

Cleveland Orchestra:
***Mozart's Magic Flute* (May 16)**

by Kevin McLaughlin



In what has become a welcome springtime tradition at Severance Music Center, Franz Welser-Möst and The Cleveland Orchestra devoted their season finale to opera. Mozart's *The Magic Flute* contained many delights — a beautiful score, superb singing, imaginative staging by Nikolaus Habjan, spare but thought-provoking sets — in such quality as to perhaps win over even the most opera-resistant. And maybe to

prompt the timeless question: doesn't Cleveland deserve a full-time, professional opera company? I attended opening night on May 16.

A centerpiece of the second Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Opera & Humanities Festival, *Magic Flute* shares the festival's theme of "power." The characters of Tamino, Papageno, and Pamina eventually vanquish an angry queen, though the allegorical plot is more a parable of growing up and learning to love and trust. There are also initiation rites, a rescue, and a conversion to the high ideals of another powerful figure, Sarastro.



In a kind of ventriloquism act, Habjan had huge puppets mime and gesticulate as if singing and speaking, while the real singers stood close by. In the role of Queen of the Night, Kathryn Lewek divided and conquered with an awesome bearing, both stage and vocal, even managing to upstage her cloth-and-wire co-star. Her rage aria, “Der Hölle Rache kocht in meinem Herzen” (“Hell’s vengeance boils in my heart”), might be the best I’ve heard, gaining in power for its brilliance and precision, and hitting those high Fs with disconcerting ease.



Physical separation of Lewek from her puppet at one crucial point was Habjan’s way of projecting the Queen’s inner psychological conflict. She seems to possess parental compassion after all as we listen and watch her temporarily break free, leaving the papier-maché husk to rage on.

In the case of Sarastro, nobly and securely sung by bass Tareq Nazmi, conflict was likewise conveyed both visually and dramatically. This puppet, a ghoul with large hands and outsized gestures, is wheelchair-bound, while his attendant and vocal surrogate meekly pushes from behind. The character’s moment of dichotomy comes late in the second act with “In diesen heil’gen Hallen,” as Sarastro’s truer, parental-self (Nazmi) steps away from the priest-puppet (who, let’s face it, was a little creepy anyway).

From the melting love aria that Prince Tamino sings early on (“Dies’ Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön”), tenor Julien Prégardien was in warm, ardent voice, and as Pamina, Christina Landshamer was utterly convincing. Her clear and ringing tones in “Ach, ich fuhl’s” exuded devotion and Mozartian grace.

A novelty to those entering Mandel Concert Hall to take their seats was the sight of the orchestra pit. From this location (not onstage, as has often



been the case for operas) Franz Welser-Möst supercharged The Cleveland Orchestra in moments both grand and sparkling. The overture was fast but precise, and sensitive coordination with chorus and soloists provided further sources of excitement.



The men of the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus sustained and deepened several scenes, including a gooseflesh-inducing Priests' Chorus in Act 2 ("O Isis and Osiris") from the balcony.

The charismatic baritone Ludwig Mittelhammer brought likeability and fourth wall-breaking comfort to the role of Papageno. His most

endearing moments included the playing of the magic bells for the first time, and the farce of being chastised in Act 2 for not keeping quiet enough and protesting the prospect of a still more threatening trial with, "No thanks, I'd rather live!"



The Three Ladies (Alexandria Shiner, Jennifer Feinstein, and Daryl Freedman) held the stage with both their comedic timing and vocal skills. We felt their anguish and comic frustration as they jostled for Tamino's affections. And Dashon Burton was formidable as Speaker of the Temple in his expository duet with Tamino.

Sung in German with English supertitles, the performance gave

the hall a Viennese theater atmosphere (Mittelhammer's accent helped). This was a joyful production for all, including perhaps the opera-initiate. Focusing on the delights

of Mozart's magical music and Emanuel Schikaneder's fairy-tale, the performance made for a satisfying opening night, arousing a thirst for more opera.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com May 30, 2024.

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