

**Opera Circle Cleveland: Mozart's
The Magic Flute at Westlake PAC (March 13)**

by Mike Telin



Is there a more fun-filled, accessible opera than Mozart's *The Magic Flute*? Its classic fairy tale plot — good versus evil combined with a search for enlightenment and love — is timeless. Its characters are sympathetic, and it's filled with beautiful arias and catchy tunes that are certain to cause earworms long after you have left the theater.

There was a lot to like about Opera Circle Cleveland's new production of *The Magic Flute*, which was presented on March 11 and 13 at the Westlake Performing Arts Center. (I attended the March 13 performance.)

With simple yet imaginative sets, the production, sung in German with English spoken dialogue and subtitles, succeeded in no small part due to the vocal prowess and theatrical abilities of the fairly young cast. Tenor Brian Skoog embodied the handsome prince Tamino. His delivery of "Wie stark ist nicht dein Zauberton" ("How strong is thy magic tone") during the finale of act one was splendid. Baritone James Binion, as Tamino's sidekick Papageno, brought an abundance of character to the role of the foolish birdcatcher in search of a wife. Soprano Dorota Sobieska, singing with clear diction and vocal flexibility, made for an innocent Pamina waiting to be married to Tamino. And the resonant voice of renowned Polish bass Pawel Izdebski personified the enlightened Sarastro, whose actions are guided by principle and reason.

Other excellent performances included Carey Wentzel, Elizabeth Frey, and Megan Thompson as the Three Ladies, attendants of the Queen of the Night, who were splendid in the opera's opening scene as they contemplated whether or not to leave the unconscious Tamino. Bass Daniel Fridley made the most of his role as the Priest (Speaker of the Temple), singing with a focused, darkly hued tone. Soprano Jessica

Crowell was simply delightful in the role of Papagena, the would-be wife of the birdcatcher. Crowell and Binion were appropriately giddy during the famous “Pa–, pa–, pa–” aria. Rounding out the supporting roles were Governor Harris as Monostatos; Megan Martinez, Rachael Cammarn, and Dawna Rae Warren as the three guardians; George Keller and Daniel Hild as the Priests; and Matthew Jones and Daniel Fridley as the armored men.



For all of the production’s virtues, it was not without its shortcomings, most notably the miscasting of Soprano Karla Cummins as the obscurantist Queen of the Night. Although Cummins possesses a powerful and focused tone in her lower register, sadly, on Sunday afternoon her high notes simply weren’t there. Hopefully we can hear her in a role more suited to her talent in the future.

Overall, the staging allowed for the characters to engage in natural conversation with one another, yet there were times when the action onstage came to a standstill — like during Pawel Izdebski’s haunting rendition of “In diesen heil’gen Hallen” (“Within these sacred halls”). While the acoustics of the Westlake Performing Arts Center are generally warm and attractive, depending on the positioning of the cast onstage it is also prone to the “now you hear them, now you don’t” syndrome.

Conductor Robert Cronquist did an excellent job of pacing the music. Though at times overpowering, the Cleveland Women’s Orchestra sounded secure and featured many wonderful wind solos. The chorus, prepared by Jacek Sobieski, sounded full-bodied in the opera’s concluding scene.

A bonus to the production were the creative animations by Wanda Sobieska, which were judiciously used to enhance the action rather than drive it.

The good-sized, diverse audience responded enthusiastically at the conclusion. It was great to see so many young kids in attendance — the four pre-teens sitting in front of me were spellbound for the full 2½ hours.

Opera Circle Cleveland is certainly onto something great with this production. Hopefully they will consider revisiting it sometime in the very near future.

Photos by Sean-Michael Kvacek.

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