

philharmonia orchestra

Tristan und Isolde Documentary Transcript

Esa-Pekka Salonen, Principal Conductor and Artistic Advisor, Philharmonia Orchestra

The original impulse for this whole thing actually came from Gérard Mortier who called me up and said: "Look, I think it's time for you to do *Tristan*."

Musical excerpt

I had, just a few weeks previously, seen a big exhibition with Bill Viola portraits that had been slowed down.

Musical excerpt

Peter Sellars, Artistic Collaborator

What he does, like Wagner, is slow down time and much of Bill's work is a video image meticulously photographed that then he manipulates the time flow and so you're able to see the seconds inside the seconds. What is time inside of time? That's of course what Wagner's music is giving you, and Bill uses video technology to open up time.

Musical excerpt

Esa-Pekka Salonen, Principal Conductor and Artistic Advisor, Philharmonia Orchestra

And I thought okay, now we have the ingredients here, we should ask Bill and then Peter and so on and so forth... that's how it got started.

Musical excerpt

Peter Sellars, Artistic Collaborator

We were deliberately trying to make something that moved forward and spoke from a very progressive place. Bill Viola's videos can really open on an interior world and keep an interior world alive, and not illustrate Wagner's music, but quite the opposite; move into a zone that is so private, where everyone in the audience is making their own associations, just as they are with the music. It's about a plunge into synesthesia.

Musical excerpt

You know, what's marvellous is the singers are living and breathing in present. The video is two-dimensional, so what our work is to create the sound world as three-dimensional. So we are placing musicians all over the hall, singers all over the hall so the audience is immersed in Wagner's music.

Musical excerpt

Jill Crowther, Cor anglais

It's just the most amazing part you can ever wish to play. The main bit for me is a bit at the beginning of the third act, well actually it runs through the third act; I have to go up offstage... but it's very very present actually it seems, and it just goes on and on and on; I'm just completely on my own and the theatre's in darkness and it's very scary!

Musical excerpt

Peter Sellars, Artistic Collaborator

The second act, the singers are singing from out in the hall particularly to get that sense of in the woods, you know, people calling to each other through the trees, not being able to see each other but just hearing and finding each other.

Act One on the boat, the idea that, you know, that sailors are down below decks and then they're up above, and then somebody's singing from the crow's nest and all of those spaces that are on board a ship and the commander is on that deck and the women are on a lower deck; all of the kind of spatial levels of Wagner's imagination we can actually realise in this space, and the space itself becomes the whole room, becomes musically charged and activated.

Musical excerpt

Paul Carr, Assistant Stage Manager

Isolde, who's singing now, is going to come off through this door, then I'm going to collect her and run around through these back corridors and pass doors and things through the auditorium to the foyers, to the next entrance in the auditorium. But it's a short time, it's only a minute and a bit, so she has to run round before she makes her entrance. Then she has to walk through the auditorium down the steps.

Been doing it for years, that's the way it works!

Musical excerpt

Violeta Urmana, Isolde

I'm very very glad to sing here Isolde in this particular situation because of opera in concert, but there's also some staging and this video; it's giving more than just a concert performance of some opera.

Alex MacInnis, Technical Director, Video

And I think it's thrilling for the audience also because they feel, especially in this production with the singers being all over the house, they feel like they are part of the production.

Musical excerpt

Esa-Pekka Salonen, Principal Conductor and Artistic Advisor, Philharmonia Orchestra

Now, to mount it here in Europe with the Philharmonia, first of all, for me, it's a very joyful experience to be back with this material, to come back to it after considerable experience is wonderful because it's like meeting an old friend but also discovering new things constantly. It's the kind of score that, it's this kind of a cliché of course that life is one big long learning process, but in this case, yes, I think that one lifetime is sadly quite short. Every time I come back to it, I know I'm deeper.

Musical excerpt

Peter Sellars, Artistic Collaborator

The other thing I have to say is, having an orchestra of the presence and seriousness and clarity of the Philharmonia right there on stage, because of course the drama is in the orchestra, and when you're in a theatre, the orchestra's buried in a pit, and you're just not getting the teeming world of memory and experience and emotion that the orchestra right there gives you.

Musical excerpt

Peter Sellars, Artistic Collaborator

Again, what's so marvellous is when you're inviting an artist, not a stage designer, you're getting something that's not an illustration, that's not a commentary, it's its own work of art. I mean what's going on is a technology that's much more elaborate than what meets the eye.

Alex MacInnis, Technical Director, Video

I'm Alex MacInnis and I guess my official title is Technical Director of the Video. So I worked with Bill helping him with the original editing of the project and then very quickly it became clear that between conductors, and even night-to-night, there can be huge variations in the time of different segments of the piece, and especially, being *Tristan*, it can be very organic and very, sort of, expansive or contractive; the tempi are all over the place. And so we needed to come up with a system of keeping the video in sync with the music, and traditionally, one would have some sort of click-track or something, but that was just ridiculous for a piece like this.

Audio excerpt

There's no one movie, it's not like you just put a DVD in and press play, so it's all little bits; each shot is its own

segment, and sometimes what seems like one shot, is actually three or four different segments and we mix those together in hopefully what seems like a very smooth and organic way. We also find that the video is constantly evolving as the music is evolving.

Musical excerpt

And the conductor, although he may not realise it, is conducting the video as much as the music and the singers.

Musical excerpt

Peter Sellars, Artistic Collaborator

So what Bill Viola has been able to do is, in the first act, create an inner journey of two people who are on their way to end their lives, what it means when you choose death. And Bill gives you the plunging into those worlds; worlds that are on fire, worlds that are freezing under water; all of these worlds shift with the speed of thought. So the evening really builds in force as Wagner does, but also as Bill Viola does. Starting with the highly strategic and highly structured formal process, and then finally opening up into something that again takes you into a synesthetic world where you don't know where your senses begin or end.

Musical excerpt