Camerata: music good but no dramatic sense

By JONATHAN RICHMOND

Joel Cohen decided it was time to go back to the roots of the Tristan legend, which long predates Wagner. Last weekend, his Boston Camerata performed the result, an evening of drama and music drawing on Middle Ages sources. The words were taken principally from the long Tristan poem in Middle High German by Gottfried von Strassburg, the music from manuscripts of the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It was an idea with much potential, and with further iterations, it could be a great success. As performed last Saturday night, however, the music came across wonderfully, but the work as a whole lacked any sense of dramatic cohesiveness.

Anne Azema grasped the complexity of the role of Land in her singing. Assertive at times, sweetly sad at others and with a clear and accurate delivery, she brought a strong musical presence to the stage. Her prayer, "Jeu Crist," was especially moving, her final line, "Li valeurs last," poignant.

The Tristan, Henri Ledroit, was not Azema's equal, but contributed some noteworthy countertenor singing, nonetheless. Ellen Harris brought a versatile, well-directed voice to the part of Brangane. Roger Fleagle — in four smaller roles — exercised his powerfully lyrical voice to good effect, especially when accompanying himself on Harp.

Joel Cohen's instrumentation was insightful: flutes, harps, vielles, a sackbut, shawm and rebec, among others, setting moods and highlighting emotions to profound effect. All instrumental performances were inspired.

It was in the long spoken sections that the production sagged: put quite simply, here was a group of musicians who had no concept of how to deal with the spoken word. Henri Ledroit, speaking with a thick French accent that I previously thought only occurred when Peter Sellers assumed Inspector Clouseau, was a particular embarrassment, but the uninvolved voices of the rest of the cast jarred as well, breaking both the spell cast by the music and the evening's continuity; it seemed so amiss.

The program note does not indicate that French stage director Pierre-Jean San Bartolome had directed English language productions beforehand. To succeed, creation of the Camerata's Tristan, which give equal importance to the theatrical and the musical, must have strong stage direction from someone well versed in the language of the performance.

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TRISTAN AND ISEULT
Adapted and directed by Pierre-Jean San Bartolome.
The Boston Camerata.
Joel Cohen, Music Director.
Jordan Hall, February 20.

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