

Live Reviews

Tristan without Schopenhauer – or Wagner?

Mark Berry discovers challenging questions in Dmitri Tcherniakov's probing production at the Berlin Staatsoper

Tristan und Isolde. Andreas Schager (Tristan), Anja Kampe (Isolde), Boaz Daniel (Kurwenal), Ekaterina Gubanova (Brangäne), Stephen Milling (King Mark), Stephan Rügamer (Melot), Linard Vrielink (Young Sailor/Shepherd), Adam Kutny (Steersman); Chorus of the Berlin State Opera, Staatskapelle Berlin/Daniel Barenboim (conductor); Dmitri Tcherniakov (director, designer), Elena Zaytseva (costumes), Gleb Filshinsky (lighting), Tieni Burkhalter (video). Staatsoper Unter den Linden, Berlin, 18 March 2018

No one doubts the supreme challenge presented in performing *Tristan und Isolde*. After seventy-seven rehearsals, the intended 1861 Vienna premiere had to be abandoned. A work that had taken less than three years to write took more than double that, as John Deathridge has observed, to 'overcome prejudice about its viability. [...] Strasbourg, Karlsruhe, Paris, Rio de Janeiro, Dresden, Hanover, Stuttgart, Prague, and Vienna: in the end none of these opera houses would touch it.'¹ When Munich finally did, in 1865, Wagner's *Tristan*, Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld, died after just four performances. Wagner's foes, political, aesthetic, and 'moral', seized on the opportunity to claim, ludicrously, that *Tristan* rather than typhus was the agent of death. If audiences today avoid quite such high (melo)drama, more often than not they meet the curse on the other side of Wagner's melodramatic coin: 'only mediocre performances can save me! Perfectly *good* ones will be bound to drive people mad, – I cannot imagine it otherwise. This is how far I have gone!! Oh dear! – I was just in full career! Adieu!'²

The twin dangers of unviability and necessary mediocrity were avoided in this outstanding performance from the Staatskapelle Berlin, with Daniel Barenboim and a cast headed by Andreas Schager and Anja Kampe. When I last heard Barenboim conduct *Tristan* in 2010, I observed that this, 'of the three *Tristans* in the theatre' I had heard him conduct, had 'surely [been] the best, above all in as searing a first act as I have ever heard, reminiscent of Karl Böhm at Bayreuth.'³ This proved a more powerful musical experience still, and quite different. Yes, the first act was 'searing', but it had little in common with Böhm, save perhaps for the visceral, overwhelming quality to the close, which left me in quite a state of shock: not so far from Wagner's 'perfectly *good* ones

¹ John Deathridge, 'Tristan und Isolde', in *The Cambridge Wagner Encyclopedia*, ed. Nicholas Vazsonyi (Cambridge, 2013), 593–602, esp. 599.

² Letter to Mathilde Wesendonck, mid-April 1859, in *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, tr. and ed. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (New York and London, 1987), 452.

³ Review at <<http://boulezian.blogspot.co.uk/2010/04/berlin-festtage-5-tristan-und-isolde.html>> (accessed 22 Mar. 2018).

... bound to drive people mad'. Barenboim now appears to be hearing *Tristan* more overtly through ears transformed by his recent *Parsifal* performances – or at least he leads us to do so.⁴

Some people have, apparently, been complaining that his tempi were 'slow': do they really want a 'fast' *Tristan*? I fear that, unconsciously or even consciously fearful of Wagner's 'perfectly good', they actually might. Perhaps sometimes the tempi were slow. I have no idea, not being a clock-watcher. More importantly, there were ample space *and* tension, for the ebb and flow of Wagner's Schopenhauerian Will to find orchestral representation. For, even more than *Parsifal*, the music of Beethoven – and Barenboim's recent Beethoven, as heard in a life-changing symphonic Proms cycle with the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra – made its harmonic mark. The 'growth' of harmony from the bass line, particularly when Wagner's extreme chromaticism tugs away from it, ensured both musicodramatic comprehensibility and a placing between Beethoven and Schoenberg, nevertheless reducible to neither. The Staatskapelle Berlin might almost be overlooked, so inveterate is its Wagnerian excellence; it should not be. Without its dark, 'German' tone, 'traditional' and yet probing so many of those new musical worlds seemingly born in this score, we should come nowhere near *The World as Will and Representation* at all, still less to a 'perfectly good' *Tristan*.

Likewise Barenboim's excellent cast is crucial to far more than the 'surface' role Schopenhauer's aesthetics might suggest. Schager again might readily be taken for granted. His was certainly the finest account of the role I have heard in the theatre, fully worthy of comparison with the great, doubtless mythologised performances of the recorded past, although again certainly not to be reduced to them, nor indeed to comparisons therewith. If the seemingly infinite vocal resources Schager can call upon to make his way through the third-act monologue – it was to that in particular that Wagner referred in his letter – suggest Lauritz Melchior, there was none of the laziness or, at least, somewhat cavalier attitude that could afflict the latter's work. Schager can sing the part and he does, but dramatically it needs to be hard work; we need to feel, to share in, Tristan's struggle, even as it frightens, repels us. We did, in this, a performance for the ages. Kampe's Isolde was perhaps not on quite so grand a scale; nor did it need to be. She offered her own detailed portrayal, again matching 'musical' and 'dramatic' imperatives – as if they might ever formally be separated! – to a degree it would be difficult to match, let alone to surpass. Boaz Daniel and Ekaterina Gubanova offered far more than support as Kurwenal and Brangäne, the latter's 'operatic *Lied*' approach, unfailingly sensitive to words and their implications; they never permitted themselves to override the imperatives of the musical line. King Markes rarely disappoint: what a gift of a role it is in a more traditional sense. Nevertheless, Stephen Milling's depth of tone and grace of character impressed greatly. Amongst a strong 'supporting' cast, Linard Vrielink's beautifully sung Young Sailor and Shepherd stood out.

There remains, however, a danger, increasingly common in contemporary *Tristan* performances – more strictly, in productions; that is of missing the point of the work entirely. I hope it will not be taken that I am referring in some generic reactionary fashion to the 'creator's intentions'. However, *Tristan* seems in practice to prove unusually

⁴ Mark Berry, 'Inconvenient Truths', *The Wagner Journal*, ix/2 (2015), 72–6.



left Act I of *Tristan und Isolde*, directed and designed by Dmitri Tcherniakov, Staatsoper Unter den Linden, Berlin

below Andreas Schager (Tristan) and Anja Kampe (Isolde) in Act II of *Tristan und Isolde*, Staatsoper Unter den Linden



resistant to attempts even to question what it might be ‘about’. The idea of the work being shoehorned, for instance, into a justified protest against anti-immigration policies hardly bears thinking about. *Tristan* is certainly not in any emphatic sense ‘about’ its ‘characters’, insofar as they be characters at all; it seems to come closer than any other of Wagner’s dramas to that all-too-celebrated description of ‘deeds of music made visible’.⁵ Prior to Tcherniakov’s staging, I had yet to see what might broadly be termed an ‘interventionist’ staging that worked.

Does Tcherniakov change that? I hope it is not unduly pretentious to say I think it too soon to tell. What I can say is that his production has made me think about the

⁵ Richard Wagner, “Über die Benennung, “Musikdrama””, in *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen*, ed. Richard Sternfeld and Hans von Wolzogen, 16 vols. in 10 (Leipzig, 1912–14), ix.306.

issues involved like no other: an achievement I think worth lauding in itself. By contrast with his perhaps atypical, unquestionably brilliant *Parsifal* – the best I have seen since Stefan Herheim – we return to Tcherniakov's homeground of the unpleasant rich.⁶ Fair enough: with kings, queens, and princes, that is what we are dealing with. Elena Zaytseva's costumes and Tcherniakov's own set designs – in the first act, a true luxury vessel, replete with 'bespoke' anything you might care to mention and in the second, a 'tasteful' *Jugendstil* indoor forest 'theme' we want to hate, yet secretly like – instantly evoke the excesses of a corporate, materialistic world we know only too well. The third act by contrast retreats to a homely comfort zone for Tristan, an old moneyed boy who never grew up (haunted, as his monologue tells us, by the circumstances of his birth, visions of his parents appearing in his delirium).

Is that all too specific, though? Does it fall into the trap of making *Tristan* about the trappings of wealth? Not really, for there is an intriguing, deadly game afoot. Tcherniakov does not treat the lovers as identical, as two mere parts of 'Tristan and Isolde'. He does not accept Wagner, let alone Schopenhauer, at face value. Instead, he implicitly, even explicitly, criticises some of their (neo-)Romantic premises. Is Tristan, perhaps even Isolde at times, actually mocking whatever it is they play out? It is not always clear, but there is a degree of unnerving alienation to the proceedings that intrigues, questions, even (metatheatrically?) frightens. A woman fainting in the second act seems to fall into their trap, behaving in exaggerated, overwhelmed 'Wagnerian' fashion. This woman does what Isolde 'should' at the close, perhaps elsewhere too, yet does not; or is she in on the game too? Or, perhaps most important, is this a critique of the game we play, when we sit around, almost as Nietzsche's 'Wagnerians', 'disciples – benumbed, pale, breathless!', both at the performance, enraptured, and afterwards, discussing how singular this work is, how it refuses directorial interventionism?⁷ The question of aestheticisation is live, just as in the Staatsoper's new production by Hans Neuenfels of *Salome*, which I saw the previous evening: a fascinating, provocative pairing. Who, both productions seem to ask, is the Wagnerian now, whether on or off stage? The cor anglais player on stage (the excellent Florian Hanspach-Torkildsen) perhaps asks us something similar, his deeds of music rendered unusually visible.

Tcherniakov seems to me on balance to succeed where many others have failed, presenting an element of alienation that holds work and musical performance at arm's length, without descending into mere reductionist banality. In the separation of 'work' and staging, even of musical performance and staging, the two become problematically, rather than mystically, re-engaged. Romanticism is decisively rejected, whether in work or reception. It need not always be, perhaps, but it is here – and fruitfully. For instance, Karol Berger has recently argued that, part way through Tristan's monologue, it 'is clear thus far [...] that the escape from the separating illusions of Day into the unifying truth of Night remains Tristan's goal, but a goal he cannot accomplish in Isolde's

⁶ See Mark Berry, 'Interpreting Wagner's Dreams: Staging *Parsifal* in the Twenty-first Century', in *The Wagner Journal*, xi/2, 44–53; also, *After Wagner: Histories of Modernist Music Drama from 'Parsifal' to Nono* (Woodbridge and Rochester, NY, 2014), ch. 7.

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Der Fall Wagner', in *Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, 15 vols. (Berlin and New York, 1967–88), vi. §8, 29–30.



Florian Hanspach-Torkildsen (cor anglais) and Boaz Daniel (Kurwenal) in Act III of *Tristan und Isolde*, Staatsoper Unter den Linden

absence, since they need to escape together.⁸ Perhaps. I should certainly allow, at least, that that was Wagner's intention, most likely even what he thought he had achieved. The work here, though, I think, knows better than its creator. Wagner's need to 'transcend' at the close already betrays the relative poverty of such Romanticism, just as Mozart's terrifyingly clear-eyed coda to *Così fan tutte* does.

Ironically, for all Wagner's intent to renew the spirit of Attic tragedy, it is only really in *Lohengrin* that he permits a tragic conclusion.⁹ Elsewhere, Wagner seems compelled to bow to George Steiner's thesis on the death of tragedy.¹⁰ Mozart, by contrast, 'rounds off' *Così* with a strenuously forced, knowingly, ironically perfunctory setting of Lorenzo Da Ponte's final hymn to reason. No one – be it the two 'couples', Don Alfonso, Despina, Mozart, or a sentient audience – believes that the Humpty Dumpty of

⁸ Karol Berger, *Beyond Reason: Wagner contra Nietzsche* (Oakland, CA, 2017), 211.

⁹ Perhaps also in the original endings to *Rienzi* and *The Flying Dutchman*. For a succinct outline of Wagner's 1847 Berlin revision, see Reinhard Strohm, 'Rienzi and Authenticity', *The Musical Times*, cxvii (1975), 725–7, esp. 725.

¹⁰ In a further irony, Steiner himself argues in *The Death of Tragedy*, to my mind quite incorrectly: 'Nietzsche failed to realize [that] *Tristan und Isolde* is nearer to complete tragedy than anything else produced during the slack of drama which separates Goethe from Ibsen' (New Haven and London, 1961), 288.

romantic love can be put together again. Indeed, Mozart seems to demolish, *avant la lettre*, the pretensions of Romantic – with an upper-case ‘r’ – love too. Such neo-Classical subversion lies quite beyond Wagner, whose musical style, unlike, say, that of Richard Strauss, is rarely given to irony. ‘Transcendence’ is, perhaps, an attempt to deal with the problem, if a half-hearted one (at least from our more nihilistic standpoint). Wagner turns out to need, and here receives, more of a 21st-century helping hand.

Tcherniakov’s treatment of the so-called *Liebeshod* – Wagner’s own ‘Verklärung’ is worth fighting for against Liszt’s well-meaning misunderstanding – seems to me of particular interest here, sharing, even intensifying the ambiguity of the work, conception, and tradition. Tristan’s room returns to darkness, Isolde having cocooned herself with him, safe from prying eyes – whether ours or those on stage. The prior on-stage separation between the Shepherd and his instrument, the scenic and the musical, seems thereby at a remove almost to have been overcome. We could believe in what she is doing, she doubtless could too; but we do not, and we doubt whether she does. Wagner’s reconciliation is false. Which returned this listener at least to one of the most searching – as well as, on occasion, utterly wrong-headed – of Wagner’s critics after Nietzsche: Theodor Adorno. On the final page of his *Essay on Wagner*, we read: ‘Tristan’s curse upon love [*Minne*] is more than the impotent sacrifice intoxication offers up to asceticism.’ It is rather music’s rebellion against its own ‘constraint of Fate’.¹¹ In that rebellion, music will often benefit from enlisting the services of ‘drama’, and *vice versa*. Negative dialectics indeed.

¹¹ Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner* (Frankfurt am Main, 1981), 143.