

**Oberlin Opera: Britten's
A Midsummer Night's Dream (Nov. 10)**

by Daniel Hathaway



It takes supreme self-confidence to turn a Shakespeare comedy into an opera, and even more daring to follow up someone else's iconic music with a score of your own. Benjamin Britten is one of the few composers who could succeed on both counts. His version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, composed in 1960 and produced by Oberlin Opera Theater earlier this month,

preserves the magic of Shakespeare's verse with atmospheric writing that stands up well to Mendelssohn's wonderful incidental music.

Directed by Jonathon Field, with Christopher Larkin and the Oberlin Orchestra in the Hall Auditorium pit, the production, of which I saw the fourth and final performance on Sunday afternoon, November 10, boasted a uniformly superb cast of Athenians, Fairies, and Rude Mechanicals.

Shakespeare's play begins with romantically-confused



human characters in Athens, but when the curtain rises on an enchanted forest in Britten's opera, the spotlight is on fairies. The music sets the mood, beginning with diaphanous glissandos that match the dappled, dark colors of the woods (scenic design by Laura Carlson-Tarantowski, lighting by Jeremy K. Benjamin, and costumes by Chris Flaharty). An enormous bed stands front and center. The Fairy royalty, King Oberon and Queen Tytania, are squabbling over a changeling that Tytania has adopted.



In just a few minutes, important symbols are established. The forest represents magic. The bed stands for sleep — a central feature of the plot. The fairies are almost certainly going to be up to some mischief, having already swapped the changeling for a real child.

Mis-coupled human relationships involving Lysander, Hermia, Demetrius, and Helena, and love potions mis-applied by Oberon's messenger, Puck, complicate the plot, leaving much to be unscrambled at the end of the story — just in time for the Mechanicals to hilariously stumble their way through their play at the Duke's wedding.

Britten wrote the part of Oberon for the ethereal voice of countertenor Alfred Deller. Oberlin alumnus Andrew Lipian has a more commanding vocal quality and stage presence, which took nothing away from his character. Soprano Greta Groothuis was vocally and physically striking as Tytania. Their big musical moments — “I know a bank” for Oberon



and “Come now, a roundel” for Tytania — gave them lovely ornate material with which to shine.

Sagana Ondande was perfectly cast as Puck, the only non-singing character. His prankish acrobatics were impressive, but his lines should have been included in the supertitles.



The confused Athenians lovers were admirably sung and acted by Seyquan Mack (Lysander), Matthew Santos (Demetrius), Aviana Burkepile (Hermia), and Katherine Krebs (Helena). Colin Anderson played Theseus and Lily Landsell sang Hippolyta to fine effect.

The ensemble of fairies, choreographed by Lauren

Genevieve Elwood, was splendidly headed up by Nicole Goldstein and Caroline Wolfe (Cobweb), Risako Beddie (Mustardseed), Sarah Aaldering (Moth), and Kiki Porter (Peaseblossom). Their haunting choruses (“Over hill, over dale,” and “Ye spotted snakes”) cast a spell over the score.



But the performances that brought down the house belonged to the Mechanicals. In *The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe*, Evan Lindberg (Bottom, a weaver) made a charmingly malaprop Pyramus. Gabriel Stefanides (Snout, a tinker) gave a resoundingly silly monologue as Wall, and Evan Tiapula (Snug, a joiner) roared convincingly as Lion.

Max Cook (Flute, a bellows-mender) was outstandingly awkward in the drag role of Thisbe, originally played — if you can believe it — by Peter Pears. Anthony Anderson (Starveling, a tailor) and Alex Smith (Quince, a carpenter) filled out the rambunctious sextet.



Probably Benjamin Britten's signal achievement in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the creation of a score that doesn't compete for attention with Shakespeare's words — or remind the listener of Mendelssohn's cherished music. Despite the excellent playing of the Oberlin Orchestra, even the most retentive of musical minds must have been hard-pressed to remember any of the composer's tunes after the final curtain.

In lieu of auditory momentos from the score to take home, the Oberlin cast fanned out into the audience at the end of the opera, passing out LED roses of the type used by Oberon and Puck to administer the love potion and its antidote. Jonathon Field bought 1,500 of them to serve as souvenirs of this terrific production.

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