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Nelsons Summons Compelling Drama Of *Tristan's* Act II

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Camilla Nylund and Jonas Kaufmann joined Andris Nelsons and the BSO for Act II of 'Tristan und Isolde.'

(Photo by Robert Torres)

By **Keith Powers**

BOSTON — Hyperbole and excess have followed Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* through history. Here are some examples:

"The opera that changed music," and "The only opera that exists." Or conversely, "The most disgusting thing I have ever heard in my whole life," and "The most enormous depravity I have ever seen." And then back to, "I shall never forget this," and "Dwarfs every other creation."

Even performances of just the emotionally tense second act of *Tristan* stand out as notable occasions. The [Boston Symphony Orchestra](#), with [Andris Nelsons](#) on the podium, achieved just such a moment April 5 at [Symphony Hall](#).



Nelsons and company repeat the work at Carnegie Hall on April 12.
(Hilary Scott)

Nelsons *Tristan* excerpt shone thanks to a memorable cast of soloists led by tenor [Jonas Kaufmann](#) and soprano [Camilla Nylund](#) in the title roles. Lustrous mezzo-soprano [Mihoko Fujimura](#) brought the character of Isolde's fretful servant Brangäne to life. Bass [Georg Zeppenfeld](#) (King Marke), tenor [Andrew Rees](#) (Melot), and baritone [David Kravitz](#) (Kurwenal) rounded out the stellar group.

The performance was unstaged – no acting apart from a few facial mannerisms and one tender, prolonged glance between the lovers at the act's climax. But the dramatic tension, which started with the first few ambiguous notes from the orchestra, did not abate for a moment.

There should be no debate about whether this single act succeeds on its own as a concert performance; its dramatic integrity and strong characterizations make for a seamless presentation. The singing begins with Brangäne's warning — “Hörst du Sie noch?” (“Don't you hear them?”) — and in that instant she becomes the worried sentinel, and Isolde the expectant and careless lover. The deceivers' plot becomes known its unraveling likely, in just one phrase.

Act II portrays their inner battles: between love for each other and fealty to the crown; between day and night; and, most eloquently, in the choice between leading a diminished life or finding true fulfillment in death.

But the fiercely drawn characters overwhelm any chance that the lack of action will weaken the drama. Isolde, sung with elegance and seamless facility by Nylund, never wavers in her bold, disastrous devotion to Tristan. In turn, Tristan never bemoans his fateful love, but parries hopelessly with eternal forces to make it possible.



Ludwig and Malwine Schnorr von Carolsfeld in the world premiere in 1865.

Brangäne warns and worries, but never hectors. Fujimura, impressive in her BSO debut, sang some of the most compelling music of the evening. Even King Marke, robustly realized by Zeppenfeld, sings not as a victim but as a mystified friend, high-minded and not jealous even in the face of betrayal.

Nylund sang with distinction, easing above the large orchestra. Her effortless, confident instrument sat comfortably next to Kaufmann's Tristan; only with the oversized skills of Fujimura did the balance get skewed.

Kaufmann appeared to struggle in this performance. To his great credit, he sounded fierce and partnered beautifully. His “Isolde! Geliebte!” duet with Isolde when they first meet in the dark – with the orchestra in a frenzy and Isolde at the highest reaches of her range – made for an unforgettable entry into their long love scene.

But he lacked the natural power he often brings to the stage. Copious amounts of water seemed to help his discomfort, a visual distraction in an otherwise static set. But great singers, like anyone else, have bad nights because of colds or other ailments. Whatever this was, Kaufmann proved to be a true professional, not singing at his great best, but singing with great distinction nonetheless.

Fujimura displayed an exceptional vocal instrument. When she sang in the long warning duet scene with Isolde, Nelsons not only had to work hard to keep some semblance of balance between her power and Nylund's more lyric sound, but also between her force and the orchestra. Her subsequent offstage appearances – further warnings that the nighttime tryst was about to be uncovered – were beautifully crafted. Her “Einsam wachend in der Nacht” (“Alone I keep watch in the night”), an aria that could sound Cassandra-like and self-absorbed, instead sounded like a heartfelt lament for the lovers' inevitable demise.



Mihoko Fujimura excelled as Brangäne. (Edd Royal)

Zeppenfeld as well riveted attention. King Marke also sings arias like “Tatest du's wirklich? Wahnst du das?” (“Did you really do it? Do you think that?”) that could easily veer toward self-interest. But Zeppenfeld's character and sheer robust sound added to Wagner's philosophical intensity. King Marke doesn't want revenge; he yearns to understand.

Rees as Melot has a pivotal role in the action, but only a minor singing part in this act. The terrific Kravitz – entering hastily, singing only “Rette dich, Tristan” (“Save yourself, Tristan”) – must have easily earned the best per-word fee of his career.

In the score's instrumentation instructions, Wagner calls for the strings to be “exquisitely cast in quantity and quality.” Done and done. Nelsons kept the instrumental accompaniment intense but controlled with chamber music-like settings in the winds. The horns, offstage and on, sounded out with restraint.

The orchestra performs three programs in [Carnegie Hall April 11-13](#), including Act II of *Tristan* on [April 12](#).

Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR's ARTery. Follow @PowersKeith; email to keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com

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John Fleming
MCANA President

Welcome to Classical Voice North America, the online journal of the Music Critics Association of North America, of which I was elected president in July. I have been a member of MCANA for 25 years, joining after I became performing arts critic of Florida's *St. Petersburg Times* (now the *Tampa Bay Times*).

I remember fondly the first MCANA annual meeting I attended, organized around the Lyric Opera of Chicago's 1992 premiere of *McTeague*, with score by William Bolcom. That meeting gave me – then new to music criticism – the invaluable opportunity to get acquainted with leading journalists in a specialized field. Many newspapers and magazines sent their staff critics, a far cry from the situation today when traditional print is severely stressed. Still, our meetings continue to be a great way to exchange ideas and hear top-notch performers together.

Under Barbara Jepson, my predecessor as president, and other MCANA leaders, CVNA was launched in September 2013 to provide a new outlet for classical music coverage. With readers in 90 countries it has shown consistent growth, recently passing half a million page views on 1,100 stories by 123 authors, the great majority of whom are members of MCANA.

Thank you for reading CVNA, which seeks to convey the richness of musical life in North America and elsewhere, with reviews and commentary by expert MCANA members and occasional guest contributors. If you happen to be a writer with experience in classical music, please consider this an invitation to [join us](#).

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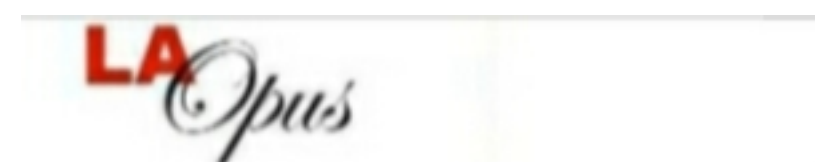
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