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## SEEN AND HEARD INTERNATIONAL OPERA REVIEW

**Wagner, Tristan und Isolde:** Soloists, Estonian National Opera Symphony Orchestra and Opera Chorus / Arvo Volmer, Estonian National Opera, Tallinn, 17.5.2008. Premiere. (GF)

Directed by Neeme Kuningas

Designed by Ervin Õunapuu

Lighting design by Neeme Jõe, Neeme Kuningas and Ervin Õunapuu

### Cast:

Tristan-Heikki Siukola

Isolde-Irmgard Vilsmaier

Brangäne -Helen Lokuta

Kurwenal-Rauno Elp

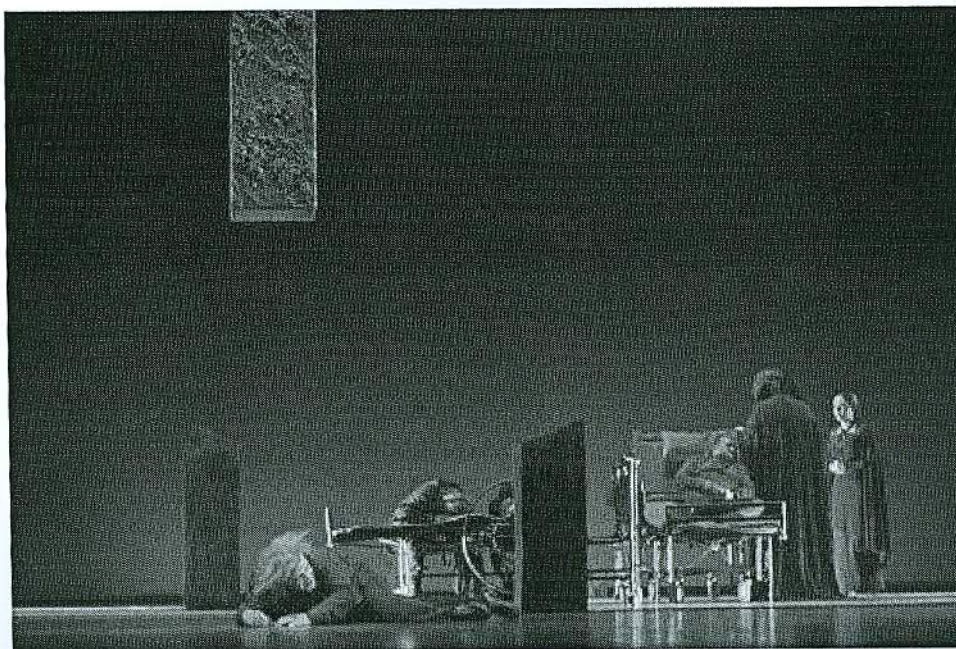
King Mark-Priit Volmer

Melot-Mart Madiste

A young sailor-Andres Köster

A steersman-René Soom

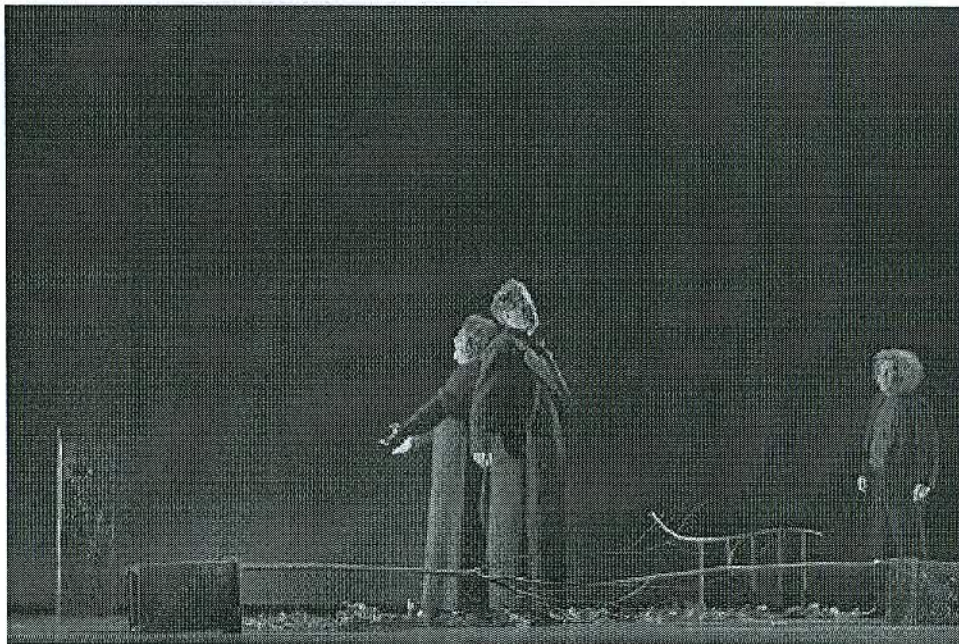
A shepherd-Vladislav Horuzhenko



The central drama in *Tristan und Isolde* takes part primarily on an emotional level while the 'action' is limited to the end of Act II when Melot and Tristan fight, and in the final scene when both Melot and Kurwenal are killed. As a consequence, director Neeme Kuningas has chosen to



discard most external adornment in the Estonian National Opera's new production of the opera and makes it a symbolist, to a certain extent even absurdist, play. A bare stage, evocatively lit and with a few props is the backdrop during the five-hour performance and the revolving stage is diligently employed. The costumes are timeless modern, no weapons are used in the fighting scenes – Tristan's sword is seen on the stage and also coming down from above but only as a symbol. Hospital beds are on stage in the first and – more naturally – third act, when Tristan is mortally wounded. In the first act, Isolde and Tristan are in bed on either side of the stage, tended by Brangäne and Kurwenal – who is old and walks with a stick. Both 'lovers' wear black glasses which are removed towards the end of the act when their eyes are being opened. But even after that, they mostly avoid looking at each other and they hardly touch. In the love scene in Act II they both sit on little stools, to which a tree with dry branches is connected. The long love duet is sung with the lovers lying on the floor and the tree tops touch each other. The whole performance is permeated by lack of contact. Only at the climactic end of the love scene do their bodies meet – but they are standing back to back, and it is in this position that King Mark finds them. In the last act, when Isolde arrives at Kareol to reunite with Tristan, she sits down by his side and really cares about him – but by then he is already dead. There is a sense of distancing in this performance – and whether this makes the story more universally applicable is probably a matter of personal attitude – but in its coolness and reserve it is very beautiful and leaves room for various interpretations. It definitely shuns passion as a central element – at least in traditional terms.



Musically there is no lack of passion, quite the contrary. The Estonian National Opera Symphony Orchestra under its chief conductor Arvo Volmer played at this premiere with an intensity and a lustre that surpassed anything I have heard from them, and Volmer's reading was voluptuous and sensual. From the first bars of the prelude he signalled that this was not going to be a lengthy affair in the Bernstein mould but a vital, airy and fairly swift performance – rather in the no-nonsense way of Karl Böhm's Bayreuth version or the recent Stockholm Opera production under Leif Segerstam. And he didn't hold his fire in the impassioned and dramatic moments. In a way his handling of the score was in contravention of the stage direction but I would rather state that it was complementary.

And he was lucky to have soloists who could withstand his volcanic eruptions without being drenched in the lava stream. In fact all the central characters were large voiced singers and, in the case of the loving couple, singers with real stamina. The Finnish tenor Heikki Siukola has sung Tristan in 21 productions of the opera and his was a powerful baritone voice that showed very little strain and – almost unique for a Heldentenor with so many heavy roles behind him – none of the dryness and lacklustre delivery that disfigure so many of his colleagues. He was at his most impressive in the first act, where the tessitura is somewhat lower, but in spite of a slight flicker every now and then in the second act, the love duet was impressive and in the third



act he was back on top form. His Isolde was the German soprano Irmgard Vilsmaier and she was sensational. A former pupil of Astrid Varnay, she made her debut some ten years ago in *Elektra* and now she is an Isolde to challenge the best, not only of today's singers but she is also worthy to be mentioned in the same breath as her teacher and even Birgit Nilsson. It was a large voice, perfectly produced with rounded tone and ringing top – and truly beautiful. It is difficult to know how well she projects in a larger house but it seemed that she has resources even for the MET.

Slight of stature but with a great voice, the young Helen Lokuta was a Brangäne to match even this formidable Isolde and she was a convincing actress. Rauno Elp was also a convincing Kurwenal, who improved after a slightly hesitant start and was tremendous in the last act. I saw him as Don Magnifico in *La Cenerentola* half a year ago and Alidoro in that performance was Priit Volmer who has a grand bass that he employs with great expressiveness. The only problem with his King Mark was that he looked far too young for the role. The minor parts were all well handled with an extra plus for Vladislav Horuženko's beautifully sung shepherd.

In the first interval there was a picnic in the Glyndebourne manner, even though the chill and some drizzle deterred the majority of the audience from dining in the open, but there was enough space indoors.

This was a triumph for the Estonian National Opera, where there hasn't been a new *Tristan und Isolde* since the 1930s. There are three more performances scheduled this Spring with other singers in some of the leading roles. It should also be mentioned that the Estonian National Opera are celebrating their 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary this year – on 27 November to be exact – with a performance of *Rigoletto*. More information can be found on [www.opera.ee](http://www.opera.ee)

### **Göran Forsling**

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[Back to Top](#)

[Cumulative Index Page](#)

[Return To Previous Page](#)

- [OPERA REVIEWS](#)
- [UK CONCERTS](#)
- [INTERNATIONAL CONCERTS](#)
- [ARTICLES AND NEWS](#)
- [HOME](#)

# "SEEN AND HEARD INTERNATIONAL" OOPERIARVUSTUS

TÖLGE

**Wagner, Tristan und Isolde:** Solistid, Rahvusooper Estonia sümfooniaorkester ja ooperikoor / Arvo Volmer, Rahvusooper Estonia, Tallinn, 17.5.2008. Esietendus. (GF)

Lavastaja: Neeme Kuningas

Kunstnik: Ervin Õunapuu

Valguskujundus: Neeme Jõe, Neeme Kuningas ja Ervin Õunapuu

## Osades:

Tristan-Heikki Siukola

Isolde-Irmgard Vilsmaier

Brangäne-Helen Lokuta

Kurwenal-Rauno Elp

Kuningas Marke-Priit Volmer

Melot-Mart Madiste

Noor meremees-Andres Köster

Tüürimees-René Soom

Karjus-Vladislav Horuženko

Ooperi "Tristan und Isolde" keskne tegevus toimub ennekõike emotsionaalsel tasandil, 'action' seevastu piirdub Meloti ja Tristani võitlussteeniga II vaatuse lõpus ja lõpustseeniga, kus langevad Melot ja Kurwenal. Nii otsustaski lavastaja Neeme Kuningas Rahvusooper Estonia uues lavastuses välistest ilustustest praktiliselt loobuda, tehes ooperist sümbolistliku ja teatud määral koguni absurdivõtmes loo. Tühi lava, sugestiivne valgustus ja üksikud rekvisiidid on fooniks viietunnisele etendusele, kus kasutatakse aktiivselt ka pöördlava. Kostüümid on ajatud-tänapäevased, võitlussteenides ei kasutata relvi – näeme küll Tristani mõõka nii laval kui laest laskumas, kuid üksnes sümbolina. Esimeses ja – mis on ka mõistetavam – kolmandas vaatuses, kus Tristan on surmavalt haavatud, seisavad laval haiglavoodid. Esimeses vaatuses leavad Tristan ja Isolde teine teisel lavapoolel oma voodites, nende põetajateks on Brangäne ja vana, kepile toetuv Kurwenal. Mõlemad 'armastajad' kannavad musti prille, mis võetakse eest vaatuse lõpu poole, kui nende silmad avanevad. Kuid hiljemgi hoiduvad nad enamasti teineteise poole vaatamast ja vaevalt puudutavad teineteist. II vaatuse armastussteenis istuvad nad väikestel istmetel, mille küljes on raagus puud. Pika armuueti ajal lamavad armunud põrandal ja kokku puutuvad hoopis puuladvad. Kontakti puudumine iseloomustab tervet lavastust. Vaid armastussteeni kulmineeruvus lõpus kohtuvad armastajate kehad – kuid nad seisavad seljad vastamisi, ja sellises poosis kuningas Marke nad leiabki. Viimases vaatuses, kui Isolde saabub Kareoli Tristaniga taas kohtuma, avaldab ta Tristani kõrval istudes tõeliselt oma kiindumust – kuid selleks hetkeks on mees juba surnud. Lavastuses on tajutavat distantseeritust – kas see loo üldistusjõudu suurendab, on ilmselt igaühe enda otsustada –, kuid just oma jaheduses ja hillitsetuses on see äärmiselt kaunis ning jätab ruumi mitmesugusteks tõlgendusteks. Ilmselgelt on hoidutud kire kujutamisest keskse elemendina – vähemalt traditsioonilises mõttes.



Muusikalise poole pealt ei saa küll rääkida kire puudumisest, pigem vastupidi. Rahvusooper Estonia sümfooniaorkester peadirigent Arvo Volmeri juhatusel mängis esietendusel jõulisuse ja säraga, mis ületas kõik varemkuuldu, ning Volmeri partituurilugemine oli meelas ja sensuaalne. Juba eelmängu esimestest akordidest andis ta mõista, et sellest ei tule Bernsteini võtmes pikaldane esitus, vaid vitaalne, õhuline ja kaunikesti kiirelt kulgev etendus, mis sarnaneb oma sirgjoonelisuses üsnagi Karl Böhmi Bayreuthi versiooniga või Stockholmi Ooperi hiljutise lavastusega Leif Segerstami juhatusel. Ja kirglikel, dramaatilistel hetkedel ei hoidnud dirigent energiat kokku. Mõnes mõttes oli tema partituurikäsitlus laval toimuvaga vastuolus, kuid minu arvates toimis see pigem lavastust täiendavana.

Volmeril vedas solistidega, kes suutsid laavavoolu alla mattumata tema vulkaanipurskeid taluda. Kõiki keskseid rolle esitasidki võimsa häälega lauljad ja armastajapaar näitas üles tõelist häälejõudu. Soome tenor Heikki Siukola on Tristanina osalenud juba 21 selle ooperi lavastuses ja tema jõulises, baritonaalse tämbriga hääles oli tunda väga vähe pingutatust. Ja mis peaaegu ainulaadne *Heldentenor*'i puhul, kelle pagasis on nii hulgaliselt raskeid rolle – tema esituses polnud jälgegi sellest kuivusest ja tuhmusest, mis paljudele tema kolleegidele kahjuks tuleb. Kõige muljetavaldavam oli Siukola esimeses vaatuses, kus faktuur on veidi hõredam, kuid hoolimata teisest vaatuses aeg-ajalt esinevast kergest värelusest oli ka armastusduett muljetavaldav ja kolmandaks vaatuseks oli ta taas tippvormis. Tema Isoldeks oli saksa sopran Irmgard Vilsmaier, kes esines lausa sensatsiooniliselt. See Astrid Varnay endine õpilane debüteeris kümmeaasta eest "Elektras" ja nüüdseks on ta Isolde, kes võib kinda heita parimatelegi – mitte ainult tänapäeva lauljate seast, vaid teda võib kõrvutada tema õpetaja ja koguni Birgit Nilssoniga. Tema hääl oli suur ja täiuslikult valitsetud, ümara tooni ja heliseva ülemise registriga – tõeliselt kaunis. Raske kujutleda, kui hästi ta suuremas saalis kõlaks, kuid igatahes jäi mulje, et tal oleks MET'igi jaoks piisavalt eeldusi.

Õbluke, kuid suurepärase häälega noor Helen Lokuta oli Brangäne rollis isegi sellele võimsale Isoldele vääriline kaaslane, samuti veenev näitleja. Rauno Elp oli Kurwenalina samuti veenev, kogudes end pärast veidi kõhklevat algust ja esinedes viimases vaatuses lausa vapustavalt. Nägin teda pool aastat tagasi don Magnificona "Tuhkatriinus"; Alidorot laulis seal Priit Volmer, kes oma võimast bassihäält suure väljendusrikkusega kasutab. Ainsaks puuduseks tema kuningas Marke juures oli see, et solist nägi oma rolli jaoks kaugelt liiga noor välja. Ka kõik väiksemad rollid olid hästi teostatud, eriti kiidaksin Vladislav Horuženko kaunilt esitatud karjuserolli.

Esimesel vaheajal peeti Glyndebourne'i stiilis piknik; kuigi jahedus ja tibutav vihm sundisid enamikku publikust vabas õhus einetamisest loobuma, oli ka sees piisavalt ruumi.

See lavastus on triumfiks Rahvusooper Estoniale, kus ooperi "Tristan ja Isolde" värsket lavastust pole nähtud 1930. aastatest saadik. Selleks kevadeks on planeeritud veel kolm etendust, kusjuures mõned peaosatäitjad vahetuvad. Tuleks ka ära märkida, et Rahvusooper Estonia tähistab sel aastal – nimelt 27. novembril – "Rigoletto" lavastusega oma ooperilavastuste 100. sünnipäeva.. Vaata lähemalt [www.opera.ee](http://www.opera.ee)

**Göran Forsling**

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