

**WAGNER *Tristan und Isolde*** • Leif Segerstam, cond; Wolfgang Millgram (*Tristan*); Hedwig Fassbender (*Isolde*); Lennart Forsén (*Marke*); Martina Dike (*Brangäne*); Gunnar Lundberg (*Kurwenal*); Magnus Kyhle (*Melof*); Ulrik Qvale (*A young sailor/A shepherd*); John Erik Eleby (*Helmsman*); Royal Swedish Op Male Ch & O • NAXOS 8.660152-54 (3 CDs: 212:12)

In a bygone era—say, 35 years ago—the prospect of a new *Tristan und Isolde* from a budget label would not have seemed even potentially promising. But that, of course, was the World Before Naxos and the rules have changed. It's ironic that this *Tristan*, taped over a six day period in June of 2004 in Stockholm, should appear not long before the anticipated release of Plácido Domingo's for EMI, a massive undertaking that some have heralded as the last studio opera recording from a major label. Naxos can do it, all right. But can they do *Tristan* justice?

The main attraction here, and it's a big one, is the *Isolde*, Hedwig Fassbender. This superb musician was first a pianist before studying voice with Ernst Haefliger. She successfully sang many lyric mezzo parts—lots of Mozart—before moving on to dramatic soprano roles, including the Marchallin, *Wozzeck's* Marie, and Wagner: *Isolde* was her first Wagnerian undertaking (in 2001) and she's since gone on to Sieglinde, Brünnhilde, and Kundry. Fassbender portrays *Isolde* with conviction and dramatic force. Her voice has credible power on top and appealing warmth lower down. She is capable of subtly shading her vocal production, as when Wagner instructs *Isolde* to sing "darkly" (*düster*) while asking *Brangäne* for the box of magic potions. *Isolde's* curse is terrifying and she communicates a firm resolve when she tells *Kurwenal* to tell *Tristan* to get his sorry butt over to her side of the ship and apologize. Fassbender's "Liebestod" is beautifully modulated, glowing with both inner strength and resignation.

The *Brangäne*, Martina Dike, is quite effective, and her scenes with Fassbender are among the most successful of this *Tristan*. The men do not fare nearly as well. Wolfgang Millgram, who has performed most of Wagner's tenor roles and has sung at Bayreuth, soldiers on gamely and never embarrasses himself, but just can't follow Fassbender to the heights of ecstasy she reaches in their act II duet. His voice isn't especially large, and has a slightly beclouded quality, without much ring. In act III, there's nothing close to the wounded animal sort of delirium that Jon Vickers brought to the music. Gunnar Lundberg's *Kurwenal* is undistinguished; Magnus Kyhle and Ulrik Qvale, too, have just serviceable voices. A real liability is Lennart Forsén as *Marke*: the King's long monologue at the end of act II has rarely seemed longer—the necessary mix of sadness and rage eludes this performer.

Segerstam is an experienced Wagner conductor—his DVD of *Der fliegende Holländer* was reviewed positively in 28:4—but, while fully in control of his singers and the very fine Royal Swedish Orchestra, he fails to take the best advantage of his moments in the spotlight. The Prelude to act I does not convey enough of the affective lability and turbulence of what's to come; with the beginning of act III, Segerstam doesn't create the sense of utter desolation that others have.

The orchestral sound is nicely blended with good weight, if a little dull. Balances between pit and stage are satisfactory. No libretto is included—Naxos states this measure is to keep the cost down, and the listener is directed to a Web address to download German and English texts. Yes, the new Naxos set can be had for not much more than \$20 but, with the classic 1966 Böhm/Nilsson/Windgassen *Tristan* available (with libretto!) in the DG "Originals" series for another 15 bucks, the words "false economy" come to mind. Still, for the most dedicated Wagnerians, this recording will be a consideration for Fassbender.

**Andrew Quint**