

2 Understudies Take Over the Met Stage

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NEW YORK -- Call it "Tristan und Isolde _ und Isolde."

On a night full of surprises and considerable musical rewards, the Metropolitan Opera's revival of Wagner's epic drama about doomed lovers with a serious death wish came perilously close to being doomed itself.

The original cast looked, on paper, like a dream _ heldentenor Ben Heppner repeating his acclaimed interpretation of Tristan and soprano Deborah Voigt singing Isolde for the first time at the Met.

Then Heppner came down with a virus and canceled the first four of six performances. At Monday's opening, his "cover," or understudy, John Mac Master, struggled to make it through the five-hour-long performance. So for Friday night's second outing, the Met turned to the second cover, Gary Lehman, a former baritone who had never sung the role onstage before.

But Lehman came with some good advance buzz _ he had drawn favorable attention in 2005 when he stepped in at a moment's notice for Placido Domingo in the title role of Wagner's "Parsifal" at the Los Angeles Opera.

And from the moment he appeared on the Met stage, he took control of the role, with a strong presence _ enhanced by his tall, relatively trim figure _ and a sturdy tenor that projected well into the vast auditorium.

Still, Act 1 is not a true test for Tristan, since he has relatively little to sing. So the audience was waiting eagerly to see how he would fare in the 40-minute love duet that comprises the core of Act 2 and has brought many a tenor to grief.

And that's when the night's biggest shock arrived.

Voigt, who had struggled with both pitch and breath support during Act 1, suddenly rushed offstage just as the lovers were supposed to be settling in for a night of rapture.

James Levine kept conducting the orchestra for a minute or so even after the curtain slowly came down, and Lehman could be heard faintly singing his next lines. Then the music stopped, and a Met



In this photo released by The Metropolitan Opera, Gary Lehman and Janice Baird appear in their title roles during a performance of Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde," at the Metropolitan Opera, Friday, March 14, 2008. When Deborah Voigt, the original star, fell ill and was unable to finish the second act, Baird came to replace her. She and Lehman received enthusiastic applause at the end of the act. (AP Photo/The Metropolitan Opera, Ken Howard) (Ken Howard - AP)

official came out to announce that Voigt had been taken ill but that her cover, Janice Baird, was literally waiting in the wings and would be out shortly.

Sure enough, after about 15 minutes the curtain rose again, and the audience warmly applauded the two lovers onstage together.

For opera fans with a sense of history, it was an amazing sight _ two singers making unplanned Met debuts together in the lead roles of one of the most daunting operas in the repertory.

And it inevitably brought to mind another "Tristan" performance, from Dec. 28, 1959, when soprano Birgit Nilsson sang Isolde opposite three different tenors (Ramon Vinay, Karl Liebl, and Albert da Costa) _ one for each act.

Both of Friday's substitutes made it through the rest of the evening with aplomb. Lehman was particularly gripping in the long soliloquies of Act 3, when the dying Tristan ruminates about his troubled life and has delirious visions of Isolde. He did transpose a few exposed high notes downward and clipped off one or two others abruptly as he tired toward the end, but for the most part he sang the role as written _ no mean feat.

Baird is harder to judge because she didn't sing Act 1, when Isolde whips herself into a frenzy of outrage for her Narrative and Curse. She has a voice of considerable power, but its pieces don't always fit together. In the lower register, you can hear remnants of a former mezzo-soprano, and her high notes are gleaming and dead-on. In between she tends to sing flat, especially at lower volume. That problem marred the opening measures of the Liebestod, Isolde's rhapsodic solo that ends the opera. It flared again on her final note, at the end of the phrase "hoechste Lust" ("utmost rapture") as she expires over Tristan's corpse.

Like Lehman, she cuts a glamorous figure, and together they made the most romantic-looking couple seen onstage here in "Tristan und Isolde" in many a year. The audience rewarded them with a standing ovation and seemed in no rush to head for the aisles despite the late hour of 12:30 a.m.

The rest of the cast in the eccentric, abstract Dieter Dorn production remained intact from opening night: mezzo Michelle DeYoung sympathetic but sometimes underpowered as Brangaene, Isolde's servant; baritone Eike Wilm Schulte virtually ideal as Kurwenal, Tristan's trusted companion; and bass Matti Salminen, nearly as imposing as the cuckolded King Marke as when he made his Met debut in the role 27 years ago.

Levine and the orchestra rose to even greater heights than usual to support the night's newcomers, with a sumptuous and stirring interpretation of the score.

It turns out, according to Met general manager Peter Gelb, that Voigt had been feeling queasy all day but wanted to go on to support Lehman. She is expected to be back for Tuesday's performance. Her Tristan is still listed as TBA.

There was yet another Met debut Saturday night, when soprano Ruth Ann Swenson came down with the flu and was replaced by Ermonela Jaho as Violetta in Verdi's "La Traviata."