Orchestras in the United States are increasingly experimenting with film and video in an attempt to shake up the often moribund concert experience. To date, the most ambitious, prestigious, and acclaimed of these efforts has been undertaken by the distinguished video artist Bill Viola for the Los Angeles Philharmonic’s “Tristan Project,” in collaboration with the perennial enfant terrible Peter Sellars.

The resulting presentation of “Tristan und Isolde,” falling somewhere in between opera-in-concert and a full staging, was premiered in Los Angeles in 2004-2005 in the course of three separate evenings. It has also been seen, in another form, in Paris as conducted by Valery Gergiev. This spring the Tristan Project is being presented for the first time, both in Los Angeles and New York, with the entire work intact: three acts, two intermission, five-plus hours. It has already been called the “the great LA artwork of our time” by Mark Swed, the music critic of the Los Angeles Times -- a writer who, like the orchestra itself, keeps his finger on the pulse of contemporary fashion.

The choice of Viola for Wagner is both tantalizing and implausible. His moving photographic images are typically glacial. Both obviously and not, they convey potent thought and feeling. He is deeply engaged by Buddhism and other quiescent Eastern creeds. Though none of this is irrelevant to “Tristan,” Wagner is at the same time mercurial. And his excavations of individual consciousness are often brutal and explicit.

Viola did not know Wagner upon agreeing to take part in the project. He was properly amazed, especially by Wagner’s treatment of time; his ways of compressing or stretching it, moving forward or back, have exciting video applications. Keenly appreciative (as any artist would be) of the perils of literalism, Viola has attempted a visual track in counterpoint -- sometimes oblique, sometimes direct -- with the libretto. As a conscious strategy, he mainly ignored the music in conceiving an evolving elemental iconography of water, fire, forest, and existential religious ceremony. The aqueous medium he favors - - a Viola specialty -- may be crashing waves, or sullen seas, or an underwater ballet of
naked human bodies, or the water poured ritualistically -- slow sheets of undulating drops -- over heads and hands.

Even so, when during the rapt love music of act two (“O sink hernieder”) the earnest faces of a man and woman are followed in close-up by a rotating camera, the result borders on kitsch. Skirting Wagner’s narrative, Viola invents narrations of his own. This act two tableau of the lovers inching towards a romantic embrace is schematized by Viola as the “Awaking of the Body of Light,” yielding an ecstatic union.

In act one, therefore, Viola shows a preparatory rite of purification: the same man and woman slowly and inexorably disrobing. However coherently this illuminates Viola’s mega-narrative (or for that matter Wagner’s), the opera’s detailed scenario of feeling and behavior -- Isolde’s raging anger, Tristan’s sullen confusion, the drinking of the potion, the all-forgetting love torrent -- is incongruously ignored. Even if intellectually defensible, this double track refuses to resonate in any appreciable way unless Wagner’s protean lovers are stripped of their astounding vocabulary of weapons and vulnerabilities.

The opera’s third and most interior act -- the act in which Wagner’s mainly eschews action or interaction -- of course suits Viola best. And he responds with a tour de force. His reading of Tristan’s delirium, he has said, draws upon the Tibetan Book of the Dead in limning “the dissolution of the self in the stage of dying, the delicate and excruciating process of the separation and disintegration of the physical, perceptual, and conceptual components of conscious awareness.” The panoply of images, surpassingly beautiful in their colored or recolored realization, swims or dances across a screen now turned vertical and hence conducive to fire and water narratives of devolution or ascent. Isolde is at times gleaned spectrally, or afloat. Her ship may be a remote tanker on a dark sea, its lonely lights glimpsed through a hallucinatory haze of foreground droplets. Or she approaches as a flickering desert mirage (footage filmed over a period of months in the Mojave Desert). For the Liebestod: accumulating sheets of water streaming upward, a metaphor of transfiguration clinched by the slow ascent of a prone human form.

Only a better musical performance than what was heard April 18 in Disney Hall could determine the full potency of Viola’s wondrous act three. As Tristan, Alan Woodrow -- a superior Siegfried in the Seattle Ring of 2001 -- was over-matched. Esa-Pekka Salonen’s on-stage Philharmonic places crueler demands on Wagner singers than Seattle’s recessed pit ensemble, and Tristan, with his endless melodies and existential ravings, is not Siegfried. John Relyea, as Mark, and Jukka Rasilainen, as Kurwenal, far eclipsed the other members of the cast; when they acted and sang, the video stream ceased to matter. Anne Sofie von Otter, a cherishable artist, was unaccountably miscast as Brangane; like Woodrow, she was often incompletely audible. Christine Brewer is a credible Isolde in the making, suitable in voice and temperament, but not yet an interpreter of the role. Her music stand was at all times a distraction; the others memorized their parts.

Frank Gehry’s much-described Disney Hall interior was of course a palpable presence. With its billowing ceiling and arcs of seats, it is itself a vessel. The sound, also much discussed, is bright, vivid, balanced, pellucid. Wagner wants warmer, more blended
sonorities. The shimmering Liebesnacht, nakedly dissected, conveyed little magic. The biggest climaxes lacked weight. Salonen and his orchestra, too, do not comprise a Wagner medium for all tastes. There is no lack of polish or conviction. Especially given Viola’s disregard for the downing of the potion, the extinction of the torch, and sundry other momentous details, I felt a need for more musical punctuation. The score’s pregnant silences sometimes fell slack.

Peter Sellars, credited as “artistic collaborator,” seems a marginal contributor to the show. He eagerly and effectively uses the hall’s physical and acoustical resources. Everyone sings from a balcony at least once; otherwise, they stand at the front of the stage, oratorio style. Waves of light and antiphonal brass thrillingly articulate the landfall ending act one, crashing upon the oblivious lovers. Sellars’s controversial propensity to multi-task the audience is always at play.

“Tristan,” Nietzsche wrote, is a work of “dangerous fascination” -- an observation many times confirmed. I did not find the Tristan Project infuriating after the fashion of, say, Robert Wilson’s much-mounted “Lohengrin,” in which the ingenious addition of striking tableaux and the subtraction of intellectual engagement result in an unintended critique of the opera: the title character seems irretrievably bland, the story simplistic and flat. But I was left convinced that the Viola treatment could better serve a purely symphonic “Tristan,” stripped of story, character, and singers -- and also of the Tristan Project’s super-titles, which however indispensable deface many a sublime video image. Why not retool the Viola “Tristan” in counterpoint to Leopold Stokowski’s “Tristan” synthesis, a sybaritic exercise in pure sound to parallel Viola’s pure delight in form, color, and movement? If only there were a Stokowski around to conduct it.
The “Tristan Project” in New York might have been more modest than its Los Angeles counterpart, but it was an innovative conception of a core work, and we’ll take what we can get. The New York Philharmonic’s nearest efforts have been frothy musical-theater evenings, like “My Fair Lady” and “Candide.” That getting a production like this into Avery Fisher Hall requires importing it from across the continent is truly outrageous. Combining the purity of Zen with the power of video, the Tristan Project aims to liberate a mythical opera from the conventions that have confined it for 150 years. Alan Held as Kurwenal, Ben Heppner as Tristan, Daveda Karanas as Brangäne and Melanie Diener as Isolde in the Canadian Opera Company’s production of “Tristan und Isolde.” Chris Hutcheson. ROBERT HARRIS. the Tristan project. Tuesday, November 13, 2012. Tristan Barnett. steals coats from bars. Posted by Virginia Alvino at 12:54 PM 1 comment