

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

THE MAGIC FLUTE

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart 1791

November 9, 13, 15, 17, 2013

Lights, action, and the magic of Mozart

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The Magic Flute was Mozart's 1791 masterpiece, a *Singspiel* he composed near the end of his short life. The Lyric Opera of Kansas City brought the work vividly to life with stunning visual elements at the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts on Wednesday night. The audience clearly appreciated this dose of quintessential Mozart and unabashedly cheered for its operatic heroes, most notably Queen of the Night and Papageno.

The noble chords of the overture sounded in tandem with a projection of colorful lines dancing onstage; this unexpected visual effect was curious at first, but soon enough it was clear that the linear streaks were to be a continuous theme. Lines gave way to a geometric grid projection evocative of a child's artwork (and mimicked in Papageno's costume) so that overall, the aura was one of youth, whimsy, and adventure, where orchestral color notably matched the design's vibrancy.

Mozart was prone to moralizing, and filtering his enlightened ideologies through his dramatic works was habit. In coded message, the composer could relate frustration about social constructs and class relations which he deemed unfair and unyielding. In *The Magic Flute*, Mozart takes audiences along on the search for intellectual and spiritual illumination, as we watch various characters accept challenges and adventure. To help audiences grasp a sense of individual versus society and personal introspection relevant to maturation, Mozart used all musical means available within operatic convention of the time. Thus, the score's scope engages audiences. Truly there is something for everyone as *The Magic Flute* sequences spoken dialogue and recitative and lyrical arias, while relying on ensemble and boisterous choral numbers for rousing finales.

Daniel Belcher is a deft and natural Papageno. "Der Vogelfänger bin ich ja" was a promising start to the consistent vocal and acting work that he offered all evening, while "Ein Mädchen oder Weibchen" in act two demonstrated Belcher's consummate professionalism and stamina. He was on the mark, never over-acting the role (a common trap to fall into with Papageno) and easily charming the audience with this well-crafted comedic character.

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Tamino's first lyrical aria is "Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön," and the number should be a showpiece for the character. Shawn Mathey, though, left something to be desired, particularly in his tendency to skimp up high. Although a fine actor with a vivid stage presence, overall the voice seemed strained, shallow, and even colorless early on. Mathey began to grow on me by the close of act one, perhaps as his character's determination bolstered his vocal effectiveness.

From her spectacular entrance, it was clear that Kathryn Lewek would be a menacing Queen of the Night. Brought in and out of scenes with claps of thunder and bright lightning (and dazzling in amazing dresses and headpieces), Lewek had much to lean on for dramatic punch. However, the vocal acrobats audiences crave from this character were delivered and transcended all of the imagery. No matter that Mozart was making fun of the serious Italian opera style of the age in her two main numbers: an audience waits for her, particularly craving the second act main attraction "Der Hölle Rache." Lewek brought histrionics and vocal prowess (unfortunately, though, much of her spoken dialogue was completely lost early in act two).

Lauren Snouffer was born to sing the role of Pamina, a character that she matches perfectly in looks, demeanor, and vocal color. Although Pamina does not garner much of a musical presence at first appearance, from her opening utterance, Snouffer was unforgettable, and the duet with Papageno, "Bei Männern welche Liebe fühlen," was the perfect lyrical interlude. Pamina's act-two lament established Snouffer as a vocal gem of this cast: she was controlled yet generous on high-range sustains, working a flexible soprano that boasts ample color and movement, even as she remained appropriately innocent in character. "Tamino mein" sealed the deal, revealing vocal prowess that her act one appearance never even hinted at; Snouffer was simply fantastic.

The Three Ladies (Andrea Garritano, Kristee Haney, and Tara Cooper) were a feminine powerhouse - a dynamic, demonstrative trio. While their consonants were not perfectly coordinated across melodic lines and movement, the Ladies still represented a single, forceful entity that aided in continuity across the dynamic story. Jeffrey Beruan's Sarastro was genuine and steady. He showed remarkable facility in his low (very low) range, and it was thrilling to listen to his bass timbre bottom out time and again. Doug Jones provided an appropriately gruff and slightly sinister Monostatos, and the Three Spirits (Victoria Schmidt, Rachel Aron, and Ella Graham) were positively precious. The audience congratulated them heartily on their work, no doubt appreciative of an admirable blend and their crystal clear diction.

While the chorus fell noticeably out of step with the orchestra in the act-one finale, the ensemble closers were indeed a luxury for the ears and eyes. Kaneko's design vision for stage, costumes, and lighting was a unified one. Via projections, animations, and physical pieces, Kaneko played up the supernatural elements of German folklore, and the effects were striking. Kaneko admits to not wanting to "decorate" the story through the visual, and I appreciate that restraint; for me, though, much of the design concept was sterile in its abstraction, and at times incongruous to the story. I preferred the visual treatment of the second act to the first, and overall, the costumes were the best visual element, contributing something tangibly descriptive where set design was intentionally abstract.

To what extent Mozart operated with intentional national pride is unclear, but this stage work is definitely distinct from Italian and French counterparts of the age. Taking the German language out of the dramatic equation dilutes the overall "German-ness" of the *Singspiel*, and frankly, the decision to stage the *Singspiel* in English was a disappointment. In fact, the English-to-German translation can weaken or even change messages altogether. On a more superficial level, the audience misses out on the original language's coarse consonants, and thus is denied hearing how those sounds ricochet off of melodic intricacies and rhythmic accents to fascinating effects.