

# Magic Mozart

NIKOLAUS Harnoncourt is the one major international conductor who remains almost completely unknown in this country. He has visited London rarely—a couple of visits with his Concentus Musicus of Vienna, a last-minute substitution with the Vienna Symphony Orchestra—and has never to my knowledge conducted an opera here or a major British orchestra.

His cycle of Monteverdi's operas was seen in Edinburgh, and yet his Mozart operas (which originated in Zurich and are now being recorded) have not been taken up by festivals here. Yet in the recording studio he is one of the busiest conductors in the world—regularly totting up as many records in a year as Karajan or Marriner—and among his recordings with the Concertgebouw are some of the most startling and revelatory modern accounts of Mozart symphonies.

Harnoncourt is currently conducting Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* at the Vienna State Opera. It is a typically idiosyncratic and stimulating interpretation, like no one else's. He coaxes the Vienna Philharmonic in the pit (or perhaps sheer brute force would be a better description, given their somewhat disgruntled looks) to a performance which is unusually sharp and clearly articulated.

Speeds are flexible and very variable. Harnoncourt apparently believes that the music for the priests has an element of parody about it, and so the final chorus of Act One races away (it is admittedly given one of the fastest markings in any Mozart opera, *presto alla breve*) while the Pamina/Papageno duet is extremely relaxed. The end of Tamino's flute aria is manically fast: the beginning of the duet that follows very measured. When Pamina and Tamino meet before the trials the music is suspended in air as if all sense of pulse has disappeared: a magical moment.

Alongside these successes are several ideas that sound merely eccentric or work less well—but that is always the case in a Harnoncourt performance. This 'Magic Flute' could not succeed so well were not the cast in perfect accord with his musical ways of thinking. Apart from Lucia Serra's blistering, razor-sharp Queen of the Night,

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### Two 'Magic Flutes'

NICHOLAS KENYON

which is outstanding, the individual voices may not be supremely distinguished, but they work well in ensemble, with three crisp, bright ladies, three boys from the Vienna Boys Choir, and the ardent Tamino of Jerry Hadley well partnered with the concentrated, pure Pamina of Patricia Schuman. (She is allowed remarkable freedom in her aria, which evaporates into thin air at the close.)

The producer in Vienna is Otto Schenk, who directs a no-nonsense, unfussy staging which does little more than complement the most attractive designs of Yannis Kokkos, symbolic scenes all set within the outline of a blazing sun, complemented at the end by another sun at the back of the stage, and decorated with some extremely cuddly animals. It made one realise quite how coherent and unified 'The Magic Flute' is, in spite of all the problems of style and genre that surround it.

It used to be the case that commentators wrote of Mozart's music for this opera as if it were a miscellany. Yet the fact remains that the sound of this opera is unmistakable, and in an age which has different attitude to originality—which has come to terms, for example, with the self-borrowings of Bach and Handel, and regards musical material as less important than what a composer does with it—'Die Zauberflöte' seems a miracle of coherence.

On Wednesday there was another new production of 'The Magic Flute' at the English National Opera, which is certainly exotic (and hugely enjoyable) though not altogether coherent. Nicholas Hytner, the producer, shows himself once again to be the most prodigiously gifted of all our younger opera directors, with enough ideas for 10. But are they all aptly applied to Mozart's masterpieces?

Bob Crowley's gleaming white setting starts as a never-never land of potential harmony, but becomes increasingly tricky: Papageno deftly collects fluttering birds for the Queen of the

Night, and she looks as if she roasts them alive in their cages. The smouldering fires here pre-echo the burning coals which in some early-industrial contraption provides Tamino's trial by fire. Sarastro and his brotherhood are, I suppose, Shakers, devoted to bringing about the peaceful kingdom in harmony with the animals: quite how this squares with the guns and dead hares of the act one finale hunt I am not sure.

Perhaps it is naive to require coherence in a setting which is intended only to give a stimulating succession of visual images: animals recur neatly in the Egyptian friezes of the second act, and Papageno and Papagena are exceptionally bird-like, taking off at the end in their bird-mobile to the skies. Nick Chelton's lighting provides many subtle moments, but the final overwhelming appearance of the sun ('a brilliantly lit temple...the most consummate splendour', says the stage directions) does not really happen.

Hytner's cast is wonderfully lively, led by John Ravensley's Papageno, lovable old bird-catcher with (in Jeremy Sams's clever new translation) a host of Eric Morecambe one-liners. 'You win some, you lose some', he mutters philosophically. But oddly, when he sings, the characterisation 'drops completely, and the voice is pallid.

Helen Field's Pamina is equally touching in word but terribly tense, unrelaxed in song. The noble Sarastro of Gwynne Howell is unacceptably foggy of voice: he is comprehensively out-sung by Richard van Allan's magnificent Speaker. Nan Christie's Queen of the Night is physical and committed, enfolding both Tamino and Pamina in her two arias, and the voice is brittle and suitably icy. A most promising debut is made by Thomas Randle, whose forthright Tamino is not always flowing but is constantly alive to the drama of the musical line. There are three excellent boys with white heavenly knapsacks, but the three bright blue ladies are a warby crew.

Ivan Fischer conducts with an energy that borders on agitation, and the singers rarely manage to sound relaxed: it keeps a very tasty cauldron of an evening bubbling away nicely, but the final meal is a little indigestible.



Nan Christie as a dramatic Queen of the Night in 'The Magic Flute' at the London Coliseum.

## Nicholas Kenyon reviews two flutes

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