



OPERACLICK

Richard Wagner San Diego Opera: Tannhäuser

 La recensione



Robert Gambill and Petra Lang
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Photo © Cory Weaver



Reinhard Hagen
Photo © Cory Weaver

The San Diego Opera opened their 2008 season with an engaging production of Wagner's *Tannhäuser*. This tale of the conflict between sensual expressions of physical love versus the purity of spiritual love is based on the real-life Tannhäuser, a 13th century minnesänger (minstrel, troubadour) and poet. A legend arose about Tannhäuser after the publication of his *Buslied* (poem on atonement) that was part of the *Codex Manesse*, a collection of medieval love poems, many with distinct erotic imagery, which was published in the early part of the 14th century. Wagner centered his libretto faithfully on the historical legend, with one significant change; at the end, he allows his protagonist to have a shining moment of grace when he is shown that he was, finally, forgiven by the God he had previously forsaken.

This production succeeded in effectively conveying Medieval German sensibilities, in part, by maintaining the integrity of earlier classic productions. The set was a faithful reproduction by **James Mulder** of his mentor **Günther Schneider-Siemssen's** original design for the Metropolitan Opera, dating back thirty years. In fact, the costumes were rented from the Metropolitan, further completing the homage to the rich conceptualization of this well-known piece. It was a special treat for me, having seen *Tannhäuser* at the Met in 1977, to have it brought to life again in such exquisite detail. Of particular note was **Marie Barrett's** lighting of this production, which, in contrast to the dark atmosphere of many of Wagner's works, was infused with welcome warmth.

Tannhäuser is a morality play with lessons on the value of dedication to a chaste life. The minstrel forsakes his honorable life for a retreat into a world filled with debauchery. When he realizes that an existence based only on lust-filled pleasures of the moment is lacking in depth and true connection to the highest levels of life, he decides to return to the ordinary world of men, despite its pains and tribulations. Once back in that world, he (almost unknowingly) continues to put forth the message of sexual pursuits as worthy goals, revealing that he has not fully resolved to live the pious life to which he aspires. His subsequent journey of self-flagellation and penance in search of forgiveness is initially met with rejection by the church, but when the woman who loves him with pure, spiritual passion intervenes on his behalf, he is forgiven.

The struggle between a life centered around physical desires and a life dedicated to spiritual purity transcends history and cultures around the world. In today's modern times, the struggle between those who seek further and more extreme heights of material gain and those who are ever more fervently devoted to their religious beliefs reaches the level of civil war at times. Each side passionately commits to the merits of their philosophy and sees the other side as

 La locandina

Data dello spettacolo:
26/01/2008

Tannhäuser	Robert Gambill
Elisabeth	Camilla Nylund
Wolfram von Eschenbach	Russell Braun
Venus	Petra Lang
Landgraf Hermann	Reinhard Hagen
Walter von der Vogelweide	Martin Zysset
Biterolf	Andrew Greenan
Heinrich der Schreiber	Simeon Esper
Reinmar von Zweter	Scott Sikon
Sheperd Boy	Laura Portune
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Conductor	Gabor Ötvös
Director	Michael Hampe
Scenic & Projection Designers	Günther Schneider-Siemssen, James Mulder, Alexander Schneider-Siemssen
Lighting Director	Marie Barrett
Chorus Master	Timothy Todd Simmons
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	San Diego Symphony Orchestra
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	San Diego Opera Chorus



Robert Gambill
Photo © Cory Weaver

hopelessly out of touch with "the way things are." Wagner's tale of redemption through the virtue of forgiveness highlights a way out of the divide that speaks to audiences of the 21st century, as much as to those of the mid-19th century, when the opera first premiered in Dresden, Germany.

The action begins with Tannhäuser in the hidden kingdom of Venusberg. He has been Venus's lover in this realm, but decides he misses the normal realities of human life and begs to be returned to the world he once knew. American-born heldentenor **Robert Gambill**, in his SDO debut, gave a fine portrayal of the minstrel's conflicted desires throughout this opera. His "Dir töne Lob!" varied between devotion and resistance to Venus's charms, his voice ringing out with strength. His acting made clear what he was feeling, from emotional turmoil to complete atonement. In his final moments, he is overwhelmed with gratitude for the forgiveness he has received, and in dying, is finally united with Elisabeth in the heavenly state of spiritual purity.



Camilla Nylund
Photo © Cory Weaver

Petra Lang, a German mezzo-soprano in her SDO debut, was a shining example of a Wagnerian female character in the role of Venus. Her voice had tremendous power and she left no doubt as to the arrogance of a goddess who demands faithful worship. Her actions were both seductive and haughty, showing Venus's range of skills to manipulate Tannhäuser. One hoped for variances in her vocal tone in order to audibly convey the different means of persuasion she was using on Tannhäuser, but overall she gave a fine performance.

Tannhäuser is transported back to the world of men, where he meets with old friends and returns to the castle where he was once a noted minstrel. The Wartburg Hall of Song is also where he is reunited with the fair Elisabeth, and they reaffirm their feelings for each other, "Gepriesen sei die Stunde." Finnish soprano **Camilla Nylund**, also in her SDO debut, was excellent in this performance. She has strength in her voice that does not obscure expressions of sweetness, most evident in her declarations of spiritual devotion. She seemingly effortlessly delivered a wonderful embodiment of a young woman thoroughly committed to her faith and she was a pleasure to both hear and see in this role.

American soprano **Laura Portune** was charming in the role of the Sheperd Boy. Landgraf Hermann was portrayed by German bass **Reinhard Hagen**. He has glorious rich tones in his voice that effectively conveyed his authority as the Count of Thuringia as well as his concern for the feelings of his beloved niece Elisabeth. The group of knights/minstrels (**Martin Zysset** as Walter von der Vogelweide, **Andrew Greenan** as Biterolf, **Simeon Esper** as Heinrich der Schreiber, and **Scott Sikon** as Reinmar von Zweter) performed very well, each delivering his lines with assurance.

Canadian baritone **Russell Braun** made Wolfram von Eschenbach an immensely sympathetic character. Wolfram's unwavering devotion to Elisabeth and to spiritual purity compel him to repeatedly restrain himself from showing his feelings and thus he nobly sacrifices his desires to share spiritual love with Elisabeth, even honoring her wishes to die so that she can intervene from Heaven on behalf of Tannhäuser. In Act III, Braun's clear tones conveyed his genuine heartbreak in "O du mein holder Abendstern," the perfect picture of the character's feelings and motivations.

Hungarian conductor **Gabor Ötvös's** authority and enthusiasm led the **San Diego Symphony Orchestra** to produce a full, resonant sound. The chorus, under the guidance of **Timothy**

Todd Simmons, produced nice, sonorous sounds as well as bright ones, with their usual competence. Michael Hampe's direction was in complete accord with the music and the story, and defined the cohesiveness of this well-rounded production.

Olga Hirsch

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