

# Tristan and Isolde

Colin Mackerras

Site: Teatro de la Maestranza, Seville

Musical director: Pedro Halffter

Production: Pierluigi Pier'Alli

Tristan: Robert Dean Smith

Isolde: Evelyn Herlitzius

Kurwenal: Martin Gantner

Brangäne: Iris Vermillion

King Marke: Reinhard Hagen

Orchestra: Real Orquesta Sinfónica de Sevilla

Chorus: Coro de la A.A. del Teatro de la  
Maestranza

In linking Seville with opera, the names that immediately spring to mind are *The Barber of Seville*, *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Carmen*, all of them set in this wonderful city in southern Spain. Wagner does not immediately seem relevant. None of his works is set there, and it not a city necessarily famous for Wagner performances. However, the performance I saw with a group<sup>(1)</sup> touring Spain on 31 May 2009 was perhaps the best *Tristan* I have ever seen, and the others members of the group all agreed that it was

quite superlative. From almost all points of view, the performance was outstanding.

The tour leader Peter Bassett gave the group an introductory talk in the morning of the performance. He aptly described this work as “the origin of modern music”. It is a truly path-breaking work. It not only revolutionized chromatic harmony but was able to put into musical expression the romantic idea of yearning for the unfulfillable. It also contains wonderful climactic (even orgasmic) music of a kind that had never been heard before.

Wagner was able to express philosophical ideas through his music and used the orchestra in an entirely new way that made it not merely accompany the singers but add significantly to their emotions. It is an extremely great work, for me among the very greatest ever written.

And this particular performance was a superb implementation of Wagner’s concepts. We begin with the visual side, the sets and costumes. This was the Rome Opera production and to me it expressed the atmosphere of *Tristan* more or less to perfection. For a start, the emphasis was rather

traditional, “something of a rarity these days”, as Peter Bassett’s pre-tour notes aptly put it. The characters were all dressed in ways that seemed appropriate to Wagner’s libretto, in other words they looked rather as one might imagine medieval people to look. Tristan appeared like the knight he is supposed to be and Isolde appropriately like a medieval princess.

There are many examples to show the suitability of the sets, but just a few can suffice as illustrations. An important one was the way holograms and projections were able to create extra crew and a sense of distance on the ship in Act I. Peter Bassett told me that it had been a photo of this Act that attracted his attention long before the group actually came to Spain. In the love duet in the second act, the lights shone on the lovers who were really together, as they should be, not on opposite sides of the stage as in some productions. In the background was a darkish but delicious forest effect that gave one the impression of a real love scene. In Act III when Tristan sings excitedly about the approach of Isolde and the orchestra plays the “happy tune”, we had the

effect of a fairly large ship with a medieval prow drawing in, with Isolde disembarking and coming down, looking for Tristan and, when she sees him, rushing into his arms. For me this was a completely electric moment. Although she did not actually collapse at the end, Isolde looked totally transfigured and the “great emotion among the bystanders” referred to in the libretto was realistically expressed.

The singers were in generally really splendid. I begin with the Tristan of Robert Dean Smith. I had heard him several times before, including in this role in Bayreuth. He did not disappoint. He has a strong and beautiful voice, with plenty of light and shade in terms of volume and sonority. He sang the Tristan music in Acts II and III flawlessly. The Tristan music in Act III is among the greatest music I know for its originality, its content, its interesting sidelights of Tristan the man, and its foreshadowing of Freudian psychology. Dean Smith managed this about as well as seems to me possible, a dream performance. He never faltered on the succession of high As against the overpowering orchestra towards the end,

he sang sweetly and with a deep and insightful interpretation.

Our Isolde was Evelyn Herlitzius, whom I had heard as Brünnhilde in *Der Ring des Niebelungen* in Bayreuth in 2003 and as Kundry in *Parsifal* in 2006. Herlitzius is just wonderful as Isolde. To start with, she looks the part. She is beautiful, and just the right build and height. Nobody can accuse her of being too fat for the part, a complaint one often appropriately hears of Wagnerian sopranos. And she is an excellent actor. Some of her facial expressions in Act I, as she expresses her rage against Tristan, were just electric and totally appropriate to Wagner's text.

And as a voice what a powerhouse! She dealt with the climaxes splendidly, such as the one that ends the first scene of Act II just before she extinguishes the light and Tristan comes in for the love duet. On the whole she was at her best in the loud parts and her voice sometimes lacks light and shade. Also, she is beginning to develop a vibrato that threatens to become excessive. But in addition to her power, she

was very good also in some of the soft parts. When in Act I she describes Tristan's plight just before she nurses him back to health successfully (before the opera begins), she sang "er sah mir in die Augen" ("he looked into my eyes") beautifully. In terms of beauty and radiance of voice, she does not come near Frida Leider or Kirsten Flagstad (who does?), but she is humane, intelligent and musical and you can hear her above the orchestra. In some places she is perhaps a bit too loud, for instance, she drowned out Dean Smith in the beginning of the love duet. But as an overall evaluation, I give her very high marks indeed.

None of the singers of the less important roles was familiar to me. They were all excellent, though I wouldn't call any of them wonderful. The Brangäne (Iris Vermillion) has a pleasant and fairly strong voice, which she uses reliably, and she did the warning scene creditably. The Kurwenal (Martin Gantner) sang very strongly in Act III and that matters, because his part is so crucial in the way it offsets Tristan's psychological and obsessive music. Finally, I thought Reinhard Hagen (King Marke) did a very good job. Although I

appreciate the bass clarinet music of his monologue, I find it just slightly boring and self-pitying by comparison with the love duet that precedes it and the act's climax that follows. He sang compassionately and with a good musical voice. And he looked like a king with his crown and robes, and commanding presence.

Finally, the orchestra and chorus, both local, were surprisingly good, indeed excellent. The conductor Pedro Halffter was unfamiliar to me. But I must say that he did a splendid job. There were perhaps moments when the orchestra sounded slightly ragged, not quite together, but the overall impression was of considerable command of this complex score. The sonorities were right, the volumes were right, the singers were beautifully integrated with the orchestra. "Brangäne's Warning" gave the beautiful, quite eerie, sound that is so special to this scene, and the Tristan music in Act III was wonderfully accompanied. And of course the Liebestod was just stunning, rising to the tremendous, orgasmic, climax and then dying away as fulfilment is finally achieved in death.

Only two points were slightly disappointing. Although the theatre, the Teatro de la Maestranza, is large, modern and comfortable (built in 1991) and its acoustics are excellent, it struck me as slightly stark and a little bit lacking in character. Admittedly the lavish decorations that are so familiar in the traditional opera-houses of Europe are not necessarily obligatory for a good performance, they do add to the overall excitement and atmosphere of opera-going. The audience was distinctly noisy, with a lot of coughing and other minor noises, possibly made worse by the good acoustics but distracting nonetheless.

However, such weaknesses were very minor in the big picture of things. To see this great work was a truly exciting and wonderful experience. The singing, music, acting and sets were all perfectly blended in a truly memorable performance.

Note <sup>(1)</sup>: - The group, led by well-known Wagner specialist Peter Bassett, was organized by Renaissance Tours in Sydney. Entitled *Viva España*, the tour of Spain lasted from 22 May

to 4 June 2009 and visited Barcelona,  
Granada, Cordoba, Seville and Valencia.