

DUTCHMAN TAKES FLIGHT

ST. LOUIS SYMPHONY SEASON CONCLUDES WITH WAGNER'S OPERA,
IN COLLABORATION WITH VIDEO ARTIST S. KATY TUCKER

BY BENJAMIN PESETSKY



The St. Louis Symphony performs with video projections by S. Katy Tucker

DILIP VISHWANAT

Opera is a hybrid art form: music, poetry, and theater. But in many cases the music and story are strong enough to carry an evening on their own, so orchestras perform some of the most popular operas in concert with a full cast of singers, but only the barest suggestion of costumes and staging. Listeners can enjoy the words and music in the abstract, or may close their eyes and imagine a production in their minds. But what if a visual experience, nearly as rich as the wood and canvas sets of an opera house, could be created in the concert hall simply through lights and projections? This is the approach taken by the St. Louis Symphony, both for its sold-out performances of Verdi's *Aida* in 2015, and for its upcoming season-ending performances of Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* on May 4 and 6.

For both these projects, the STL Symphony worked with S. Katy Tucker, a video and projection artist who got her start as a painter and installation artist in New York. She has collaborated frequently with music director David Robertson,

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first for a 2012 performance of Orff's *Carmina Burana* with the Orchestra of St Luke's at Carnegie Hall, then *Flying Dutchman* with the Sydney Symphony at the iconic Sydney Opera House in 2013.

"The things that can be done with projections to enhance the atmosphere feel like an extension of the music," said Robertson in an interview at Powell Hall. "Particularly in the hands of S. Katy Tucker, some of it is beautiful beyond description. There's no way I can tell you what it's going to feel like when you hear the music and see the images she's conjured up. She's very good at being able to maintain the primacy of music, and that's a real gift, particularly when you're presenting something in a concert."

Explaining her working method, Tucker wrote in an email, "any collaboration with the visionary David Robertson begins with talking to him. He has an incredible gift of really seeing the music and bringing it to life for audiences. The process also begins with familiarizing myself with the piece. For several months, I listen to the opera in full at least two to three times a day. I have to know a piece of music well enough that I can listen to it and anticipate what comes next. Then I start to hear the music subconsciously, even when I'm not actively thinking about it. I sit with the score in my studio and follow along with a recording until I can actually visualize what should happen."

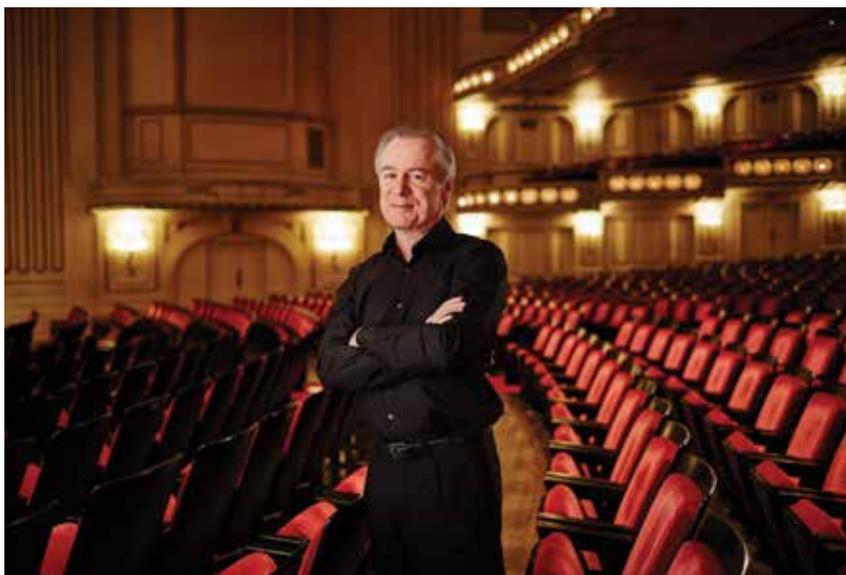
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The Flying Dutchman premiered in 1843 and is Wagner's first mature work—predating his earliest work on *The Ring Cycle* by a decade. It's a story of the sea, of a ghost ship, and of redemption through love. The Dutchman is condemned to sail the oceans until doomsday unless he can find a woman who will be faithful unto death. He encounters Daland, a Norwegian sailor, in a storm and trades his stash of treasure for the promise of marriage to Daland's daughter, Senta. Meanwhile on land, Senta is wooed by the hunter Erik, but she is fixated on the Dutchman and ultimately commits to him, sacrificing herself as the ship sinks, breaking the curse.

Wagner wrote the opera in a time of desperation, after he fled creditors in Riga (then part of the Russian Empire) and set up shop in Paris, hoping for work as a conductor and composer. His ocean passage from the Baltics to Western Europe was terrifying: the ship encountered storms around Norway and took three weeks to reach port, far longer than expected. This real-life voyage inspired *The Flying Dutchman*, which Wagner began after the Paris Opéra showed no interest in his previous effort, *Rienzi*. The composer never found success in Paris, and moved to Dresden in 1842, where both *Rienzi* and *The Flying Dutchman* were eventually premiered. The later opera, however, is considered Wagner's first work in his

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David Robertson

hallmark style, and is a pillar of the operatic repertoire.

“The Dutchman isn’t just a man, he’s a myth,” Tucker said. “He represents impending doom, a churning darkness, unrest, and even escapism for Senta. The video is about bringing this portrait of the Dutchman to life. The music is assisted with a bevy of imagery based on the sea—the source of life and death for him.”

Tucker’s production uses large projection screens, shaped like ship’s sails, which loom above the orchestra. She filmed Alan Held, the bass-baritone who will sing the role of The Dutchman, and footage of the singer’s face will be composited with sea imagery in a painterly fashion.

The projections are controlled live during the performance by Tucker, with assistance from a member of the STL Symphony’s staff who carefully follows the score. That way, the conductor and orchestra do not have to synch themselves to the video like a soundtrack—instead, the video responds to the spontaneity of live music.

“The beautiful thing about live performance is that no two performances are the same,” Tucker said. “Video should elevate the music, not hold it back, so by designing a great number of cues (or visual shifts based on musical placements) I can respond to the choices David and the orchestra make. And I am equipped to respond to any changes he wishes to make anytime it is performed.” So those who attend this production, in either of its two performances, will have a one-of-a-kind musical *and* visual experience.

Benjamin Pesetsky is a composer, writer, and publications consultant to the St. Louis Symphony.