

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

HANSEL AND GRETEL

by Engelbert Humperdinck

SEPTEMBER 17, 21, 23 AND 25, 2016

Fairytales, scary tales

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By Sarah Tyrrell



Webster's Dictionary defines 'fairytales' like so: "a story (as for children) involving fantastic forces and beings (as fairies, wizards, and goblins)." No mention of creepy clowns, carnivals, or cannibalism, but the Lyric Opera production of Humperdinck's "Hänsel and Gretel" indeed served up all of that and more.

It's likely most opera-goers have been exposed to this little horror story before, having heard from parents or grandparents about a brother and sister lost in the woods, who then have to dispense with an evil woman who wants to eat them (thanks, Mom and Dad, for the terror). Of course, there are valuable lessons in the siblings' adventure, so we look past the dark themes toward the tale's merits. Ultimately, Hänsel and Gretel explores the intersection of light and dark, toggling between the make-believe world of a youthful imagination and the realistic (sometimes sinister) intrusions that could impact a kid's life.

From the first notes of the overture, Humperdinck's stylistic connection to Wagner is clear. The score is active and restless, and proves his love of lush doublings and varied timbres. Even beyond orchestral color, it was difficult to listen without the Wagner filter: Humperdinck wrote long-breathed, romantic melodies, reveled in continuous wind/brass dialogue, and crafted huge dynamic swells. I admire how polished and responsive the orchestra was all evening; congratulations to conductor John Keenan and in particular to the horn section, which managed adequately the constant test of being ultra-exposed in the orchestral fabric.

Of course, when the pit establishes such a formidable (and yes, loud) presence, it challenges singers—and the solutions to those challenges pose vocal risks. Cast members, though, handled well the balance conundrum, both when instruments shadowed their vocal line and when countermelodies contradicted it. On only a few occasions was any solo voice dampened.

Megan Marino (Hänsel) and Rachele Gilmore (Gretel), photo by Cory Weaver
The brother and sister pair of Hänsel (Megan Marino) and Gretel (Rachele Gilmore) is virtually inseparable throughout the opera, sharing woes, celebrating victories, and developing what reads like convincing sibling chemistry. It was fun to watch Marino and Gilmore spar, mock one another, and show protective affection. Both legitimately embodied youth and naïveté, and Marino proved quite capable of playing a boy, handling the pants role with extraordinary naturalness.

One of the most powerful moments was also the sweetest—the famous “Evening Benediction” duet of Act 2—but “Cuckoo, Cuckoo” was also a chance for both singers to expose their notable range and agility, as well as to demonstrate how deftly they could manage expressive dissonance, jagged melodic leaps, and that huge orchestral sound. Overall, Gilmore was sweet and appealing with a mighty, vibrant coloratura, where Marino played up boy-like abandon in every gesture and facial expression, her fiery mezzo sealing the deal.

Victoria Livengood pulled double duty as The Mother and The Witch: she was larger than life in both, and that goes for presence as well as voice. In Act 1, Livengood came across as appropriately shrill; demonstrating parental frustration via a strident tone. After sending the children away, Livengood proved her versatility by morphing into an anxiety-ridden mom, leaning into her softer side and showcasing a concentrated mezzo that conveyed across all registers—and positively rumbled in the lower range. Livengood proved her stamina in Act 3 by muscling through the lengthy sequence bookended by “Who’s Nibbling At My House” and “Hopp hopp, galopp lopp.”

Troy Cook strikes again—unforgettably—on the Lyric stage as The Father. He managed to be at once cavalier and tender, his baritone nimble here, thunderous there. At all times Cook is bold, decisive, and intense—and who doesn’t appreciate that kind of abandon? I like Cook’s poise and command as an actor, too, and frankly I just enjoy how consistently demonstrative he is.

Even with Director’s Doug Varone’s broad and creative conception deviating from the fabled story, opera-goers will recognize the original; admittedly, though, it took some time for me to grasp Varone’s vision. I know that German artists like Humperdinck would have taken their magic seriously, making it my job to embrace the supernatural. Where I had the most trouble was nailing down situation and setting: all the way through Act 2 had me confounded to some degree, where I was so busy measuring the visual reference to Fred and Ginger against the creepy clown (and then trying to barter my memory of a black forest against Varone’s sparsely treed carnival wasteland) that for a minute or two I may have forgotten to listen to the music.

Children’s Chorus and Dancers (Doug Varone and Dancers), photo by Cory Weaver
In all, there were moments of utter visual and aural delight, like the Act 2 dance sequence that merged thoughtful, elegant choreography with stylish formal costumes (men in tuxedos with the women all in white, as the angels who protect the sleeping children). The audience was riveted while watching the dancers interact with the main characters. Monotone grays marked the opening scene and the siblings’ costumes, in stark contrast to the vivid palette of the circus performers’ outfits. That useful visual, attributed to the vision of David Zinn, costume designer, and Mary Traylor, coordinator, helped delineate the thematic dualities in play, where Hänsel and Gretel’s life operates in sharp relief against the imaginary luxury of carefree (and well-fed) carnival folk.

The children’s chorus was under Mark Ferrel’s direction and as usual the ensemble was capable and memorable. In Act 3, their initial reserve was so pure, so lovely—and then their boisterousness as they “awakened” was beyond measure. That proved a powerful moment.

The Sandman (Laurel Weir) didn’t come across as fully integrated and vital to the story; the character’s entrance was awkward and seemed to not be fully in the moment. The lullaby “I Am the Little Sandman” absolutely featured competent singing, but presence—and confidence—lacked. The Dew Fairy was, on the other hand, a sparkling respite. April Martin’s compact role was built on a fun irreverence and palpable sarcasm, then delivered by her lively soprano.

No renovation can satisfy everyone in the house. In this case, Varone tinkered freely with the tale, never mind that his version would in turn compete with viewers' own experiences with this story. Varone did preserve and develop the human themes of family ties, courage, and purity of heart alongside otherworldly elements, all to an intriguing end result.

As a side note: I was surprised to see empty seats on this, the Lyric's opening night of the season. Of course, every seat left unoccupied is an opportunity for a student to take economic and artistic advantage. This is a gentle reminder to students: with I.D. in hand, it's easy to secure an affordable "rush" ticket just ahead of curtain.