

# LYRIC OPERA

## KANSAS CITY

## THE MAGIC FLUTE

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart 1791

November 9, 13, 15, 17, 2013

### Lyric Opera's 'Magic Flute' transforms Mozart's whimsical opera into indelible visual trip

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By Robert Trussell

Let's begin with a simple observation: The most inventive scenic and costume designs these days are found not in legitimate theater, but in grand opera.

That, at least, is how it looks from this critic's perspective. For proof, look no further than the Lyric Opera's eye-popping production of "The Magic Flute."

Jun Kaneko's production designs – including scenic elements, costumes and props – explode the conventions of visual storytelling in theater. He employs abstract projections, cleverly dazzles the viewer with collisions of color and clothes the performers in outfits that demand attention as distinct works of art.

The overall effect treats the audience to a sort of psychedelic succession of startling images, many of which suggest kabuki theater, but also at odd moments recall John Tenniel's "Alice in Wonderland" illustrations. Watching this production is a bit like watching an artist at work in his studio.

Kaneko's vision is so singular that it threatens to overshadow Mozart's whimsical 1791 opera in two acts about a prince's quest for spiritual enlightenment and the woman he loves. But director Harry Silverstein creates indelible images as he arranges his players against Kaneko's vivid backdrops. The moments of pure spectacle are remarkable.

This is officially a co-production with several other companies, including the San Francisco Opera, where it was built and staged last year with a different cast. It's also performed in English, which is a smart choice. Mozart and his collaborators crafted a singspiel, which, in the manner of Broadway musicals, includes spoken dialogue between the musical performances. This way the singers, freed from wrestling with the original German, can really act.

Baritone Daniel Belcher provides the glue that holds the show together with a delightful and broadly comic performance as Papageno, the bird catcher with enthusiastic appetites for food and wine. Belcher has a fine time with this harlequinesque role. As the Queen of the Night, soprano Kathryn Lewek executes arias in each act that, in terms of vocal pyrotechnics, are simply spectacular.

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Shawn Mathey employs a rich tenor as Tamino, the protagonist. Like so many leading romantic male roles, Tamino is a bit on the bland side, but Mathey delivers a creditable performance. Lauren Snouffer, a soprano, makes an agreeable impression as Tamino's love interest, Pamina. Tenor Doug Jones has his way with the comedic Monostatos. Jeffrey Beruan, who possesses a sternum-rattling bass, is impressive as the imposing Sarastro. And Andrew Gangestad, also a bass, brings quiet dignity to the role of the Speaker.

Supporting performances are solid. Kansas City Symphony players under Gary Thor Wedow's baton performed well on opening night, although there were moments when the horns threatened to fall out of tune. But one thing is certain: Viewers will leave the theater with mental images that will remain in their heads a very long time.