

HERALD TIMES:

MUSIC REVIEW: IU OPERA THEATER

Set, costumes are stars of 'The Magic Flute'

By Peter Jacobi H-T reviewer , November 16, 2009

Not to minimize the vast, if varying, contributions of the many musicians involved, the star of IU Opera Theater's current production - Mozart's "The Magic Flute" - is someone who doesn't sing, play an instrument or wave a baton.

This is C. David Higgins' show. It is he who conceived and designed the sets and costumes, the eye-catching environment that envelops the action for Mozart's timeless entertainment. Even the composer makes an appearance amid the clever happenings that animate the Musical Arts Center stage, all within what may be described as three sides of a symbols-laden magic box. Panels open, slide, lift, and fold to shape seemingly effortless scene changes.

Canopies and backdrops lower and rise. Gardens, grottos and assorted props glide in and out. Thrones roll forward from behind the rear wall: one arrayed with glittering stars to introduce the Queen of the Night, who comes to personify evil in this operatic morality tale; another with a profusion of gold seats for Sarastro, the representative of good.

And to help satisfy the fairy tale elements of the story, there's a huge and squiggly dragon. There are birds that nibble and peck. There are full-sized, huggable animals. All, of course, are make-believe and brought to life by puppeteers, these trained by an imported master of that craft, puppet creator Lisa Aimee Sturz.

Higgins' imagination has made everything possible. His cohort in this endeavor is stage director Tomer Zvulun, a young Israeli visiting from the Metropolitan Opera and elsewhere who sought ways to imbue this Mozart classic with the right blend of fantasy, magic, majestic ceremony and mirth. The team has managed to do so, with excellent help from Marie Barrett's evocative lighting.

All that would be for naught without equal care given to the music, which must soar and melt, rage and dance, weep and laugh, mock and exalt. In the orchestra pit, it just about always did. Authoritatively led by Mark Gibson, the IU Symphony Orchestra brought beauty and passion to Mozart's score. Gibson knows how to handle young musicians, a skill he's honed as head of orchestral activities at the Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music. He also obviously loves Mozart and found a way to cause members of his ensemble here to share that love.

On stage, Gibson had an army of soloists and choristers. "The Magic Flute" makes big demands on a sizeable chorus, portraying the priests and women of Sarastro's temple. Chorus master Mark Doerries had whipped his charges into commendable shape; Gibson effectively took over from there.

The cast numbers 18. Since opera theater double-casts most parts, the number rises significantly. To find fully satisfying candidates for every role is difficult enough in the professional world. At the university level, even in such a place as the respected Jacobs School, the task becomes close to impossible. Let's just say that, overall, the results served Mozart and the spiffy new production well enough, here and there even with distinction.

The two Taminos - tenors Mark Van Arsdale at Friday's opening and James O'Hanlon on Saturday - gave high doses of velvety lyricism to their work. O'Hanlon, a newcomer to IU Opera Theater, was a particularly welcome surprise. Jacqueline Brecheen on Friday seemed to have more success than did Saturday's Suna Avci in shaping the dulcet soprano tones one expects to rise from the throat and heart of Pamina, Tamino's intended, but both made the character a meaningful focus in the story.

The Queen of the Night is the most difficult role to cast, its vocal requirements including both the agility to negotiate supremely difficult coloratura turns and the power to express an anger worthy of so dominating and self-centered a monarch. Very few sopranos in a given generation have all the goods. Shannon Love, on Friday, handled the pyrotechnics confidently and with aplomb, as did Katelyn Lee the night after, if not quite so comfortably. Neither fulfilled the dramatic demands; their voices haven't the needed guts at this stage of development.

Baritones Mark Davies and Christiaan Smith-Kotlarek were charming and properly discombobulated as the birdcatcher Papageno. Friday's Sarastro, bass Joseph Beutel, bestowed more resonant low tones than did his counterpart, Max Wier, but each supplied plenty of nobility. Hirotaka Kato contributed a truly resonant bass as the temple spokesman on Friday; Jesse Malgieri almost matched him Saturday.

From among the remaining parts, one should mention the Queen of the Night's attendants. They're important to the opera and came to musical life, thanks on Friday to Alyssa Cox, Kerriann Otano and Kelly Glyptis and on Saturday to Amanda Woodbury, Shareese Johnson and Melissa Block.

This weekend, the casts exchange days.