

English translation spoils Mozart opera

By Avigdor Zorom
special writer

Detroit area audiences were recently treated to another seasonal visit by the Metropolitan Opera of New York. Here is an account of two of the seven presented, "The Magic Flute" and "The Barber of Seville."

To begin with, there are different kinds of opera audiences who enjoy opera for different reasons and there's no way to appeal to all of them.

My personal view is that an opera should be presented as authentically as possible to reflect the composer's wishes. Unlike reading a suspense story where the plot unfolds before a curious reader, opera isn't geared to unfold a drama to a viewer who is unaware of it beforehand.

In this context, there is an eternal debate of the merits of an original versus a translated version.

"The Magic Flute," whose original language is German, was presented here in English translation, conducted by Julius Rudel.

"Barber," on the other hand, was sung in the original Italian, conducted by Andrew Davis. Even though I am not among the fortunate who understand Italian, I found the performance of "Barber" to be more artistically satisfying and pleasing.

THERE ARE SEVERAL ways to deal with the language barrier. Ideally, of course, it would be desirable if more people in this country knew more foreign languages, which could prove useful in other areas besides music.

review

A more practical solution for most, however, would be to buy a complete libretto (original and translated) before the performance. Indeed, such an opportunity is available for the affordable price of \$3.

The problem with this solution, however, is that during the performance one is prevented from using the printed pages because of the darkness, and even if one had the foresight to bring a flashlight, reading the libretto would cause one to miss the action on stage.

The method I find preferable is to study the opera from a recording, with accompanying libretto, without any distractions from the stage. This, of course, requires a much more substantial investment in time and money, and is one of several things that make full music appreciation a rather costly undertaking.

THE SINGLE, MOST serious deficiency in the performance of "The Magic Flute" was the ill-conceived adoption of the English translation. The principal characters, Tamino, portrayed by tenor David Kuebler, and Papageno, portrayed by Donald Gramm, both exhibited superb voices, rich in tone and color.

However, their singing constantly clashed with the hard English consonants, impeding the natural flow of the melody. While the range of Papageno's

role is actually that of a baritone, a genuine bass in the cost was expertly sung by John Macurdy (Sarastro).

Noteworthy also were Gail Robinson (Pamina) and Osceola Davis (Queen of the Night). The three ladies, portrayed by Loretta Di Franco, Ariella Bybee and Batyah Godfrey, were impressive when singing separately, but their voices didn't blend well together, possibly due to last minute changes in the cast as Di Franco substituted for Patricia Craig. While the scenery, designed by the renowned Marc Chagall, was truly impressive, the staging was not.

The plot of the opera is generally light and humorous. However, there are some tense moments, as in the scene of the trial by water and fire by Tamino and Pamina. In addition, there is the undisputed high quality of Mozart's music, which should have provided some counter-balance to the frivolity of the plot. In this performance, however, all of this was dissipated among the long spoken dialogues which seemed to command the center of attention.

IN CONTRAST, "Barber" sounded more the way a true, authentic opera should. While the plot is even more humorous than that of "The Magic Flute," not even having the pretense of drama or danger in it, there was a lot of artistic dignity in the performance. The principal characters, sung by Rockwell Blake as Count Almaviva and

Pablo Elvin as Figaro, were truly delightful. The famous Figaro tongue twister, "Largo ad Factotum," was very skillfully presented, with matching stage gestures. It would be inconceivable to attempt to perform it in any other language.

Unfortunately, it was sometimes drowned out by the orchestra. Loretta Di Franco, appearing in the relatively minor role as Bertha, the housekeeper, did shine through with her aria, "Il vecchietto," in the second act.

Sesto Bruscantini as Dr. Bartolo was delightfully amusing, but his bass voice was unfocused on many occasions. The staging, directed by David Sell, was most appropriate and convincing, often overcoming the language barrier.

One aspect that I found most disturbing had to do with the general behavior of the audience. Certain reactions during a performance, such as laughing at the funny lines or applauding after an impressive solo appearance, are acceptable.

However, constant and chronic coughing, sneezing and sneezing shouldn't be tolerated by a civilized audience. At one point, a man in the row behind me fell so fast asleep that his snoring literally obliterated the sounds from the stage. Only repeated disapproving looks prompted his companions to wake him up.

Given the choice, a visit to the Met in New York is far superior to hearing the company on tour.

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