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# SFist Reviews: Attila, The Magic Flute, And Ojai North



*A ferocious Ferruccio Furlanetto in the title role of Verdi's Attila. All pictures SF Opera/Cory Weaver.*

Video enhancements are all the rage on staging nowadays, and of course opera isn't exempt of the fad. Case in point: both [Attila](#) and [The Magic Flute](#) at [SF Opera](#), which we saw on consecutive nights Friday and Saturday, prominently feature large screen with video projections. It was a tutorial in how to do it well, and how to do it poorly.

In [Attila](#), Verdi used the Hun barbarian of the 5th century as a metaphor for the Austrian oppressor of his time, the mid-18th century. So stage director Gabriele Lavia decided to set the first act in the historic time of Attila, in a destroyed Roman amphitheater; the second act happens in Verdi's time, in a run down theater, making the Hun-Austrian symbolism explicit. But the opera ends with a third act, so the next ride in the DeLorean takes us to a movie theater in the 1950s. Why, you ask? "*Our choice of the movie theater was influenced by recent barbaric Italian policies: many important theaters, that were also historical sites, were demolished or refashioned and turned into modern movie theaters,*" replies Lavia in an interview in the program book. Turning theaters into bowling alley, peep shows, churches, movie theaters, or gasp, [parking lots](#): those are the real outrage, the barbaric crime against humanity. Glad it's clarified. Let's fight evil, let's bring a Shakespearian troupe back into the market street cinema already. They'll get in the VIP lounge for free if they wear their name tags.



*The Sign of the Pagans dominates the stage*

The movie theater obviously features a huge screen, showing [Sign of the Pagans](#), with a slit through which the singers can enter the stage. But they are dwarfed by Jack Palance on screen, and the whole projection is visually way too distracting, you're totally drawn into a fierce battle scene with much more action than what's going on the stage. It's a bit unfortunate, as the sets are otherwise pretty to look at, and the stage direction is very efficient in moving a large number of figurants in and out briskly. And the cast is phenomenal: Ferruccio Furlanetto gives to the role of Attila a wonderful bass voice, proud, conquering, very powerful, but lyrical as well. His performance is unbelievable, single-handedly worth the price of admission. He shares with baritone Quinn Kelsey (as Ezio, his Roman nemesis) a testosterone laden bromance of a duet in the Prologue which would figure in the dictionary under vocal manliness. The love interest, Odabella, challenges them in terms of range, power and pitch accuracy, but with a slight metallic tinge to her voice. And in a cameo role of the Pope, comes in legendary bass [Samuel Ramey](#), his voice like the wind in a cavern. That's how Attila describes hearing him, we'll go with it. Ramey is not as good as in his high years, but quite impressive for a septuagenarian.



*Quinn Kelsey and Ferruccio Furlanetto.*

Attila is a rather unsubtle propaganda piece, with large chorus extolling the virtues and resilience of the Italian people. But second-grade Verdi is better than most opera nonetheless, and the SF Opera chorus (directed by Ian Robertson) just owns those large ensemble scenes. Maestro Nicola Luisotti's conducting match the testosterone-charged score.



*The animals designed by Jun Kaneko, charmed by Alek Shrader's magic flute.*

We feared [The Magic Flute](#) would be another example of video-as-distraction when a large screen at stage front displayed a colorful screensaver during the Overture. Not a 2d pipes screen saver exactly, but that's what the visual creation of the artist [Jun Kaneko](#) reminded us of. After the overture, the projections continued on the back wall and sides of the stage, but became rather unobtrusive, and quite efficient at hinting at a location, a mood or a time (say, sunrise). While at the same time being distinctly in the visual vernacular of Kaneko: stripes and dots and a few colors (light blue, cyan, magenta, mustard) over a white background. Jun attended a couple seats ahead of us, good naturedly interacting with other spectators. His daughter complimented our Marimekko shirt, they have an eye for stripes in the family.



*Nathan Gunn, disguised as a rubik's cube.*

There, the video allows for quick transitions, and really supports the action rather than take the attention away. Add a humorous English translation (by no one else than SF Opera general director David Gockley) which makes the spoken dialogue a lot less halting and ponderous, and a spiffy, inspired, light footed, Mozart-channeling conducting by Rory Macdonald in his SF debut, and this Magic Flute went by breezily.



*The Japanese monk aesthetic inspires the costumes. Kristinn Sigmundsson towers over them all.*

Again, it was an all star cast. Nathan Gunn reprises one of his most successful role as Papageno the bird catcher; Alek Shrader is not a big name yet, but we recall him fondly from his Merola and Adler Fellow days, and his voice is still as pretty. Another Merola alumni will take over the role (Nathaniel Peake, also singing Udino in Attila). Yep, Merola concerts (a new batch coming up this summer!) are truly where a thousand opera stars bloom. Kristinn Sigmundsson (also a recurring visitor on this stage) blows wind in the cavern too: a voice crawling out of a bottomless pit of wisdom.



*Hedi Stober (Pamina) and Albina Shagimuratova (The Queen of the Night) are having a mother-daughter chit chat about killing Sarastro. Or not.*

We can't fathom how Heidi Stober's voice can fill up the house oozing out of her tiny frame, it's against the laws of physics. She's wearing an Alice-in-Wonderland outfit that is darling. You know your supporting cast is deep when Melody Moore (the lead female singer in [Heart of a Soldier](#), and another former Adler) is one of the Three Ladies. The Queen of the Night has a smallish role, but the most famous aria of the opera with stratospheric and fiendish high notes, and Albina Shagimuratova nailed it.

**Ojai North at Cal Performances:** [Ojai](#) is a tiny city at the southern edge of the Los Padres national forest. Its claims to fame are its spiritual retreats, organic food and agriculture, and communion with nature. Add an annual contemporary [music festival](#) with world class artists, and this elitist hippieism does not seem too different from a post-performance dinner at Chez Panisse. Which probably is why the festival has been traveling up to Berkeley over the last few years, for a second run after the Ojai events hosted by [Cal Performances](#). Each year, a different artist curates the musical program: next year, dancer Mark Morris; the year after pianist Jeremy Denk. This year: Norwegian pianist [Leif-Ove Andnes](#), who put together a really intriguing Nordic Maverick program.



*Leif-Ove Andnes curated the Ojai Music Festival and its Ojai North sequel.*

Unfortunately, we could not make it to the first few concerts (the Ojai North festival ran over four days), catching only bits of last night performances. So we missed the rare performance of John Luther Adams' *Inuksuit* (this John Adams hails from Alaska, not to be confused with the Berkeley one); or *Im wunderschönen Monat Mai*, a palimpsest of a song cycle by the Dutch composer Reinbert De Leeuw based upon lieder from Schuman and Schubert; or the *Concord Sonata*, by Ives, performed by [Marc-Andre Hamelin](#).

What we saw was as eclectic all right. We should have heard a quite intense, quite dramatic violin concerto by the Icelandic composer Haflidi Hallgrímsson, but went to Zellerbach Hall instead of the more intimate Hertz Hall, arrived late and could not seat until it was over. But the piano concerto by [Bent Sørensen](#) (his second, named "La Mattina") was worth the East bay trek alone. Leif-Ove was the soloist, playing with the [Norwegian Chamber orchestra](#). The concerto depicts two musical arcs, a progression from the orchestra from the raw, gritty, almost dirty (imaging throaty flutes and offkey pitches and overly wide string vibrato and decadent glissandos) to a more refined sound; while the pianist travels from a deceptively simple, almost childish and naive, melodic piano line to as refined a sound as it gets: a few bars of a Bach chorale. A two-note melodic motif going down a half-step generates most of the material. Somehow, both piano and orchestra evolutions converge together and the progression seems almost natural, without artifice.

Mezzo-soprano Christianne Sotijn and Marc-Andre Hamelin went through Four Songs of Alban Berg, she with a dark, deep voice, and him with a restrained tasteful accompaniment. Andnes completed this program with Beethoven and a thrilling Waldstein sonata: full of enthusiasm and energy, especially in contrast with the rather dark Songs. The evening featured two concerts, a 7pm and a 9:30pm. Andnes opened the second one with Kurtág's Jatekok: short, Satie-esque pieces of apparent transparency which are so hard to deliver meaningfully. Andnes elicited appreciative noise from a seeing-eye dog who did not wait for the piece to end to comment. We left at this point to cross the bay back before bedtime, feeling slightly ashamed: Ojai crossed half the state from SoCal up to Berkeley, how dare we complain about crossing only a bridge.

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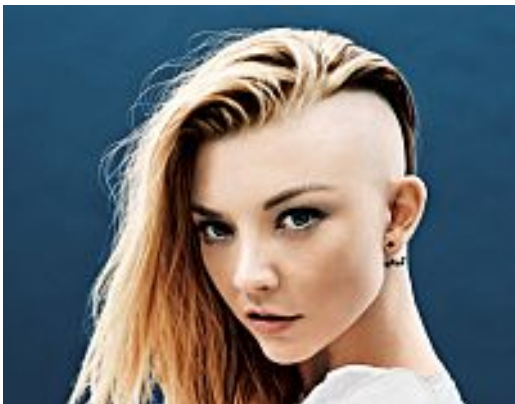
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Thanks, Cedric, for your review of Attila. I'm seeing it Saturday, so now I'm pumped up.

^ | v

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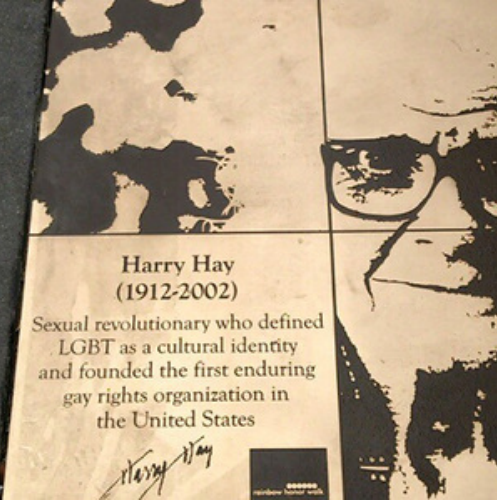
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