

“Tristan” Production

October 17, 2009

After an absence from London's Royal Opera House of some 40 years, it was delightful to be offered by friends last week a ticket to Wagner's "Tristan and Isolde." It did make a delightful evening, but oh dear! – the modern production! The classics of yesteryear are one thing. Their production on stage today can be quite another!

A classic like "Tristan and Isolde," which was staged for the first time in 1865, becomes a classic because it succeeds in expressing human problems and solutions that belong to all the ages. Never for instance have the passions of romantic love between man and woman been so skilfully and powerfully expressed as in the music-drama of "Tristan." But every time a classic drama is put on stage, its production can obviously belong only to the time of its staging. So the classic depends in itself on the author, but in its production on the producer, and on how he understands the classic he is producing.

Now Wagner can be called the father of modern music, especially through the revolution wrought by the chromatic harmonies of "Tristan," constantly shifting. Nobody can say Wagner is not modern. Yet what the current production of "Tristan" at Covent Garden shows is the huge distance even between Wagner's time and our own. This producer had either no understanding or no regard for Wagner's text, as two little examples may show. In Act III when Kurwenal is meant to be looking out to sea for Isolde's ship, he is shown watching Tristan all the time. On the contrary when Isolde finally rushes in to find Tristan dying, Wagner's text has her of course scanning him for the least sign of life, but this producer has her on the floor with her back turned to him! This flagrant violation of the original text, and of common sense, ran through the production from beginning to end.

What did the producer think he was doing? I would like to know. Either he had no common sense, or if he had any, he set out deliberately to defy it. Worse, the Royal Opera House probably paid him a royal sum to do so, because it will have judged that today's audiences would enjoy the defiance. One is reminded of Picasso saying that he knew his art was nonsense, but he also knew that it was what people wanted. Indeed last week's audience, which should have been hooting such nonsense off the stage, instead watched docilely and applauded warmly. In Wagner's own country today, unless I am mistaken, classic productions of his operas are rare.

One is bound to ask, what is happening to common sense? Where are today's audiences going? How can a people long survive which takes pleasure, for example, in lovers turning their backs on one another at the moment of death? Objection: it is only theatre. Reply: theatre holds up the mirror to society. Conclusion: society today either has no common sense, or what little it still has, it is trampling on. Since common sense is the sense of reality, such a society cannot survive.

Kyrie eleison.