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ABBA's songwriting team brings 'Kristina' to New York

Benny Andersson, left, and Bjorn Ulvaeus (AP photo / September 13, 2009)

By Peter Santilli
The Associated Press
10:51 a.m. EDT, September 25, 2009

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NEW YORK - The Scandinavian song-writing duo that gave us **"Mamma Mia!"** has brought another creation to New York, and it couldn't be more different from the pop musical that became a smash hit in London, on Broadway and around the world.

A concert version of **Benny Andersson** and **Bjorn Ulvaeus**' epic musical "Kristina" was performed Wednesday (the first of two performances) at **Carnegie Hall**, giving American audiences a rare opportunity to see and hear a more classical side of the composers who formed one-half of the 1970s pop group **ABBA**.

Making it more accessible to New Yorker theatergoers, this was the first-ever English-language production of the operatic, nearly three-hour piece, which was written in Swedish and first performed in 1995.

The story is based on Vilhelm Moberg's "The Emigrants," a classic of Swedish literature. It takes us on a family's odyssey from famine-stricken farms in Europe to the promise and rigors of the American frontier.

This large-scale, concert production was performed by the **American Theatre** Orchestra, under the musical direction of conductor Paul Gemignani, and showcased an impressive collection of singers.

Foremost among them was Helen Sjoholm, who returned to the title role she originated 14 years ago. Her triumphant rendition of "You Have To Be There" left no doubt about her mastery of the material, regardless of the language in which she's singing.

The talented, sprawling ensemble also featured Louise Pitre, whose memorable performance in "Mamma Mia!" garnered a Tony nomination. Pitre made a splendid entrance as Ulrika in the deliciously brooding waltz "Never," which beautifully highlights her throaty timbre.

Not to be outdone were Russell Watson in the role of Karl Oskar -- the male lead opposite Kristina -- and Kevin Odekirk as Karl Oskar's brother, Robert.

The English translation by Ulvaeus and Herbert Kretzmer is conservative but clever, displaying careful consideration for rhythm and articulation. The lyrics and delivery proved surprisingly fluid, considering the breadth of the piece and the limited time the creators and performers had to develop it in English.

While "Kristina" is traditionally classical and set in the 1850s, we are playfully reminded in a few sections of its score that this is a contemporary piece. In these moments, symphonic instrumentation gives way to a more modern sound.

A drummer, unseen toward the back of the 50-piece orchestra, played something funky on a snare and hi-hat. Also unseen near the back of the flat stage, an electric guitar reverberated with a hint of distortion.

What is remarkable about this device, which is used sparingly and tastefully, is that it seems to fit naturally with the rest of the musical.

Now that the English-language version of "Kristina" got its feet wet, one can only wonder where it might turn up next.

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