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Act 1 Bacchanale. Photo: Robert Millard

Los Angeles Opera's 'Tannhäuser' is a visual and auditory feast, just don't bring the kids!

**Richard Wagner
TANNHÄUSER
Los Angeles Opera
February 24, 2007**

By: Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

Los Angeles Opera's company premiere of Richard Wagner's "Tannhäuser" was, in a word, wonderful. All of the theatrical and operatic elements came together on the stage of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion on Feb. 24, to create a visually stunning, sexual, sensual and provocative production.

It was the totality of the parts that made the production so magnificent, so classically beautiful to look at and listen to. Credit must first go to Wagner, for without his glorious

music, this evening would have never occurred. Then there was James Conlon, who conducted the Los Angeles Opera Orchestra with energized control and passion, and with a sensitivity to the needs of the musicians and singers. As LA Opera's new music director, he has married himself to the company, which was evident when he beamed with pride during the curtain calls. He is a thinker, a mover and shaker, and LA Opera is already benefiting from his presence.

This four-hour "Tannhäuser" won't put anyone to sleep – that is for sure. As the black French doors that shielded the set from view slid open during the overture, the audience was able to get a first glimpse of the land of Venusberg, whose inhabitants were acting out their lust in a very X-rated way. The stage was bathed in red with black accents. Even the flooring and costumes were in red. The nymphs, sirens, bacchantes, satyrs and cupids were tearing off their clothes in a pornographic frenzy and were participating in an onstage orgy. Only shorts, thongs and g-strings were preventing penetration.

Sounds pretty decadent. Well, it was. But the scene was done with such choreographic creativity -- with revolving platforms and various shades of light -- that the vision was mystical, sensual and captivating. L.A. Opera simply elaborated upon Wagner's Paris version of the opera, which expanded the bacchanal of the original Dresden versions. The nudity seemed to move the operatic plot forward. Then, after the bacchanal, LA Opera utilized the Dresden version.

THE STORY

Tannhäuser is a minstrel who is caught between his loyalty to spiritual love and his desire to fulfill his erotic sensual needs, even though he is aware that fulfilling the latter might plunge him into an abyss. Although he receives much gratification from his time spent with the goddess of love, Venus, he asks her for freedom to return to a life of piety. She scoffs his wishes until he mentions the Virgin Mary, and then she and Venusberg disappear.

Near the Wartburg Castle, Tannhäuser meets a shepherd boy, pilgrims, singers and the landgrave of Thuringia, who reminds him of the woman who loves and misses him -- the pious Elisabeth. Tannhäuser decides to proceed with them to the hall in the Wartburg, where he attempts to earn Elisabeth's hand by winning a song contest. Unlike the other minstrels, he doesn't sing a song of spiritual love, but rather one that extols the virtues of the erotic love he enjoyed with Venus. Condemned by the knights and minstrels who have gathered, only Elisabeth attempts to protect her troubadour. Elisabeth prays for Tannhäuser while he seeks atonement from the pope in Rome, but the pope refuses to grant him absolution. Elisabeth dies for him, and he takes his last breath while kneeling beside her dead body as the pilgrims reveal the miracle that he has been vindicated.

As decadent as the first act might have seemed, the second act reeked of piety. The black accents remained, but the red hue and costumes were changed to white. The song contest took place in a room with chandeliers, women in 20th-century gowns and men in tails. The scene looked more Mozart, Strauss or Verdi than Wagner. By the final act, the hue was changed to green.

We didn't care if the set and costume updates made sense or not because the vision was so alluring. Although Wagner's song contest was made up of minnesingers -- lyric poets and musicians who sang of idealized love in 13th-century Germany -- and although the characters in the opera were based on real individuals in history, we simply didn't care that the reality onstage didn't match Wagner's intentions. We didn't even care that Tannhäuser accompanied himself on a black grand piano to the sounds of a harp in the pit. We didn't care because we were taken in by the vision.

Ian Judge's direction was flawless. Every orchestral moment was accounted for with onstage movement from the singers, the choristers and the supernumeraries. Even the rotating sets seemed to dance. The lighting illuminated our senses, and the music gave us goose bumps.

THE CAST

Many heldentenors have a tight quality in their voices as if they might be pushing. Not Peter Seiffert! His voice has depth, and he sang Tannhäuser with passion. His voice did seem to tire, though, in the last act at about the time of the Rome narration -- "Inbrunst im Herzen" -- but the role required a lot of physicality, which Seiffert executed with polish. The splendor in his voice was evident from the onset during his confrontation with Venus, who was sung by mezzo-soprano Lioba Braun. Braun enveloped her role with dramatic vocal power and a strong demeanor.

As Elisabeth, Petra Maria Schnitzer's tones were at times voluminous; at others, more delicate and lyrical. Her hymn to the hall of song, "Dich, teure Halle, grüss' ich wieder," and her prayer, "Allmächt'ge Jungfrau," were sung expressively. She added a warm glow to the stage.

The other standout was Franz-Josef Selig as Landgraf Hermann. His deep mellow bass had a rich, sonorous quality worthy of accolades.

The audience seemed particularly impressed with Martin Gantner's Wolfram von Eschenbach. He is a high baritone whose voice almost resembles that of a tenor. His tones were placed high and focused, and he had the technique to sing two "Tannhäusers," but his voice had a flat quality to it. (By that, I do not mean that he sang flat -- quite the opposite.) Although the role calls for a baritone, I have heard it sung by baritones with rounder, more expressive voices. His "O du, mein holder Abendstern" didn't make the grade.

Rodrick Dixon as Walther von der Vogelweide brought a youthful, fresh feeling to the song contest. Robert MacNeil, Jason Stearns, Christopher Feigum, Isaac Calvin and Karen Vuong added to a generally superlative cast; and the chorus was excellent.

But the real star of the evening was Wagner's music, which was played by a first-rate orchestra and led by a conductor with an affinity for the score. The music grabbed us at the beginning of the overture, during the bacchanal, and it didn't let go until the final

note. But I still wanted to hear more.

Conductor, James Conlon

Director, Ian Judge

Set and Costume Designer, Gottfried Pilz

Lighting Designer, Mark Doubleday

Concertmaster, Stuart Canin

Chorus Master, William Vendice

Scenery originally constructed by the Salzburg Festival;

Adaptation of scenery by the San Diego Opera Scenic Studios.