

Review**Baldwin Wallace Opera —
Hansel and Gretel (February 20)**

by Daniel Hathaway



There are paradoxes aplenty in Engelbert Humperdinck's opera *Hansel and Gretel* — beyond the idea of an edible house. It's a folk tale with roots in the dark days of the Plague years in medieval Europe collected by the Brothers Grimm but sanitized into a children's story by the composer's sister, Adelheid Wette, who wrote the libretto.

It's a simple tale, but one that was set to complex and sophisticated music by a disciple of Wagner who adopted the technique of *Leitmotiv* to subliminally suggest char-

acters and themes. The score interested Richard Strauss to the point that he agreed to conduct its premiere in 1893.

It's a vocally demanding work that calls for experienced singers, but it's frequently mounted by university and conservatory opera departments who have a bumper crop of women's voices to cast (Hansel is routinely performed as a trouser role). It calls for a large orchestra — which can cause balance problems against younger singers.

BW opera director Benjamin Wayne Smith found himself blessed with such a plentitude of women's voices this year, and decided to take profit of that by staging *Hansel and Gretel*. He made some wise choices on the way to the John Patrick Theatre stage.

By conceiving the production as a fairy tale, he lets the audience find what they will in the story, whether they're children enjoying exactly what they see or adults who are susceptible to subtle undercurrents. Together with set designer Laura Carlson Tarantowski, he envisioned a luscious scenario which evokes the natural qualities of a German romantic forest but is playful enough in its color scheme to become fantastical.

By restricting all the action to a sixteen-foot square, raked platform, he focuses the drama into an intimate space on the theatre's wide stage. And working with guest music director Dean Williamson, Smith decided to use a reduced orchestration that suited the available pit space and gave the young singers a better chance at being heard.

All of this resulted in a visually beautiful, vibrantly acted and musically satisfying production that revealed only a few opening night jitters on Thursday, February 20.



The show is double cast. Thursday's Hansel and Gretel, Grace Olmsted and Katie Staskus, were convincing as gently warring siblings. Their attractive singing and good diction (the libretto is in English) carried clearly into the house. Rayna Brooks as Gertrude the Mother (she plays the Witch on alternate nights) and Joe Ziegler as Peter the Father, were vocally and physically compelling in their roles as older characters, though Ziegler was sometimes out of sync with conductor and orchestra. As the Dew Fairy, Sarah Nadler made the most of her cameo vocal appearance. But it was tenor Cory Svette as the Witch, who stole the show after intermission with his maniacal cackling, outrageous vocalizations and over-the-top acting.



Charlene Gross's period costumes, Jeff Herrmann's imaginative lighting and Laura Carlson Tarantowski's whimsical set pieces (who knew that the gingerbread house was a play house?) contributed to the magical tone of the production. Amy McKenney's nicely

choreographed chorus came into play at more than one point and added texture and striking lighting details to the show, not to mention splendid singing in the finale.

Dean Williamson did a fine job of holding the musical threads of the opera together and drew some impressive playing from the 34-piece orchestra. There were laudable moments of fine blend from horns, bassoons and the whole wind section. Some dicey passages in the strings should take care of themselves as the performances settle in.

Hansel and Gretel continues at the Kleist Drama Center in Berea on Friday and Saturday at 7:30 pm and on Sunday at 2:00 pm. Operagoers 18 and under get in free with the purchase of an adult ticket.

Dress rehearsal photos by Brittney Callahan.

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