

**Metropolitan Opera
Lincoln Center
The Flying Dutchman**

By Elga Wimmer

François Girard's production of *The Flying Dutchman*, which opened March 2nd at New York's Metropolitan Opera, was unfortunately cut short, after what turned out to be its final performance March 10, which I was fortunate to see.

The wonderful aspect of an opera with music by Richard Wagner is always the magnificent score by this master composer. Rarely has any conductor failed to live up to Wagner's posthumous expectations down through the centuries. And so it is with this orchestra, conducted by Valery Gergiev. Wagner's score is reminiscent of the great German Romantic composers, with an undertone of powerful drama, which excels in the characters of Senta, and her fiancé Erik. (see romance in act III, which is very lyrical and romantic). Wagner originally wrote the work to be performed without intermission — an example of his proclivity to break with tradition — and the Metropolitan Opera was faithful to this directive in this two hour and twenty-five minute set.

The opening scene, with the grand chorus of townspeople, was of great visual effect. A medieval ship set against a painterly Turner-esque sky

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evoked mystery and drama. Dark foreboding colors, the use of black, grey, and deep blue — from the background scenery, to the vessel, to the clothing of the crew — conjured Goya's *Black Paintings*, and fostered an intensely haunting scene. Digital projectors filled out the set design, mimicking stormy seas and violent winds.

Amidst this array of shadow and light, a ghostly figure appears, and the story begins:



Evgeny Nikitin as the Dutchman and Anja Kampe as Senta in Wagner's *Der Fliegende Holländer*, 2020. Photo: Ken Howard / Met Opera, New York.

The mythical Dutch sailor, doomed to wander for eternity, until he finds the woman who follows him with love and truthfulness to the ends of the earth.

Introduced by a dancer as a stand-in for Senta, Girard's reinterpretation of this central character seemed overly staged, as if feigning a Martha Graham choreographic piece. This effort was upstaged by the soprano Anja Kampe as Senta, a leading Wagner soprano in Europe, whose stage presence worked to phenomenal effect. Her rich, warm singing in the lyrical description of the yet unknown (to her) sailor's portrait, changed to a steely intensity when pressing on to leave behind the good-natured Daland — as deftly portrayed by stentorian bass Franz-Josef Selig — for the mysterious Dutchman, who the bass-baritone Evgeny Nikitin convincingly brought to life. Attired in dramatic red, Senta recalled the classic film portrayal by Ava Gardner in the Hollywood version of *The Dutchman*, as Pandora. A sen-



A scene from Wagner's *Der Fliegende Holländer*, 2020. Photo: Ken Howard / Met Opera, New York.

suous force of nature, Senta commands center stage.

Evgeny Nikitin as the Dutchman comes across as an almost Siegfried-like heroic figure. His demand of Senta, right after the introduction of her father Daland, to follow him for eternity and give up her fiancé Erik (the muscular-voiced tenor Sergey Skorokhodov who tried to woo Senta in a wonderfully lyrical passage), was that of a divine power, a semi-god-like, surreal figure. The duet of Senta and the Dutchman represents one of the absolute highlights of this production. Both performers culminate their respective longing, despair and hope with a standout performance at the end of act II.

And in a particularly striking set design innovation, vertical strings covered the stage like a giant see-through curtain, twirled and twisted by a chorus of women from the town who work at spinning wheels, while the men are out to sea. The breathtaking visual effect reminded me of a Pat Steir painting, like a *tableau vivant*, the

scene was presented through a frame as if the audience was viewing a moving painting.

In the film version of the Dutchman, the doomed sailor paints a picture of his future bride before ever having set eyes on her. In the opera *The Flying Dutchman*, Senta is so mesmerized by the story and the portrait of the Dutchman, that she promises to follow him, and save him from eternal punishment. We can only see the eye of the Dutchman staring out at the audience, an omnipresent bigger-than-life image spanning the entire stage in the beginning

and at the end of the Opera. Would he have predicted today's trying times, as in Goya's *Black Paintings*? Given that present day reality ultimately shut down the show's performance before its time — with fears of an invisible modern day plague turning the lights out over Broadway and pitching the city's legendary cultural life into an indeterminate darkness — the proverb "art imitates life" never rang so true. **M**

While the Metropolitan Opera is shut down, this performance will be available online at www.metopera.org/season/on-demand/, as well as all Met Opera on Demand apps.



A scene from Wagner's *Der Fliegende Holländer*, 2020. Photo: Ken Howard / Met Opera, New York.