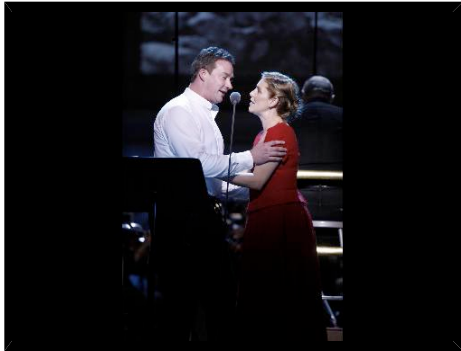





## ABBA Duo Turn Swedish Epic Into Windy Oratorio: Jeremy Gerard

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Review by Jeremy Gerard



Sept. 26 (Bloomberg) -- After flopping on Broadway with "Chess" (but before their "Mamma Mia!" megahit) the Swedish song-writing duo behind ABBA went Baroque with "Kristina," a hit in Malmo, Sweden.

An epic oratorio masquerading as a musical, the 1995 show was given a formidable reading Wednesday and Thursday nights at New York's **Carnegie Hall**. The story of Swedish emigration to the U.S. in the mid-1800s, "Kristina" was presented with the 50-piece American Theatre Orchestra, 27 cast members (including "Mamma Mia!" star Louise Pitre) and three adorable children with

varying lengths of blonde hair.

Wednesday night's audience was full to overflowing with couples who might have parented those children and who responded to every grandiloquent number (in a score full of them) with cheers, applause and ovations.

Also in attendance, perhaps anticipating the next "Mamma Mia!" were that show's producer, **Judy Craymer**, and honchos from all three major Broadway landlords, including Shubert Organization chairman **Phil Smith**. I exchanged greetings with "Mamma Mia!" general manager Nina Lannan, already onboard in the same capacity with "Kristina."

So how was the show, Mrs. Lincoln? Bold, beautiful and dramatically inert.

Based on Vilhelm Moberg's series of novels "The Emigrants," "Kristina" tells the tale of hard-working, population-enhancing Kristina and Karl Oskar; Kristina's unstable brother, Robert (euphemistically referred to as "a dreamer"); and Ulrika, the community mattress in their small town of Ljuder.

Death by Porridge

Drought and famine, not to mention child-killing porridge, follow them as they chance the miserable crossing to New York, eventually making their way to Minnesota and, in Robert's case, the not-so-Golden West. (The novels were also the basis for the 1971 film "The Emigrants," with **Liv Ullmann** and **Max von Sydow**.)

Musically, "Kristina" sounds like a serious-minded film score. **Benny Andersson**, the composer, works in the middlebrow idiom of **John Williams**, which is to say the music is eminently listenable, sometimes lovely and always chummy enough to tell us what's going to happen before it happens. **Bjorn Ulvaeus**, as we learned with both "Chess" and the compilation vehicle "Mamma Mia!" is great at exposition and clueless about what makes a Broadway show tune different from a pop song.

Men in Suspenders

So "Kristina" has one song after another, delivered by the leads and assorted stout, suspender-wearing men, telling us what just happened or what happens next. The lyrics, translated by Herbert Kretzmer, contain such memorable howlers as Robert's "Though I sleep on the dung/ I must hold my tongue." I could go on, but that would just be shooting herring in a barrel.

However one felt about the material, there can be no complaint concerning musical director **Paul Gemignani** and stage director Lars Rudolfsson. The presentation was tight and gorgeous, sounding as if it had been rehearsed for six months instead of several days. In that context, Andersson and Ulvaeus gave Helen Sjöholm, as Kristina, **Russell Watson** and Kevin Odekkirk as Karl Oskar and Robert, respectively) and Pitre moments to soar, and soar they did.

Rating: \*\*1/2

What the Stars Mean:

\*\*\*\* Do Not Miss

\*\*\* Excellent

\*\* Good

\* Poor

(No stars) Worthless

(**Jeremy Gerard** is an editor and critic for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

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