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**Los Angeles Opera's 'The Magic Flute' dazzles and dazzles. Who says the holidays are over?**



Photo: Robert Millard

**WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART  
THE MAGIC FLUTE  
LOS ANGELES OPERA  
JANUARY 10, 2009**

By: Carol Jean Delmar  
OperaOnline.us

Los Angeles Opera's current production of "The Magic Flute" is kind of like being at Disneyland: the colorful sets, costumes and lighting are magical, so feel free to bring the kids. I was in awe from the very first moment I saw the gigantic serpent. Then the three veiled ladies literally cracked me up as they slayed the serpent and didn't want to leave the young prince who had fainted dead away and was lying on the ground beside it. But the bird-catcher stole the show. He was so cute, and boy was he funny when he tried to

sing with a padlock on his mouth.

This revival was originally performed in 1993, then in 1998 and 2002, but it looks as crisp and fresh as a premiere.

When the three ladies show Prince Tamino a portrait of the Queen's daughter, Pamina, he falls in love with her. The Queen of the Night sends him to rescue Pamina from the evil high priest, Sarastro. He is given a magic flute for protection, and the bird-catcher, Papageno, is given magic bells. But as the opera progresses, the evil Sarastro proves to be honorable, and the Queen of the Night emerges as the villain attempting to destroy him. But she fails, and Sarastro and the priests of Isis and Osiris lead Tamino and Papageno through the trials that prove their integrity and worthiness of initiation into the Temple of Light. Tamino and Pamina find happiness, Papageno and Papagena dream of having children, and virtue and wisdom prevail.

It has been said that "The Magic Flute" is a Masonic allegory evoking the mysteries of ancient Egypt. Both Mozart and librettist Emanuel Schikaneder were Freemasons. An essay by Austrian Masonic leader Ignaz von Born -- "Mysteries of the Freemasons" -- contributed to Schikaneder's text for Sarastro. And Jean Terrasson's novel "Sethos" influenced the opera's setting and the trials.

"Die Zauberflöte" -- "The Magic Flute" in German -- continues to be one of the most beloved operas today. This singspiel -- a mix of dialogue and song -- would make the perfect Broadway musical although it is most definitely an opera. The voices are naturally important, but some of the other components are equally significant. The sets, costumes, lighting, acting and movement can make or break a production. Los Angeles Opera delivers.

"Die Zauberflöte" begins with a wonderfully melodic overture which on opening night was followed with applause after a member of the audience shouted, "We love you, James Conlon!" The maestro continued to guide the orchestra and singers throughout, providing them with a primary source of energy as their eyes gravitated to his baton.

Then the audience (or maybe it was just me) was overjoyed at seeing the fanciful serpent, the antics of the three veiled ladies, and the loveable feathered bird-catcher, who continued to delight with his opening aria, "Der Vogelfänger bin ich ja." Nathan Gunn's performance as Papageno had a glorious freedom to it. There was an ease to his movement, acting and delivery that made him captivating like a breath of fresh air. At one point, however, during his suicidal sequence, he seemed to relax. His voice and energy weren't projecting. But maybe Papageno was tired. After all, he'd just gone through some extremely harrowing trials. Thunder, lightning, the earth shaking -- that's enough to exhaust anyone. But Gunn perked up again when he was reunited with Papagena. All he wanted was a little wife. Gunn's Papageno was my favorite.

Although this isn't a contest, my second favorite wasn't Pamina, Tamino or the Queen of the Night: It was Beth Clayton as the Third Lady. All of the ladies were excellent, but

Clayton's mannerisms were hilarious, her comedic timing was perfect, and she stood out in a role that normally only blends. What a joy.

Matthew Polenzani had the perfect lyric tenor sound for Tamino, which was evident in his first aria, "Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön." He sang with technical ease. We liked him.

Marie Arnet was a lovely sweet-toned Pamina who sang her heartfelt "Ach, ich fühl's" with elegance. L'ubica Vargicová's aria as the Queen of the Night – "Der Hölle Rache" – showed vocal agility but sounded thin as if she was simply aiming to hit the high notes. "Der Hölle Rache" is the type of aria that can easily be squeaked but really needs a coloratura who can sing with depth. Vargicová's sound and characterization lacked body, substance and temperament, yet the audience liked her.

Another character who was probably too likeable was the evil Moor, Monostatos, who delighted us in his green almost leprechaun-like costume. It was hard to believe that he could scare anyone, but Greg Fedderly – Monostatos -- followed the director's lead, sang with an ease of delivery, and moved agilely across the stage.

Matthias Goerne's noteworthy vocal quality as The Speaker added to the ensemble feel of the production. Günther Groissböck's Sarastro had nobility, but at the beginning of Act 2, Groissböck seemed hesitant as if he had just learned the score. He was insecure and dependent on Maestro Conlon. His "Star Trek"-like makeup, hood and costume made him almost indiscernible among the other priests. He and The Speaker needed identity.

The highlight of the evening could have been Papageno's final duet with Papagena, but it wasn't. I have watched the duet many times on a videotape (now on DVD) of the Bayerische Staatsoper's 1983 production with Francisco Araiza as Tamino, Edita Gruberova as the Queen of the Night, Lucia Popp as Pamina and Wolfgang Brendel as Papageno. I love the final duet, and Gunn was certainly up to the task. The scene should have been directed with much more creativity to show the joy Papageno and Papagena feel when discovering each other. Maybe I've been spoiled with the 1983 version which had children running onstage, but I wanted to feel that kind of charm and I didn't. And although Amanda Squitieri warbled well as Papagena, she just didn't seem to meet my expectations as Papageno's adorable little mate. She should have been lighter on her feet. Maybe a longer feathery skirt would have been more flattering.

Grant Gershon made much of the choral moments, and the three boys' voices blended harmoniously.

It was a glorious production. How could anyone worry about the economy while looking at a midget alligator in tennis shoes or a long-legged ostrich in high heels? What fun!

Conductor: James Conlon

Original Production: Peter Hall

Designer: Gerald Scarfe

Director: Stanley M. Garner  
Lighting: Richard Pilbrow, Michael Gottlieb  
Associate Conductor/Chorus Master: Grant Gershon  
Animal costumes by Vin Burnham

The production has been double cast.