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BWW Reviews: New MAGIC FLUTE Full of Color and Wonder at SF Opera

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by Harmony Wheeler Print Article Email Link



Polka dots, neon and pastel colors, and innovative use of projector technology comprise a cheerful and vivid new production of Mozart's The Magic Flute, which premiered Wednesday night at the San Francisco Opera Memorial House. Although it sometimes lacks the dramatics needed to keep a strong momentum, the production makes a strong addition to a long line of creative takes on the opera. Plus, its nonsensical plot makes it the perfect opera to share with friends who do not regularly attend opera. San Francisco Opera General Director David Gockley's new modern English translation also adds to that note, although some audiences may miss the original German.

Designed for the entire family, the plot follows prince Tamino and his hilarious companion, the bird catcher Papageno, as they seek to rescue the beautiful Pamina, daughter of the proud Queen of the Night, who has been captured by the wise Sarastro. As Tamino and Papageno search for the women they will marry, they must prove themselves worthy of the women's love.

In the San Francisco Opera's magical new production, artist Jun Kaneko's drawings project on a large backdrop. His animated shapes make for an ever-changing background that keeps the plain scenery interesting. Although the projections are not quite as impressive once viewers get used to them, they provide a memorable background that leads as the true star of the production. They're also a huge step up from some of the poorly designed productions out there with sets straight out of cardboard and sloppy drawings.

While Kaneko's colors rarely match the plot or the setting of Magic Flute, they flow marvelously with Mozart's whimsical and lush music, particularly during the opera's opening moments. Drawing from a Japanese influence in style, they emphasize and complement Kaneko's equally colorful and shape-driven costumes, including some diva divine crowns that the Queen of the Night dons.

The opera comes very close to succeeding in a fashion similar to the Metropolitan Opera's most recent production of Magic Flute. That production featured amazing costumes and puppetry by Julie Taymor, as well as fantastical glass-like set pieces. Kaneko's costume and scenic designs do not have that same overwhelming "wow" factor, but they bring an upbeat, happy atmosphere not present in the Met's mostly dark scenery.

The good feeling that the projections and costumes create is deterred by a particularly slow second act, however, fostered by a few awkward scene transitions. As complete silence overtakes the stage, stagehands dressed in all black, including black face covers, move props on and off stage. Such instances feel more like rehearsal than world-class opera.

The first act has plenty of humor to keep it going, but even within that success, plenty of missed opportunities exist. Director Harry Silverstein gives the opera a traditional staging that does not stand up to par with Kaneko's nontraditional designs, and many of the Queen of the Night's entrances and exits lack much needed dramatic flourish. She does rise out of the ground with a bit of smoke at one point, but to little effect. Her acting, too, remains static and, for the most part, without emotion. And the character's final scene in which an earthquake defeats her makes very little sense without reading the synopsis.

Nathan Gunn, who sang the role of Papageno in the famed Met production, provides as strong a voice as ever for this new San Francisco Opera staging, but many of the fun facial expressions and uses of the stage that added humor to his Met performance were missing in Silverstein's staging. Thankfully, a wonderfully adorable scene where

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Papageno finally finds his perfect mate fills in the gap, as does Gunn's neon, checkerboard costume, all full of character.

Heidi Stober, who lent such a lovely voice to San Francisco Opera's Xerxes last fall, brings youth and vigor to Magic Flute's Pamina. Aside from [Albina Shagimuratova's](#) fabulous delivery of the Queen of the Night's high notes, Stober's vocals were the obvious standout of the two and a half hour opera.

Other notable performances come from the handsome Alek Shrader as Tamino, the devilishly funny Greg Fedderly as Monostatos, bass Kristinn Sigmundsson as Sarastro, and Melody Moore, Lauren McNeese, and Renee Tatum as the proud ladies who serve the Queen of the Night. A host of supporting singers in other, smaller roles, also lend consistent and strong vocals.

It's unfortunate that the pace and staging of this production do not live up to their full potential, but ultimately the San Francisco Opera production of The Magic Flute still boasts a wonderful cast and groundbreaking designs that make up a visual and musical feast any opera goer or even average music lover cannot help but enjoy immensely.

The Magic Flute

San Francisco Opera

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° A theater lover since childhood, Harmony Wheeler has done Marketing and Public Relations work for Sierra Repertory Theatre, Hillhouse Opera Company and other companies. She graduated with high honors from Biola University with her degree in Journalism and an emphasis in Public Relations. In addition to working for the Gallo Center for the Arts, MJM Entertainment Group, Biola University Marketing and Communications, 6th Street PR, and Zimbabwe Gecko Society, Wheeler has written for The Modesto Bee, The Chimes, Static MultiMedia, BullyPulpit.com, TUFW Alumnus Magazine, Christian Book Previews, The Christian Communicator, and Church Libraries Magazine. Her photos appear in The Dominican Dream, a book available for purchase through Biola University's Journalism Department. Her photography and video work can be found at <http://photographybyharmonywheeler.shutterfly.com/>. To learn more about Harmony Wheeler, or to contact her for work possibilities, visit www.harmonywheeler.com.

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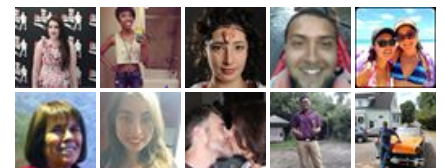
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