

Wagner

Tristan und Isolde

Wolfgang Millgramm *ten.* Tristan
Hedwig Fassbender *sop.* Isolde
Martina Dike *mez.* Brangäne
Lennart Forsén *bass.* King Marke
Gunnar Lundberg *bar.* Kurwenal
Magnus Kyle *ten.* Melot
Ulrik Qvale *ten.* Shepherd; Young Sailor
John Erik Eleby *bar.* Steersman
Royal Swedish Opera Chorus and Orchestra / Leif Segerstam

Naxos 5 538 660152/4 (3h 32' • DDD)

Translation available at:

www.naxos.com/libretti/tristan.htm

Selected comparisons:

Böhm (10/92R) (PHIL) 449 772-2GOR3

Leinsdorf (5/98) (NAXO) 8 110008/10

Furtwängler (8/04) (NAXO) 8 110321/4

Thielemann (8/04) (DG) 474 974-2GH3

A ravishing Isolde makes this clear, fresh performance moving and urgent



This is, amazingly, the fifth *Tristan* to appear on Naxos but the first to offer a completely new digital recording. The two historic versions listed above are the classic

Furtwängler EMI recording in a transfer by Mark Obert-Thorn and Leinsdorf's live 1943 Met broadcast. It goes without saying that, strong as the Royal Swedish Opera cast is, it cannot match those examples vocally, in which such singers as Flagstad, Suthaus, Melchior and Traubel are involved. There is also the outstanding 1966 Böhm/Bayreuth version with Birgit Nilsson and Wolfgang Windgassen – in many ways the most satisfying of all.

Even so, Leif Segerstam offers an account that in its freshness and clarity offers a keen alternative, the more attractive not just because of the full, transparent sound – with voices far more cleanly focused than in Thielemann's live recording – but because of the performance's magnetism and urgency. He also has a trump card in the ravishing Isolde of Hedwig Fassbender, sung with a tenderness and girlish freshness that stands as a moving alternative to the grandly noble performances from the three great sopranos mentioned above.

While Segerstam's speeds are generally fast, most strikingly in Act 3, it is odd that his account of the Prelude to Act 1 is the slowest of all, more so than Furtwängler's

and over two minutes slower than Leinsdorf. Yet Segerstam sustains tension through his spacious reading of that revolutionary music, allowing himself freer *rubato* there than later. This is a reading that never lets tension slip, so that in the great expanse of the Act 2 love duet the flowing tempo makes Thielemann seem slightly sluggish, languishing in rather than bringing out the music's glowing radiance.

What is remarkable about Fassbender's singing is the beauty and evenness of her production over the widest dynamic range, from the pinging accuracy of Isolde's Act 1 curse, with never a hint of the voice spreading, to hushed *pianissimi* flawlessly sustained. I cannot remember an account of Isolde's brief, tender solo at the end of Act 2 quite so moving as hers. She rather shows up those around her, for though Wolfgang Millgramm is a Wagnerian tenor who never barks, his control of *legato* is limited, and his finest achievement lies in the great solo passages of Act 3, for his voice is at its most cleanly focused when he is singing full out.

As Brangäne, Martina Dike's mezzo, rather light for this role, acquires an edge at the top when under pressure, and Gunnar Lundberg as Kurwenal, clear enough of focus, grows rough in places, as in the ironic song he leads with the chorus in Act 1. By contrast, the bass Lennart Forsén as King Marke sings with admirable evenness of tone. What matters most is the sense of an excellent team working together.

I have left till last the one serious blot on the set. Following the old practice in many opera houses Segerstam allows a substantial cut in the first, urgent section of the Act 2 love duet before the relaxation of 'O sink hernieder' so that the music jumps to Isolde's solo beginning 'Doch es rachte' (disc 2 track 7, 4'20") omitting some 80 pages of score. That is a pity but this is still a set that, more than most in recent years, gives a fresh, alert view of Wagner's masterpiece, a good complement with its clear modern sound to the classic sets listed. As usual with Naxos, instead of a libretto there is a detailed synopsis and an English translation available online.

Edward Greenfield