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**Los Angeles Opera's 'The Birds' proves old-fashioned enchantment can still be a winner.**



Photo: Robert Millard

**WALTER BRAUNFELS  
DIE VÖGEL  
LOS ANGELES OPERA  
APRIL 11, 2009**

By: Carol Jean Delmar  
OperaOnline.us

I shouldn't begin a review of Walter Braunfels' "Die Vögel" ("The Birds") by comparing it to Los Angeles Opera's "Das Rheingold" and "Die Walküre." But I just cannot help myself. In a podcast on the company's website, Plácido Domingo described Achim Freyer's "Ring" as "magical." In response, Anthony Tommasini wrote in his New York Times review of "Walküre": "Mr. Domingo has described Mr. Freyer's 'Ring' concept as magical, which still does not say much. . . . Much of Mr. Freyer's magical imagery is not so much strangely alluring as just strange."

I wholeheartedly agree. So if you want to see something that is truly magical, “Die Vögel” is the show to see.

“Die Vögel” is part of James Conlon’s “Recovered Voices” project, which reintroduces audiences to the works of composers who were persecuted by the Nazis. Braunfels was a popular German composer and co-director of the Cologne Hochschule für Musik. Although he converted from Protestantism to Catholicism, he was half-Jewish and lost his position at the Hochschule in 1933 for his criticism of the Nazis and reluctance to compose a Nazi anthem for them. He went into self-imposed exile and when he returned to Cologne in 1948, there was very little interest in his music.

“Die Vögel” premiered in Munich in 1920 to great success. The late-Romantic work is based on the Aristophanes comedy. It communicates a sense of hopeful yearning wrapped up in fantasy and spiritual elements. This combination appealed to a broad German audience recovering from World War I. Briefly, two men leave Athens in search of a better life among the birds. They enlist the bird king to erect a fortified city of enchantment, hope and love. But all is shattered when Prometheus enters and describes his time in servitude for defying the gods, which is followed by Zeus’s reaction to the birds’ domain by subsequently destroying it with a storm. The birds recapture their sense of loyalty to the gods, and the two men return to life among humans with a rejuvenated sense of hope.

Braunfels’ musical style is unique, yet reminiscent of Richard Strauss, Wagner and Mozart. When I sat in the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion on the opening night of “Die Vögel,” I kept hearing a “Der Rosenkavalier” quality in the orchestration. As the work became more climactic, the music swelled to Wagnerian depths, thanks to some luscious writing for the strings and brass. I could hear the Valkyries in one sequence. The festival feeling was evident when the birds joined forces much as the mastersingers and townspeople assemble for the song contest in Wagner’s “Die Meistersinger.” Good Hope reminds me of Walther von Stolzing – hopefully seeking idealistic love and spirituality. But the overall concept is most reminiscent of Mozart’s “Die Zauberflöte,” with its fairyland aura and allegorical leanings; its Tamino- and Papageno-like Good Hope and Loyal Friend; its coloratura protagonist; its bird imagery; and I think I heard some “Pa-pa-pa-pa” utterings, which when I heard them, I thought I must be dreaming.

Some critics believe that Braunfels’ musical style was old-fashioned, outdated and would have never stood the test of time. Others believe that his music could have never been rehabilitated after World War II because of the dynamic changes in composition at the time. That is like saying that had Mozart been born in another era, his musical genius might never have been discovered. The same holds true for Verdi and Puccini. Yet opera buffs flock to hear the great composers of yesteryear, waiting in anticipation for some new great talent to pave a pathway out of the current atonal abyss. I’d rather hear some meritorious music from the Romantic era – even if it does sound vaguely familiar -- than listen to some of the atonal noise we endure today. This production is so delightful that Los Angeles Opera ought to share it with some of the other major companies.

The highly raked stage no doubt makes it easier for “Die Vögel” and “Die Walküre” to coexist. The set remains stationary throughout the two acts. We see a sky, a sun or moon (depending on how each is lit), some palm trees and clouds. Birdhouses and gigantic birds’ feet are brought in, and an ornate Greek birdcastle-nest greets the first newlyweds to the city for some dancing and playing. Soon later, we see the eggs of their labor.

The birds are dressed in ancient Greek, Roman and Egyptian costumes with elaborate bird headdresses and wings. Prometheus continues in the Greek tradition. Good Hope and Loyal Friend greet the birds in the attire of the ‘20s. The flowing fabrics and sweeping movement of the dancers accentuate the flow of Braunfels’ constantly moving music. The lighting complements his variety of sound, and the orchestra glows under the insightful direction of music director James Conlon.

The singing is admirable, though not exciting. This production of “Die Vögel” gives a cast of promising young singers the opportunity to perform in the opera’s West Coast premiere.

Baritone Brian Mulligan (Prometheus) was the onstage dynamo with the strongest presence. He sang his legendary tale with passion and convincing urgency. Tenor Brandon Jovanovich’s clear lyric tenor as Good Hope (Hoffegut) displayed a sense of wonderment with an inspirational yearning timbre for an enriched spiritual life of idealistic love and contentment. Veteran baritone James Johnson sang an apt Loyal Friend (Ratefreund), although not a notable one. Martin Gantner’s Hoopoe (Wiedehopf) was convincing. Stacey Tappan’s Wren exuded vibrant energy and added a strong female presence to the ensemble, for although Désirée Rancatore sang the Nightingale (Nachtigall) with virtuosic trills and runs to high D, her voice lacked the depth and sparkle required for such a principal role. Even though I realize that coloratura soprano voices become thinner when they reach those heights, the overall lack of substance in Rancatore’s voice was a continuing disappointment to me from the beginning of the performance to the end.

The chorus sang gloriously in praise of Zeus at the finale, and the dancers executed Peggy Hickey’s choreography with precision. All in all, Los Angeles Opera has created a charming production. There is plenty of fruit for thought for those who want to taste what’s there. And for those who don’t, there is still plenty to hear, see and enjoy.

For more information on composers whose careers were dimmed or destroyed as a result of Nazi persecution in Europe between 1933 and 1945, please read and be informed on James Conlon’s OREL Foundation website at [www.orelfoundation.org](http://www.orelfoundation.org).

Conductor: James Conlon  
Director: Darko Tresnjak  
Scenery Designer: David P. Gordon  
Costume Designer: Linda Cho  
Lighting Designer: David Weiner

Choreographer: Peggy Hickey

Concertmaster: Stuart Canin

Associate Conductor-Chorus Master: Grant Gershon