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'Magic Flute' winds up Jun Kaneko's (intense, nonstop, decade-long) jaunt into opera

WRITTEN BY



Anne Midgette

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[E-mail the writer](#)

Jun Kaneko is a ceramics artist, a sculptor, a painter, a maker of public art — and an opera designer. The last is a kind of aberration, a blip on his career radar. To date, he has created sets and costumes for three operas: "Madame Butterfly" (2006), "Fidelio" (2008), and "The Magic Flute" — in a co-production with the San Francisco Opera, Opera Omaha, and the Washington National Opera — which will, after performances at the other two houses, come to the Kennedy Center on Friday. (It will also be broadcast live that night at Nationals Park, one of the company's "Opera in the Outfield" performances.)

Kaneko, 71, was born in Japan but has lived in the United States since the 1960s; for the past 24 years, he has been based in Omaha, where he staged his first opera production. His colorful "Magic Flute" is a technical tour de force, with continuous video imagery weaving through the onstage action, coming from a battery of projectors: more than 1,000 distinct media clips. Last week, Kaneko spoke by phone to Anne Midgette about his foray into opera.



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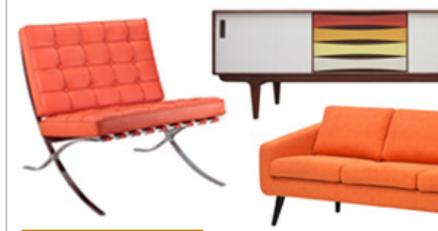
"Magic Flute" set sketch by Jun Kaneko. (Courtesy of Kaneko Studio/Courtesy of Kaneko Studio)



The Washington National Opera's "The Magic Flute" with set design by Jun Kaneko. (Cory Weaver/For the San Francisco Opera)

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"Actually, I am not an opera fan. I had never been to an opera before I designed 'Madame Butterfly,' the first opera I designed for Opera Omaha [in 2006]. When they came to ask me, I thought, 'They are kidding me.' . . . At that time I was already over 60 years old. At 60, having this kind of opportunity that I have no idea what I could do, it is scary — but it is a fantastic opportunity if they are willing to take a chance with me. So I thought about it, and two months later I said I would like to try. I still consider

myself a real amateur. I have no idea about opera, close to zero. . . . Just because I started to design the opera didn't really increase my curiosity for opera that much."

"My approach to design in opera: I try to keep myself as empty as possible and just listen to the music. Usually it takes me two to three months to get some kind of visual image coming out, just listening. I listen to the opera two to three times a day. Then I start drawing from memory, and keep doing it for a month, and then look at it. I see two or three design directions, and pick one or two, and start developing them, and compare and evaluate, and then pick one I think is probably good. Sometimes, three months into it, I think I have a better way of doing it, and scrap everything. [This happened with] every one of the [operas I've designed], unfortunately."

"My approach is a little different from other designers. I really believe opera begins with the music; video can help, but [you don't want] too much. . . . This is the struggle of a visual artist: how to make it meaningful visually. If you have too much video it will start affecting the music."

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Queen of the Night Act 1 costume sketch by Jun Kaneko. (Courtesy of Kaneko Studio/Courtesy of Kaneko Studio)

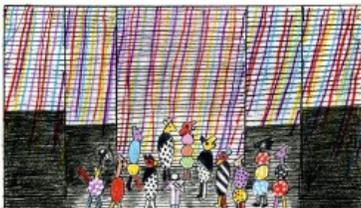


Queen of the Night in the San Francisco Opera's "The Magic Flute." (Cory Weaver/For the San Francisco Opera)

“**Madame Butterfly**’ took me 3 1/2 years. That’s every day putting in 10 hours, nonstop. Once I made a commitment, I didn’t want to make a bad mistake and have lots of people get upset about it. So the first thing I did is try to back up and see what this thing is that I’m dealing with. Basically, everything that happens within the stage opening and on the stage is a visual statement that the designer can control. That involves movement, lighting and obviously design. The problem is, it keeps on changing. A singer moves from the center of the stage to stage left a little bit, [and] it completely changes. The lighting designer changes a little bit, everything changes. To make it [work] every second is the amazing concentration and challenge of it.”

“**[With] ‘Butterfly,’ [at the] very beginning**, it took me a long time to understand real basic things. Most stage designers would take 10 minutes to figure it out; it took me two, three months. “The Magic Flute’ is the third one. I’m not saying I’m getting expert at doing it, I still am struggling, but real basic issues I have a pretty good understanding of. Still, “The Magic Flute’ took me three years.”

9/28 44-15-D1-07-04 (20:15) 55-07-57-05 (1:18) ⑦



"Magic Flute" set sketch by Jun Kaneko. (Courtesy of Kaneko Studio/Courtesy of Kaneko Studio)



The Washington National Opera's "The Magic Flute" with set design by Jun Kaneko. (Cory Weaver/For the San Francisco Opera/For the San Francisco Opera)

“**I wanted to have ‘The Magic Flute’ come out as a whole**, one statement. It’s a continuous presentation of the music that I hear. The biggest challenge is to find a beautiful flow from the beginning to the end, visually. Each moment has to make sense [as] part of that entire

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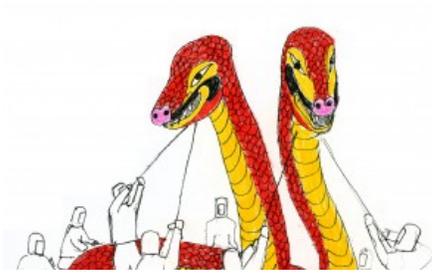
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opera. ‘The Magic Flute’ has a seven-minute overture at the beginning. . . . I think this is a great chance for a visual artist to take advantage, to add a visual part, to make an interesting visual translation of the music. So that was the first thing I started to do. And I never thought I would get into full-time video projection [through the whole opera].”

“**The story itself**, I don’t think it’s anything really surprisingly new or different. It’s pretty much an opera story. I’m more interested in dealing with the visual aspect of it.”



Snake sketch by Jun Kaneko. (Courtesy of Kaneko Studio/Courtesy of Kaneko Studio)



The Washington National Opera’s ‘The Magic Flute’ with set design by Jun Kaneko. (Cory Weaver/For the San Francisco Opera)

“**In the studio I do lots of different media, back and forth.** Some projects take two or three years, and I do smaller things in between. I am usually doing 10 things at the same time. When it comes to opera, I can’t do [this]. I have to totally focus on it. I really believe opera is one continuous flow. . . . I can’t have any conceptual interruptions while I am doing it, so once I start, I just have to stay with it and go through. I can’t understand it, but that’s the way I am.”

“**Three operas took me almost 10 years.** I still consider myself a studio artist. I started to say to myself, ‘What am I doing?’ I had a great time, but this is it. Actually, some opera company has been asking me [about doing another opera]. I said no, definitely, I can’t do it. It’s a really fantastic opportunity — I wish I knew how to do both, but I don’t. I’m very careful not to get involved again so I don’t have to be out of the studio for another three years. It’s very tempting, but right now, for me, it’s unrealistic.”

“**The experience of designing in the opera** really added an amazing design point of view in my visual art. Opera is definitely everything: sound, lights, space, just the whole natural world on the stage. If I’m doing a painting, a painting is a painting, a flat surface. I don’t worry about the back side of

the canvas. So it's a completely different thing. [The influence of opera on my studio art] will come out, but you might have to wait about 10 years to see it."

"The Magic Flute" runs to May 18 at the Kennedy Center Opera House.

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DGP999 wrote:

5/4/2014 8:33 AM CDT

Opening night last night was a total triumph (imho). The sets and costumes really do have to be seen to be appreciated fully - I have seen perhaps a half-dozen Flute productions in my life (including some great ones), but none comes close to this one, visually. The singing ranged from the very good to the outstanding, and best of all, Phillippe Auguin's conducting was simply perfect - precise and exciting and well-paced. Can't remember ever hearing this orchestra sound better.

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