

# LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

## THE MAGIC FLUTE

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart 1791

November 9, 13, 15, 17, 2013

### A fascinating, compelling production of a classic

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# KCSTAGE

As I waited for the opening chords of Mozart's "Magic Flute" to begin, the lady next to me remarked that she had rather hoped there would be more children present. This struck me as an odd sentiment at first, but by the end of the night I was seriously coming round to her opinion. We think of this story as a classic - and indeed it is - but in doing so it is easy to forget what an odd, dreamlike story it is. There's something compelling about the plot that has the same associative innocence of a child at play. The Lyric's staging, combined with Jun Kaneko's production design, matches this work, producing a compelling, almost etherial state.

Take the story: wandering prince Tamino (Shawn Mathey), sent out into the world to acquire wisdom, is saved from a monster by the servants of the Queen of the Night (Kathryn Lewek), who then recruits him to rescue her daughter Pamina (Lauren Snouffer) from the wizard Sarastro (Jeffrey Baruan). With his bird-catching sidekick Papageno in tow (Daniel Belcher), they find their way to Sarastro's home, only to find that things are not quite what they seem. What follows is a highly allegorical gauntlet of ordeals, from which the protagonists emerge happy, enlightened, and appropriately paired off.

Over time, the stories that have cropped up about this opera are legion: the various characters have been tied to real people in Mozart's life, the ceremonies of the mysterious order have been tied to the Freemasons (of which Mozart was indeed one). But interpret it how you like, this is a very strange story, no two ways about it. Jun Kaneko's artistic design, relying on bold primary colors and strong geometric shapes, highly complements the dreamlike feel of the piece. Being childlike without being childish is a thin line indeed, but Kaneko, Silverstein, Maravich et al manage it with rare grace and aplomb. The strong visual elements reinforce the almost free-associative nature of the story without distracting from it, making for a pleasantly unique experience.

The performances are quite up to the usual Lyric standard. Mathey and Snouffer are perfectly personable in their respective roles, averting the trap of the dull hero/ine. Belcher's Papageno is a delight; he clearly enjoys playing the role as much as we enjoy watching it. Kathryn Lewek made a compelling Queen of the Night, and when she started up "Der Holle Roche" you could almost feel the audience hold its breath. Happily, she swept through this most notorious of vocal obstacle courses, taking every high F with blitzkrieg fury. Need I describe the applause when she finished? I suspect not.

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Which brings me to the comment from the nice lady beside me. It is often lamented that children in this age of the soundbite and video clip and perpetually disposable culture are ill-prepared to settle in for something like opera, which takes its time and builds itself up and, heaven forbid, often isn't even in English. Opera - at least in this culture - will always be an outsider interest. That's just how it is. But there will always be young people receptive to its gifts, ready to step outside the mass culture they are constantly spoon fed and experience something that both demands and rewards active listening.

The Lyric's production, I may say, seems tailor made for such purpose. This is the sort of thing which, if shown to a younger person not currently acquainted with opera, could very possibly turn them into a rabid fan as I was so long ago. I only wish this production could be held over, and students brought in by the busload as they used to do with touring shows in my hometown. I was fortunate, despite my family being decidedly not one of means, to be exposed to the classics early on, and for that I am grateful. I cannot help but think this would be a splendid way to introduce and incubate the next generation of opera aficionados.

The Magic Flute is and always will be one of the crown jewels of Mozart's oeuvre, of the singspiel tradition, of opera in general. This is a particularly compelling and, yes, entertaining production that this reviewer can wholeheartedly recommend. You can even give the babysitter the night off, for once. This one's for everyone.