

Tom Sutcliffe looks at Mozart's bifocal vision on the opening night of the ENO's new Magic Flute at the Coliseum, and below, the designer, Bob Crowley, talks to Hugh Canning about his work

Mozart, masons and magic

Tom Sutcliffe

FREEMASONRY today is an old boy's network that helps comfortable businessmen scratch each other's backs with their middle fingers and their trousers rolled up.

In Mozart's day, it was a new boy's club, infected with republicanism and democracy, and under threat in Vienna from the newly reactionary imperial establishment of Leopold II and his secret police. The Magic Flute was the first opera consciously designed as political propaganda — to show masons in a good, albeit satirical, light.

It had to be popular and fun, its Spießbürger message of quest, initiation and renewal was projected with Mozartian buoyancy, and shaded with pathos. Its wide musical range was matched with a diversionary plot propelled by odd characters.

It is a childish fable of two youths, one lowborn, one highborn, seeking maturity and marriage. Yet its often unspitinated text evokes a kind of universal humanism.

Apart from the music there are two crucial and related factors for performance: balance of focus between the male leads, and context. As usual, Mozart's dramatic vision is bifocal. The opera follows Tamino and Papageno, prince and birdcatcher, with scrupulous equality. But to hold that balance Mozart requires a specific Magic Flute world, an imaginatively stimulating theatrical and visual context.

Mozart and his impresario, librettist and star Schikaneder's garish and concretely specific pantomime-style theatre could serve instantly from comic to deadly serious. Neutralise the situation, turn it as Bob Crowley has at the Coliseum into a glossy exhibition stand with decorative hieroglyphics, Corinthian pilasters, shiny black floor, sliding reflective white wall, a cameo of mossy woodland, and the imaginative worlds of the two heroes float free and apart.

The inevitable competition between Tamino and Papageno destroys the subtlety and the seriousness. In the ENO's Flute, John Rawnsley's Yorkshire Papageno wins hands down — despite the excellent vocal potential and well-built

torso) of Thomas Randle's young, black, American Tamino.

Crowley's bland and flashy designs are an insuperable problem. Sarastro's brother, hood wear hideous black and white ritual robes over their 18th-century suits that suggest Shaftesbury Avenue rather than Enlightenment. The Three Ladies sport vile blue frocks. The bird costumes for Rawnsley and Lesley Garrett's bawdyworking Papageno are tiresomely twee. So is the patronising but pointless comedy of disguising Papageno as an NHS test-tube knocking her fag-ash into her green dressing-gown pocket.

It's peculiar, though the burps and updated smart jokiness of Papageno, in Jeremy Sams's dreadfully reconstituted dialogue (adaptation more than translation), are as irrelevant as putting a moustache on the Mona Lisa. OK for the South Bank Show's title sequence, but unhelpful to Mozart's quicksilver agless masterpiece. Incidentally, the dialogue is (for the first time with a new ENO production) strongly milked. Alexander Oliver's Monostatos, for instance, sounded distinctly weaker when he actually started singing.

The music was not amplified, ENO say. Casting problems have not yet gone that far. But Guyenne Howell's Sarastro, unimpressive in the lower regions, seemed to be shadowed by odd echoes from a loud-speaker (or the conductor joining in as they will).

Casting and singing are generally more resolute than beautiful. Nan Christie's Queen of Night (shorn of her second definite article) was loud, mostly accurate and well applauded. Helen Field's Pamina was edgier than usual and rather frigid until her final rescue by the Three Boys, a musical high-spot. Her grieving aria had feeling tones but lacked legato line.

Ivan Fischer's conducting, at a best urbane, plodded. Textures were dense. There was little evidence of a good ear placing instrumental colours or achieving choral coherence. Mozart conducting needs transparency and alertness as well as Fischer's unmissable but self-satisfied fullness.

Is it purist to regard Mozart's libretto as part of The Magic Flute's genius? The producer Rawnsley's Papageno milks



Milking the audience . . . John Rawnsley and Lesley Garrett as Papageno and Papageno

PHOTOGRAPH: DOUGLAS JEFFERYS

Nicholas Hytner and Jeremy Sams have chosen to re-write it in all sorts of ways that did not strike me as funnier or more meaningful than the original.

The dragon at the start is a real live python, wrapped round Tamino: to detach it he descends below-stage on a lit in a faint. A kind of phony realism recurs frequently, as well as generalised "acting real" that rarely convinces or makes theatrical meaning. Chorus ladies smile in fake un-dignified welcome. Lay it on with a trowel.

the audience relentlessly. How good he might have been is shown in the final, "mean" verse of his hanging song. His birds are actual homing pigeons (classier than your Trafalgar Square variety) who fly on to and get put into his basket cage. They do say animals and children are a sure-fire recipe for success, though the animals charmed by Tamino's flute are ladies in wolf-suits.

The test of fire uses coals on a conveyor-belt "heated up" with bellows during the Armed Men's chorale. Pamina leads the way, Tamino following,

which is very unmasonic. The test of water, like the removal of the python, is endured below stage.

These are all solutions to famous problems of the "how do you show x?" variety. In each case they are opportunistic and not meaningful. This is the second opera Hytner has done with Crowley, following The King Goes Forth To France at Covent Garden. But Hytner's most successful productions (Xerxes, King Priam) have all depended on his collaboration with David Fielding. Designers are rarely given enough credit.

Hytner without Fielding is not the same thing at all.

I found Hytner's production calculating, clever-clever, charmless and irrelevant. But the ENO's audience (aced with Kent Opera supporters of conductor Ivan Fischer and Hytner, both proteges of the Norman Platt operatic school) seemed encouraging and enthusiastic. Perhaps the ENO management have got their box-office operetta-style drama for next season. Mozart with pratfalls must mean turns on seats. The great work will have to wait for next time.

Tom Sutcliffe on Magic Flute

Clipped By:



ianharris

Sat, Feb 22, 2020