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## Review: San Francisco Opera's visually stunning 'Magic Flute' too verges on Mozart as sit-com

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Eight years ago, the Metropolitan Opera had a hit with director Julie Taymor's now famous production of Mozart's "The Magic Flute," thrusting opera into the age of C. San Francisco Opera is hoping for something similar with its own "Flute," a visually ravishing production designed by the ceramic artist and sculptor Jun Kaneko, which Wednesday at War Memorial Opera House.

There is no denying the imaginative power of this high-tech "Magic Flute," sung in English to a new translation with color -- a perfect candidate for 3-D streaming to movie theaters -- it is a grand confection, but with some appealing singing, but only one marvelous performance, that of soprano Heidi Stober as the princess.

For much of the production's first half, I felt as if I were meeting an old friend after a long absence: the vitality. That was the feeling as the orchestra -- superbly led by Rory Macdonald, the young Scottish-born conductor -- played on. The vast backdrops on stage began filling with Kaneko's software-generated animations: grids and rainbows, tempos, spry melodic turns and shooting-star gladness of the music.

Mozart's opera is many things: bawdy, whimsical, magical, whimsy and magic. Kaneko's design -- encompassing a delightful magical landscape. It's like entering "Alice in Wonderland" at a Japanese temple. (The sinister priest Sarastro, who abhors the palace).

Early on, we meet Tamino, the Egyptian prince whose opening aria -- appealingly crooned, like a great doo-wop

Kaneko's slo-mo abstractions, gorgeous bubbles of slow bird-catcher Papageno. Singing of life's "sweetest harm" embodying the song's message.

Let's not forget the blazing gowns of the Queen of the Night, Pamina's mother. They are a perfect match for Albina Shagimuratova, who executed them with brilliance, punching out mile-high notes with pipe-organ authority.

Overall, the second half of the production, as directed by Harry Silverstein, lost momentum -- and oddly, it librettist Emanuel Schikaneder intimate Masonic mysteries and pose perplexing moral questions. It doesn't just eaten a bowlful of cereal mixed with gravel -- or that tenor Greg Fedderly, as the priest's henchman M

I wish Gockley hadn't fed baritone Nathan Gunn (as Papageno) lines like these: "I'm more of a lover than midst of his quest, Gunn -- full-voiced, but blandly chipper -- seemed to impersonate witless Steve Martin Papagena, poured on the joy for their love-nesting "Pa-pa-pa-pa" duet.

Don't go away before you read about the Queen's Three Ladies: soprano Melody Moore and mezzo-sopranos Lauren McNeese and Renée Tatum, all splendid. In the cast, Speaker, bass-baritone David Pittsinger was soulfully regal. Finally, consider going to this new "Flute" simply to see Stober. Every time she arrives on stage, Mozart re-enriches. In the end, we go to the opera to hear singing; this woman can sing.

Contact Richard Scheinin at 408-920-5069.

## 'The Magic Flute'

By Mozart, presented by San Francisco Opera, designed by Jun Kaneko

Through: July 8 Where: War Memorial Opera House, 301 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco

Tickets: \$26-\$330, 415-864-3330, [www.sfopera.com](http://www.sfopera.com) (<http://www.sfopera.com>)



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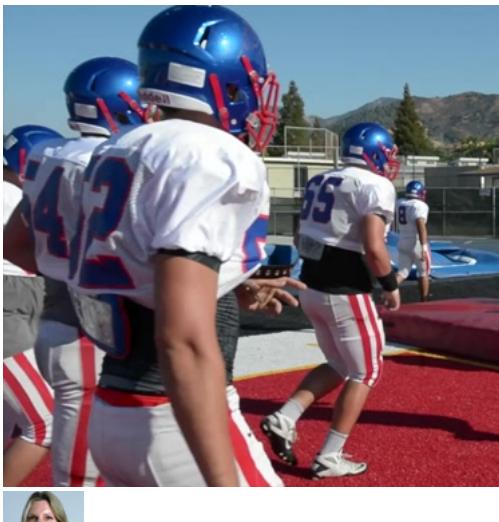
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