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The Tristan Project

by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp



Bill Viola, still from *Tristan und Isolde*, 2004. Photo: Kira Perov

When a theater director lays claim to some aspect of contemporary art, it is usually to tart up a fusty old opera to put some younger bottoms on the theater seats. The effort reminds me of sassy youthful make-up on the face of a wrinkled dowager. Well-disposed as I am to the video art of Bill Viola, I was worried about that triumvirate of theatrical innovation -- director Peter Sellars, Los Angeles Philharmonic's musical director Esa Pekka Salonen and the new artistic director of the Paris Opera, Gerard Mortier -- deploying it in service of Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*.

In this instance, the high concept turned out to be highly enjoyable. In fact, the arias of that familiar opera, especially the climactic duets, are for me now indelibly illustrated by Viola's towering video of crashing waves, entwined nude bodies and giant flames.

The Tristan Project, as it is called, debuted at Los Angeles' Disney Hall as both a work in progress and an event unto itself on Dec. 3, and was repeated on the weekend of Dec. 10-12. The three acts of the opera were presented individually in concert form on Friday and Saturday nights and Sunday afternoon. Esa Pekka Salonen conducted and opened each evening with a work by a composer who was influenced by Wagner: Alben Berg's 1926 *Lyric Suite*, excerpts from Claude Debussy's 1902 opera *Pellas and Mellisande*, and reflections on the 2000 opera *L'Amour de loin* by Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho.

Wagner, of course, dominated, even though Christine Brewer as Isolde and Clifton Forbis as Tristan and others sang with minimal gestures and no formal costumes or staging. They performed wonderfully, it seemed to me, though I am certainly no expert.

This absence of dramatic distraction encouraged the audience to engage fully in Viola's video, which largely avoids narrative interpretation of the text. Instead, he captures the roiling yet elusive emotions of the doomed lovers. Set aboard a sailing ship, the Cornish warrior Tristan is transporting the Irish beauty Isolde to become the bride of King Marke. Isolde, who saved Tristan's life without knowing his identity, feels betrayed and hopes to kill him with a death potion. Her maid substitutes a love potion, which they both drink, and the two are enmeshed in their passion even as they know their situation is hopeless.

This tragedy is rendered by Viola largely in the platinum tones of evening, as he draws imagery from Northern Romantic sources like the painting of Casper David Friedrich -- the tumultuous ocean, moonlit trees, even in the approach of *Tristan and Isolde*. In completely separate frames, which symbolize their isolation from one another, they walk slowly and without expression toward the camera and take off their clothes with painful deliberation before they are plunged into underwater oblivion.

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Yet, Viola's unique sensibility can be felt throughout the production. After the lovers surrender to their fate, they are transformed from physical to metaphysical beings, their carnal love mutates as spiritual love and their naked bodies merge as one in a silvery veil of ether. As morning sun incrementally illuminates the dark, bare branches of a tree, the Cornish King Marke, sung with tragic profundity by Stephen Milling, approaches and their death is assured. Viola had a rock band in high school and then studied with the experimental composer David Tudor at Syracuse University. He has typically employed his musical talents, especially his sophisticated sense of timing, in his video installations. From his earliest work of the late 1970s, Viola has understood the position of the audience in a way that many of his peers in video art have not. Now, at the apogee of an astonishing career, having won a MacArthur genius grant and had a mid-career retrospective, Viola was clearly equipped to invent a rapturous visual accompaniment to the complex and dissonant score of Wagner's great opera.

In fact, I came away thinking that Viola and Wagner, artists of different origins and centuries, are as compatibly suited to one another as the composer's most passionate couple. In his operas, Wagner did not pursue the comedic value of interpersonal deceptions and delights but the spiritual longing metaphorically experienced in bodily love. In his installations, including his most recent videos documenting the passions, Viola has been steadfast in his concern with the profundity of pure feeling and spiritual quest. This may be the longest music video ever made but it is surely the most remarkable.

In April, with no firm date as yet, the three acts of *Tristan und Isolde* will be presented in a single performance with Sellars' staging and Viola's video at the Paris Opera. It will also be performed at Lincoln Center.