

The Dutchman Comes Home

Mark Berry is intrigued by a production from Amsterdam that sets tradition against modernity

Der fliegende Holländer. Juha Uusitalo (The Dutchman), Catherine Nagelstad (Senta), Robert Lloyd (Daland), Marco Jentsch (Erik), Marina Prudenskaja (Mary), Oliver Ringelhahn (Steersman), Netherlands Opera Chorus (chorus master: Martin Wright); Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra/Hartmut Haenchen (conductor); Martin Kušej (director), Martin Zehetgruber (set designs), Heide Kastler (costumes), Reinhard Traub (lighting), Sebastian Huber (dramaturgy), Joost Honselaar (television director); Opus Arte OA 1049 D (166 minutes, recorded live at the Amsterdam Music Theatre, 16 and 25 February 2010)

The performance opens with a monochrome televisual storm, through which we see as well as hear strings, horns, kettledrums and other instruments, and eventually glimpse the conductor. Wagner's opening bars prove furiously driven. Calmer seas greet the very slow, very soft cor anglais-led response, raindrop effects on the camera lens making clear the 'framing' of the filmic experience. The Overture, then, finds its roots in a backward-looking potpourri conception, as opposed to forward-looking integrated symphonism, though it is perhaps not entirely without attempts to forge such a unity. Brass tend to Solti-like stridency, though the Netherlands Philharmonic woodwind evince winning perkiness and welcome lack of homogeneity. Urgency and stark contrast are the watchwords, suggesting that neither performance nor production will prove beholden to 'tradition', whatever that might be. When, towards the close of the Overture, we first view the stage, it is unclear whether the curtain has been up all along. A stark – again monochrome – set of steel and glass is immediately revealed, on to which runs a motley multi-coloured crew (one member sporting an unbecoming tropical shirt), equipped with life-jackets and lifebelts, as one registers the (relative) surprise of hearing in such a context Wagner's 1860 'redemptive' version of the coda. Were one wishing to distinguish oneself from Cosima's Bayreuth 'music-drama' approach, the 'original' or at least an earlier version of the score might have provided greater consistency. However, one soon begins to realise that, by default or design – and I cannot believe that there is no design here – the conflict between 'backward-' and 'forward-looking' Wagner is being dramatised.

Wind 'noise' heightens, for better or worse, the orchestral storm throughout this opening scene. Fine choral singing throughout offers both weight and clarity, a credit to the Netherlands Opera Chorus. The Steersman, spotlit, dons a gold lamé coat to deliver his song, taken very slowly, distended even, vocal strain telling not least through intonational insecurity; contrast is attained by speeding up considerably for the 'Hoyohe!' quasi-refrain. Tempo fluctuations mark the Dutchman's ensuing monologue, too, well delivered by the dark Finnish voice of Juha Uusitalo. This Dutchman is clearly tormented, but powerful too, looking forward, as does the orchestra, to the Wotan of the *Walküre* monologue. For all the modern dress and setting, though, the shadowy arrival of him and his crew has been accomplished in ghostly fashion, his other-worldliness intensified during the exchange with Daland. And it is clear that 'exchange' is on the

latter's mind, suave if shallow venality the guiding principle of Daland's conduct, in an intelligent reading from Robert Lloyd.

Hartmut Haenchen has become increasingly prominent as a Wagner conductor. I first encountered him on disc at the helm of some rather hard-driven C.P.E. Bach performances, then in the theatre with *Salome* in Paris, which he also conducted relatively recently at Covent Garden, both solid if hardly unforgettable performances. As conductor for the Netherlands Opera *Ring*, directed by Pierre Audi (here credited as 'artistic director'), and for *Parsifal* both in Paris and at La Monnaie, he has made claims for himself as a quasi-'authentic' Wagnerian, dubiously boasting of having led a swifter *Parsifal* even than Boulez, as if speed equated to tempo – though I believe Clemens Krauss, if not Hermann Levi, came in a few minutes faster still. Whatever the ideological stance, however, Haenchen's performance is for the most part impressive, poised, like Martin Kušej's production, between Wagner's re-imagined past and future. 'Numbers' have their own character, yet never distractingly so, as tends to happen when conductors become insistent upon Wagner's debts to predecessors; the seeds of Bayreuth are to be identified, too, in a greater continuity. Likewise, the ghostly figure of the Dutchman, whose realm appears to be of an almost Schopenhauerian metaphysical nature, contrasts with the fistfuls of €50 notes gathered keenly by Daland and the Steersman.

The second act proved at first somewhat puzzling to me. There is just the one girl spinning: Senta. The rest are pampering themselves at a spa, towelling robes and all, with a swimming pool outside the window. A contrast is certainly drawn between Senta's seriousness and the magazine-reading habits of the others, Mary included, but it seems an odd way to go about presenting it. However, one comes to realise that Kušej is also drawing a contrast between Senta's present self – Catherine Nagelstad is hardly a girl, but nor does she now need to be – and a past simplicity, imagined or otherwise, hence the determined nature of her spinning amid a backdrop of tawdry modern entertainment. The Dutchman's hooded, marauding crew may be seen outside, leaving a dead body by the swimming pool, which turns red with bloody pollution. After a brief visit outside – into the real world? – Senta re-emerges to Erik with blood on her hands. Would-be purity cannot be maintained in such a world, though Nagelstad's excellent marriage of Lieder-like detail with fine command of vocal line underlines the effort. There is, moreover, more than a hint of Nilsson-like sarcasm – again, this is no mere girl – to her delivery of the words 'Ich bin ein Kind, und weiß nicht, was ich singe!' When the Dutchman arrives, the meeting between the two of them is invested by Haenchen with a musical weight, if not always style, such as one might expect of the later Wagner. The stage is relatively empty, thinned out, too, Kušej emphasising the existentialist challenge the lovers offer to Daland's empty materialism.

Once beyond the embarrassing disco-dancing, neither attentive nor revealingly contradictory to the score, the third act continues to heighten the contrast between the late bourgeois-phenomenal world and a noumenal alternative; we also continue to follow a stronger portrayal of Erik than is generally encountered. He emerges as more dignified, more of a credible character, despite his backward-looking music. Though Erik may be no revolutionary, here and in the preceding act – especially upon the words 'Satan hat dich umgarnt!' – he presents us not only with a plausible alternative

morality to either of the production's two principal worlds, but also with true, deeply felt anger, through Marco Jentsch's finely judged, not-quite-heroic portrayal. He may be romantic rather than Romantic, but he is no cipher. However, it is the darkly Romantic image of Senta's portrait that is revealed as the final backdrop for Martin Zehetgruber's set designs. Victory for erotic metaphysics over Erik's more plausible humanity? Perhaps, but not quite, for, in a move that genuinely shocked me, Erik shoots dead first the Dutchman, upon his self-revelation, and, following her final words, Senta too. Then comes the 'redemptive' ending, where one might have expected Dresden. Viewing the two lovers upon a now-empty stage, one continues to question, though not necessarily to discount, the claims Wagner makes for redemption. His music may point us to *Tristan*, but that only raises further questions.

