

Kristina

Benny Andersson and Bjorn Ulvaeus' epic musical about a group of Swedish immigrants gets a thrillingly-sung concert staging.

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Russell Watson and Helen Sjöholm in *Kristina*
(© Carol Rosegg)

Only time will tell if *Kristina*, Bjorn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson's overly lengthy if often beautiful pop opera about a group of 19th-century Swedes emigrating to America, will ever get a full-blown English language production. But even so, the show's current concert staging at Carnegie Hall (concluding tonight) might be the ideal format for those who want to experience this singular work.

For one thing, no commercial staging could accommodate the enormous American Theatre Orchestra, led by the brilliant Paul Gemignani, who bring out the full colors in the lush, string-heavy (and ballad-heavy) score -- which is periodically reminiscent of the pair's well-known musical *Chess* and only occasionally similar to their work for their supergroup ABBA. And one could hardly ask for better voices than the ones on stage, even if they don't always clearly enunciate all of the score's lyrics (translated into English by Herbert Kretzmer). The show's choral numbers, in particular, could easily have benefited from the use of supertitles.

The true challenge of *Kristina*, however, is that the story being told is episodic without being theatrically dramatic. Young Swedish couple Kristina (Helen Sjöholm) and Karl Oscar (Russell

Watson) decide -- along with a small group of family and friends -- to go to America once famine hits their homeland. While lots of things "happen" to them, especially once they arrive in Minnesota, there's very little actual conflict. Moreover, no matter how much they're given to sing -- including an odd number about lice and a paean to a cast-iron stove -- all of the characters remain primarily two-dimensional.

Fortunately, the concert's cast is fully committed to delivering all they can. Sjöholm -- who originated the role of Kristina in Sweden (and who is singing the score for the first time in English) -- brings spunk and fire to the flinty yet steadfast Kristina. Her voice, mostly pure and sweet, is well suited to the role's demands, and she pulls out all the stops on her show-stopping second act number "You've Got to Be There." Watson, the super-successful British tenor, has a superb instrument -- robust when needed and ethereally lovely in its top notes -- that makes his music soar.

Still, the standout performances are given by the little-known Kevin Oderkirk as Karl Oscar's restless younger brother, Robert, and Broadway (and former *Mamma Mia!*) star Louise Pitre as Ulrika, the reformed whore who goes from being Kristina's enemy to her best friend. Both performers combine passion with top-notch singing and acting, leaving audiences to wish they had more to do. Still, Pitre makes every second count in the blazing "Never," while Oderkirk's glorious renditions of the pretty "Down to the Sea," and "Gold to Sand" -- the show's most dramatic number -- remain with you after the show is over.

Running nearly three hours, *Kristina* feels excessive, with much that can be excised with no loss of impact. But it's clearly a labor of love for its creators, and might well find an audience willing to love it back.

http://www.theatermania.com/new-york-city-theater/reviews/09-2009/kristina_21453.html