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Opera: Dallas Opera makes strong case for Tchaikovsky's 'Iolanta'



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Classical Music Critic

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Supertitle translations now facilitate performances of Russian operas in the West, and singers from the former Soviet Union have become international stars. On these shores, though, 19th-century Russian opera still is represented mainly by Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, with occasional stagings of Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov*.

Portraying a blind princess awakened to love and sight, Tchaikovsky's last opera, *Iolanta*, only 90 minutes long, didn't reach even the Metropolitan Opera until January. On Friday night, it came to the Winspear Opera House in a potent realization by the Dallas Opera. I can take or leave Christian R ath's abstract staging, with Elaine J. McCarthy's projections on shifting scrims, but the characters do come alive and most of the singing is superb. Apart from an unreliably tuned clarinet, the orchestra played splendidly for music director Emmanuel Villaume, who has taken the opera on a European tour and recorded it for Deutsche Grammophon.

As with many an opera, the fairy-tale story requires some suspension of disbelief. But, composed in tandem with *The Nutcracker*, to a libretto by the composer's brother Modest, *Iolanta* supplies heated passions and dramatic confrontations, soaring arias and elaborate ensembles. The orchestra propels the action on shimmering, pulsing textures and lovely sonic pastels, with stirring fanfares for noble arrivals.

The cast's knockout is Mikhail Kolelishvili, as Iolanta's father, King René, his enormous bass perfectly balancing beef and brass. What a sound! Ekaterina Scherbachenko is convincingly girlish as the eponymous princess, tracing her progression from unsettled naivete to awakening love to dazzlement at new sight. Her ample soprano supplies parallel nuances of dewy simplicity and surging ardor.

As Vaudémont, the count who opens Iolanta to light and love, tenor Sergey Skorokhodov musters requisite decibels, and his quieter singing is nice enough, but both visually and vocally a more poetic performance is certainly imaginable. With a dignified presence and substantive, polished baritone, Vladislav Sulimsky is deeply sympathetic as the Moorish physician Ibn-Hakia. Yet another well-appointed baritone is supplied by Andrei Bondarenko, as Robert, betrothed to Iolanta but in love with another woman

Iolanta's nursemaid Marta and her friends Brigitta and Laura are admirably voiced by, respectively, Tamara Mumford, Joanna Mongiardo and Lauren McNeese. Jordan Bisch is a little underpowered as the doorkeeper Bertrand, but Andrew Bidlack is a bright-toned Almeric. Prepared by Alexander Rom, the offstage chorus sings beautifully.

The story is set in 15th-century Provence, but costumes, by Susan Cox, seem contemporaneous with the opera's 1892 premiere. Their black, white and gray color scheme, **deftly lit by Thomas C. Hase**, presumably evokes Iolanta's sightlessness. The projections —of clouds, gnarly branches, eyeballs, roses, stone and ivy-clad walls — are striking.