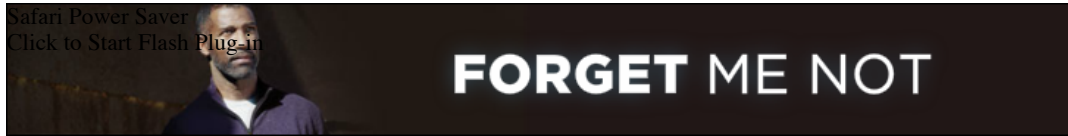


Music



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Washington National Opera offers 'The Magic Flute' in a color-saturated production



Scott Suchman for Washington National Opera - From left, John Easterlin as Monostatos, Kathryn Lewek as the Queen of the Night, Deborah Nansteel as Third Lady, Sarah Mesko as Second Lady and Jacqueline Echols as First Lady in the Washington National Opera's production of "The Magic Flute."

By Anne Midgett, Published: May 4 [E-mail the writer](#)

I have no statistics to back this up, but it's my impression that of all operas, "The Magic Flute" has a particular siren call to artists from other disciplines. Marc Chagall, David Hockney, Maurice Sendak, [William Kentridge](#) and Julie Taymor are among the best-known entrants in a long list of non-opera specialists who have tackled this, opera's ultimate fairy tale. So, ceramics artist Jun Kaneko, whose sets and costumes dominate the "Magic Flute" that opened at the Washington National Opera on Saturday night, is continuing an honorable tradition of visually dominated "Flutes," even if he told me, [in an interview days before the show](#), that he had no idea why artists were particularly drawn to this work.

Most people, including myself, might respond that "The Magic Flute," like all good fairy tales, offers a screen for our own archetypes [and projections](#). Make that five screens, in Kaneko's production (a co-production, already seen in San Francisco and Omaha), with a shifting array of video projections in a crayon-box palette of colors. Colored lines creep down and across the surfaces; blocks of color streak diagonally from right to left; circles of red, blue and yellow gently rotate, like poker chips suspended in a stream of air. In front of these, the characters appear in costumes as bright and simply shaped as baby toys.



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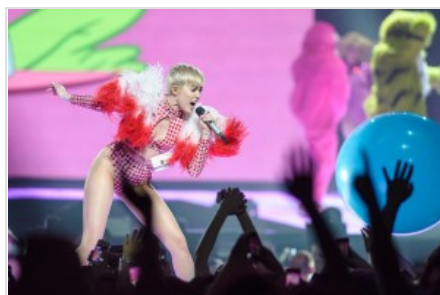
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There is no particular delineation to mark the narrative difference between one setting and another. Indeed, the emotional neutrality of Kaneko's imagery, which sets out to respond to Mozart's music more than to the opera's story, brings out one of the opera's central but not always highlighted themes: that the line between good and bad is not always clear, and that people are consistently prone to act emotionally rather than rationally, often working on far too little information and a willful resistance to considering the big picture.

Whether this was actually one of Kaneko's intentions is doubtful; certainly it was left entirely to the director, Harry Silverstein, and the singers to bring the characters to life and get the story across. They were aided by an English translation of the libretto by the company's dramaturge, Kelley Rourke, that often had the audience laughing at actual jokes rather than the hoary gag lines so common in opera "updatings."

"This seems like the work of a skillful designer," Tamino observed, looking at the projections outside Sarastro's temple and drawing titters from the auditorium. He added, "If the arts receive support here, chances are I will find a civilization that's both noble and kind" — at which the audience broke into applause.

A drawback to working in archetypes is that they can be a heavy mantle — literally — for a singer to wear. Kaneko's is not the first production in which I've seen the character of Sarastro — exacting and wise, loving yet strict and slightly mercurial — physically muted by an overlarge geometric costume (Achim Freyer's circus-themed production in Salzburg, Austria, some years ago is another example). Sarastro was sung, in Saturday night's cast, by Soloman Howard, one of the rising stars of WNO's Domingo-Cafritz program, who is in any case an emerging talent and sometimes prone to stiffness, though the beauty of his voice is unquestionable and steadily coming into focus.

Kaneko himself said, in the above-

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mentioned interview, that there is a risk of strong visuals overpowering the music; on Saturday night, however, WNO's singers — most of them making company debuts — managed at least a draw. Papageno is the figure perhaps least threatened by quirky costuming, since it's been a part of the character's conception since Mozart's day, and Joshua Hopkins offered a warm, robust singing voice in addition to lovable humor. (He also demonstrated extra unflappability and comedic reaction skills when, at the moment when Papageno is threatening to end it all, a person yelled, "Do it!" from the audience.)

Another standout was Maureen McKay as a Pamina in geometric blue dresses that evoked "Alice in Wonderland." Her soprano voice gained in warmth and flexibility as the evening continued, despite a brief hiccup that literally silenced her at the start of one ensemble, bringing the music to a complete stop until Philippe Auguin, the conductor, verbally ascertained that she could continue and got things back on track.

Joseph Kaiser is renowned for this particular role and presents a solid, handsome figure in it, though the top of his voice sounds overly nasal to my ear. And Kathryn Lewek matched her dramatic appearance with more than competent singing as the Queen of the Night. All four of the singers were appearing with the company for the first time, as was John Easterlin, who was often hard to hear as Monostatos.

A little more shaky were the two trios: Both the Three Ladies (Jacqueline Echols, Sarah Mesko and Deborah Nansteel, current and past Domingo-Cafritz program members) and the three young spirits failed to blend well, although the latter in particular may well improve as the run continues.

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Auguin has showed that he is a brilliant Wagnerian and only pretty good in some other repertoire. His "Flute" was perfectly competent if a little heavy, with a few infelicitous moments from the orchestra. It added up, though, to a feel-good evening, of which my own perceptions were definitely influenced by my companion, [a 10-year-old friend](#) who had never been to the opera and who remained involved from beginning to end. "I would definitely go to the opera again!" he said at the end of the night — a judgment that may carry considerably more weight than a critic's.

'The Magic Flute'

Continues through May 18, with two alternating casts; the second of them, with Paul Appleby and four other notable debutants in the leading roles, will perform Monday night.

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BrianPM wrote:

5/5/2014 11:39 AM CDT

Tamino's observation about funding for the arts was especially ironic Saturday night: Newt Gingrich and his wife were sitting in about the third row center. Did anybody see their reaction? His Contract with America proposed slashing the National Endowment for the Arts by 50 percent, if I remember right.

All in all it was a great show.



nlbethesda wrote:

5/5/2014 10:37 AM CDT

I attended the Saturday evening simulcast performance at the Nationals Stadium. It was truly fantastic. From where we were seated, we could see the high-def mega-screen with no problem. As big as this screen is, the clarity was as good as our HD tv at home. I was totally amazed. And then the sound quality was perfection. Our only problem was that the subtitles were a bit too small and were not always in sync with the performance.

The opera: I had never seen a performance of The Magic Flute before so have nothing to compare this one to, but I was thrilled and enjoyed every minute of this more modern interpretation in English with lots of humor thrown-in. The Japanese-inspired costuming was stunning. The singing and performances were first rate and went way beyond my expectations. And that this was all presented free to the public made me feel even better about being there. I think this is the 6th year of the stadium simulcast and I hope there are many more to come. We will certainly make sure we go again.



DGP999 wrote:

5/4/2014 4:35 PM CDT

I was also at the Saturday evening performance, and thought it was totally captivating. I've seen lots of Magic Flutes in my time - the Sendak and Hockney productions that Midgette mentions, among 5 or 6 others - and I'm not sure I've seen one that I've enjoyed more than this one. I agree with the comments on the singing - and for my money, Auguin had the orchestra sounded light and exciting. five stars from me

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