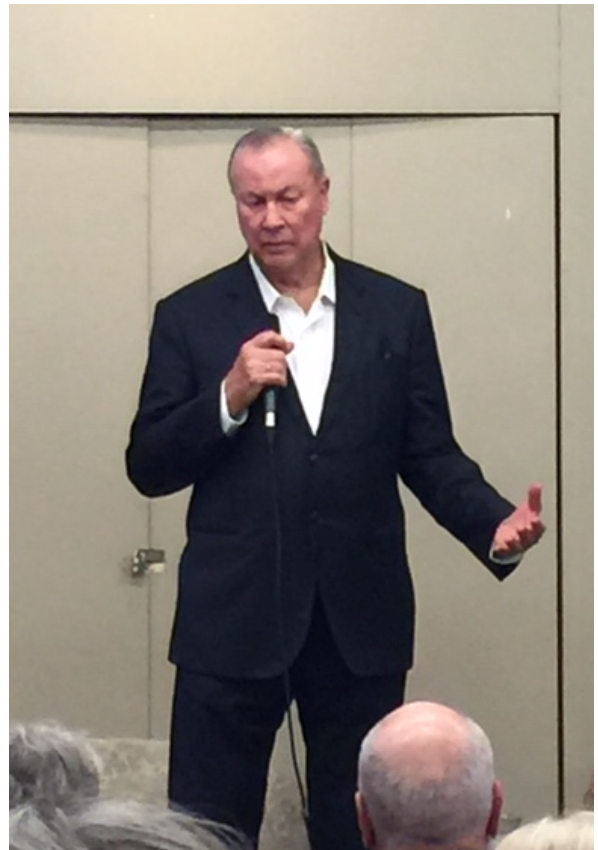
Frances Henry

Our usual custom at the TWS is to review the new program of the COC as it is announced in late spring of every year. As a co-production with Madrid and two other companies of Puccini's *Turandot* was announced to herald the Fall 2019 season, our executive immediately noticed that famed theatre opera director Robert Wilson was to direct. As is our custom we decided to invite him to attend a meeting of the TWS. Accordingly, I researched his bio on the Internet, found his website and the name of his manager. I sent a letter of invitation in July not expecting much in return but to my surprise I heard from his manager quite quickly. He noted that Mr. Wilson would only be in Toronto for one week from Sept 16 and leaving the morning after the premiere on Sept. 28 and given his tight schedule there might not be time for a meeting. About a month later, I received another letter saying that Mr. Wilson responded that he would be delighted to join you for one night – if his schedule allows. Although a meeting was not definite we were delighted that he would be interested in meeting with us. I received a note much later on Sept. 9 asking if the date of Sept. 17 was still on! This was my first inkling of a date and only ten days before the opening. A mad rush then occurred, making sure the venue was available, getting out information so that there would be a good attendance for such an eminent guest, etc., but we managed and had one of the best meetings we ever had at TWS. In my view it was actually the very best I've ever experienced in all these years at the TWS.

He spoke about his childhood growing up in Waco, Texas, his non-theatrical family background and his early years in N.Y. watching Balanchine's ballets. He also stressed his relationship with two young African American boys one of whom was a deaf mute whom he later adopted. It was through talking to this boy and watching him deal with his environment without hearing that taught him about the importance of physical movement communication. He studied architecture to please his father who was not keen to have his son become an artist. But the structure involved in designing buildings led him to the importance of standing, stillness, movement, light and colour in design. He said he was also influenced by the flow of Japanese Noh and Kabuki theatre and he has had a collaborative relationship with a Japanese director. To explain structure and other elements Mr. Wilson (who likes to be called 'Bob') jumped up and began sketching in black and red on a white board how he constructed a production of *Lohengrin* he created some years ago. He chose

that production especially for us as Wagnerians rather than the *Turandot* that had brought him here. He also does the lighting and design of his productions. His ability to clearly explain his unique method of theatre and operatic directions was very impressive and critical to understanding his work. While his work has been called 'minimalist, avant garde, progressive, etc', few reviewers seem able to look beyond these labels in describing this innovative method. Our large and appreciative audience paid rapt attention. Like me, many learned a great deal about direction from this marvellously creative man of theatre. Later when I had the great pleasure of talking to him privately he said that he was impressed by the knowledge of our audience and the intensity with which they listened to him. He also said several times that he very much enjoyed the meeting with us.

Talk about Mr. Wilson's appearance at the TWS spread through the operatic grapevine and I heard many appreciative comments from people who had not been there but 'heard all about it'.



Robert Wilson at TWS September 2019

Richard Rosenman

In a memorable and well-attended TWS meeting on September 17, Robert Wilson presented his case to an uncritical and adoring audience, which was watching all with devotional gaze. The much-anticipated meeting went unconventional.

A handsome 78-year old, with his equally handsome youthful assistant hovering at a distance but attending to any hint of instruction, not unlike Hans Sachs and David, performed a well-rehearsed and well-exercised act/routine, with the help of large sheets of newsprint on which he, Sharpie in hand, illustrated his words, a teacher to his pupils, a master to his acolytes, a prophet to his followers.

Imposing figure, impeccable in a dark business suit and white shirt, its severity relieved by an absence of a tie; radiating authority, authority borne of and reinforced by stately delivery, slow and deliberate, punctuated by eloquent moments of silence, and deliberate movements, all such which call out "I will brook no..."

It worked on this audience as it had worked on other audiences throughout the years he spread his evangel, accepted even when he produced a Wagner opera that is all movement or no movement, and once, apparently, without the music.

The presentation was measured, with an engaging gravity only infrequently interrupted by a fleeting half-smile, boyish and vulnerable and revealing more than pages of explanations. What led him to his peculiar outlook on life is well-described by Frances Henry in the parallel account. Her opening question became moot or it was not directly answered, but, nevertheless, gave him an opening to relate his life story, fundamental to his professional career for it became the theoretical basis for his theses - the body can say it all, without the need for words.

As an adjunct to his words, he stood before the easel and drew, precisely and deliberately, diagrams of his stage, the graphic equivalents of a point by point grand scheme setup, "Act 1", "Act 2", and so on, written-in under each one. (All these sheets artfully left over at the end, while the room empties, for some lingering admirer to stay behind and pocket this, a future relic to hold and venerate or to peddle on the Internet.)

His method surprises and arrests.

It is to reduce those from among the most complex to their most basic components, those repeating themselves in other guises in other productions, but reduced even further to the same few - light beams, vertical or horizontal, a rectangle for a window - just varying in size; an architectural reduction,

following willy nilly the indelible imprint of his education as an architect.

To reduce down to the irreducible.

He loves abstraction (he used the word in its many forms). To describe the process of his thinking which he then translates into reality that is not real in our understanding of the word, we should create a new word: abstraction - a noun - must be turned into a verb - to abstractize.

There is a logic in his building a structure to then follow by details and minutiae. It has become a formula, cleverly used not only to build an edifice above it but to beguile the viewer not used to such order and discipline.

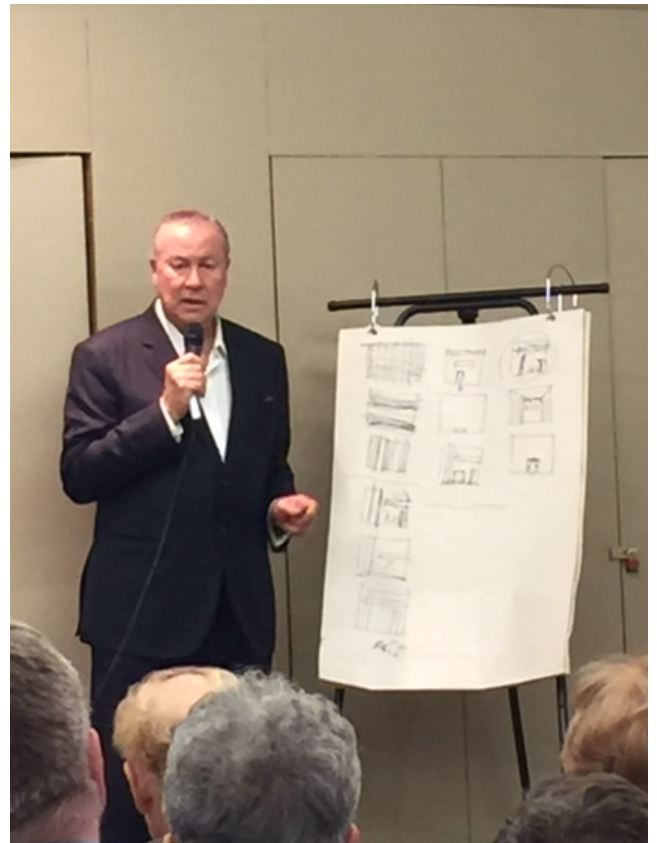
It is selling to his followers, patrons and financiers, not a new vision but a new way of looking at the familiar.

The result of this process has been variously described as "glacial", "minimalist", "rigidity stylized" or "ritualistic stage spectacles". Also "uncomfortable", to both performers and viewers.

He deals in the unexpected. He is predictable in his unpredictability - all the expected is turned upside down; all tenets are brought into doubt and upset. All the long-accepted truths had been called into doubt. He trades on doubt.

Mechanized totems. Animated robots - retrograde. The usual idea is to make robots like humans - here is the reverse.

I do not doubt the sincerity of his convictions, especially in view of the fame and the professional success it has given him. As they say, "he must know something we don't".



Photos: Richard Rosenman

Graham Vick's *TRISTAN UND ISOLDE*

Deutsche Oper, Berlin; December 1, 2019

Pierre Couture

This Deutsche Oper production of *Tristan und Isolde* was the main reason for my traveling to Berlin last month. Fully aware that Graham Vick had been for a long time one of the major exponents of European *Regietheater*, my constant appetite for new staging attracted me to this more controversial rendition of one of my favourite Wagner operas. And I just simply could not resist hearing two superb Wagnerian singers, Stephen Gould and Nina Stemme.

This production is set in a large apartment - there is no ship here - which is full of various characters. Such a setting is perfectly suited to the wide stage of the Deutsche Oper. This domestic setting, helps expose a conjugal infidelity drama and projects the full sense of betrayal, lost honour, and transcendental love, as well as the yearning of death inherent in this ageless drama.

In Act 1, Brangäne is helping Isolde to fit and adjust the wedding dress for her upcoming marriage to King Marke. Tristan sits pensively on a couch in front of an ever-present coffin, which acts at times as a coffee table. Most likely, this is a reminder of Morold's death, Isolde's first love killed by Tristan. Isolde recognizes Tristan as the murderer and this creates in her vivid memories which invoke feelings of dread and a death wish.

The usual chorus of seamen is, in this production, sung by the ship's crew who are stunned to discover two women on the ship. All this unfolds under the eyes of King Marke, who is present during the entire Act 1, seated with his back to the audience in a La-Z-Boy chair. He stares out through a set of French doors. The act concludes with the sound of choral jubilation as King Marke and Isolde prepare to marry.

From the moment Tristan and Isolde recognize each other, their fates are sealed and they become exiled from the elements that surround them. They fall slowly into their own world and transport us into the fairy tale of legend, away from the depressing activity in the apartment. It is always the same dilemma of an inevitable and uncompromising, and therefore unworkable, love. This time, Graham Vick has decided that the love potion is no longer drunk; it is injected intravenously like a dose of heroin.

There are also some very symbolic and almost distracting scenes such as the appearance of a naked young girl walking

around the contemplative Tristan during Act 1, at one end of the vast stage. At the other end, a naked young man stands behind his shovel, which he later uses to simulate digging a grave. Their re-appearance, (probably young doubles of Tristan and Isolde), throughout the first two acts is most likely meant to remind us of the purity of the feelings which animate our heroes. Should we see them as the reincarnation of Adam and Eve, or the image in our psyche of the young Tristan and Isolde?

In Act 2, although the same naked man digs a hole behind the sofa where Tristan and Isolde sing their love duet, the naked woman wanders around, and two children appear along with all those characters from the apartment. Tristan and Isolde do not notice any of them. They share their love and feel frustrated in total isolation, and take the heroin shot together which, hopefully, will give them the courage to take their love to the next level...death.

Graham Vick's imaginative inspiration sets the final act in an old people's home, - is it a nursing home or a madhouse? Our dying hero Tristan has developed a Parkinson's-type of involuntary shaking. Aware that their love is impossible, they are living their lives apart and end up separately behind the patio doors in that zone of death. Increasingly weakened, Tristan walks absentmindedly off the stage first, through those French doors, just as Isolde returns. Isolde, having reached old age in a state of sorrow because of their failed reunion in this shabby apartment, moves into a much higher plane of love with her final aria, *Mild und leise*. She then walks through the doors and goes to the world beyond where Tristan had ventured. The transcendent spiritual interaction with her beloved has just been achieved.

Throughout the production a cast lamp goes up and down, and its light settles occasionally on some elements of the staging that Vick considers crucial to the production. The stage direction is certainly enhanced by the two protagonists, Stephen Gould and Nina Stemme, singers who, although at the early twilight of their multi-decade careers, still possess the vocal powers of their peaks. Wearing 1950's or 1960's costumes during Act 3 is a very persuasive way of exposing the aging process, vulnerability and mortality.

Thanks to a particularly slow tempo - much slower than Thielemann at Bayreuth but not as slow as Barenboim - Donald Runnicles manages to bring all the lightness of the orchestration, with the harps perfectly audible even during

the unleashing of the orchestra's forces. The most inspiring moments were when the music sounded powerful and stormy.

Stephen Gould impressed with his true effortless *Heldentenor* and bright-sounding voice. We were all stunned to see how well he acted the Parkinson's suffering Tristan during Act 3. He explained to us, back stage, that his own father suffered and eventually died of Parkinson's and he had long observed him. Nina Stemme was pensive in Act 1, cheerful in Act 2, and weary of life during Act 3, when she grieves over Morold's casket. Her voice's colour, sounds and natural power still appeal to my ears. And I fully understand why her rich middle voice, deep register and flooding high notes, won her the loudest applause of the entire evening. Martin Gantner and Daniela Sindram were very effective Kurwenal and Brangäne.

Graham Vick's production, premiered in 2011, (and roundly booed then) is full of symbols; one leaves the theatre wondering what some of them could possibly mean and longing to see the production again. This truly theatrical experience - certainly a *Gesamtkunstwerk* - will definitely not appeal to the traditionalists but will shed some interesting thoughts on the Wagnerian music drama.



Tristan - Stephen Gould
Photos: Bettina Stöss



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