

Tannhauser, Opéra Bastille, Paris

Reviewed by Jessica Duchon

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It may be winter, but in Paris, Venus saunters on to the Bastille stage during Wagner's overture stark naked. Robert Carsen's Tannhäuser, the Paris Opera's first since 1984, was hotly anticipated, but the first performances were semi-staged due to a stagehand strike. When the full monty was revealed, it was worth waiting for.

Resettings of operas that work are rare, but the transformation of Tannhäuser into a radical artist succeeds because it enhances the work's core issues: sex vs spirituality, progressive art vs the establishment. Perfect, too, that it's in Paris, where Tannhäuser caused a riot in 1861: the Jockey Club was furious that there was no ballet in the second act.

Here, the ballet appears after the overture, in Venusberg, and this time, the Jockey Club wouldn't have known what had hit it: Tannhäuser paints the naked Venus aided by male dancers and an orgy of scarlet paint. Act II's song contest is transformed with aplomb into a painting concours, and symbolism returns in Act III when Elisabeth strips off to merge with Venus. With the final chorus comes Tann-häuser's salvation: his canvas hung among masterpieces.

Stephen Gould's voice is as powerful as his presence as Tannhäuser. His Elisabeth is Eva-Marie Westbroek, her "Dich, teure Halle" sung with radiant ease. There's exquisite richness of tone from Béatrice Uria-Monzon as Venus, and superb performances from Franz-Josef Selig as Hermann and the chorus. But most unforgettable is Matthias Goerne as Wolfram, with his magical phrasing, charcoal-soft baritone and gut-wrenching inwardness. And, under Seiji Ozawa's mercurial baton, the orchestral playing is sensitive and full of élan.