

Young musicians' brilliance enhances performance

REVIEW: "THE MAGIC FLUTE" AT IU OPERA THEATER

By Clemens Matuschek

One way to evaluate the quality of a musical production is to ponder the question (although hypothetical in most cases): "Would the composer have liked it this way?" Regarding IU Opera Theater's latest production of "The Magic Flute," this writer assumes both Mozart and Schikaneder would have enjoyed how their work was presented – but for different reasons.

As far as Schikaneder is concerned, stage director Vincent Liotta definitively stresses the aspects associated with the humorous librettist who insisted on playing the public's darling "Papageno" in the premiere in 1791. Some of the scenes, like Papageno's encounter with the evil Monostatos, can truly be called slapstick and are staged as such by Liotta. This certainly pleases the crowd and makes going to this production a potentially entertaining family event. The Egyptian-flavored sets and fancy special effects – like a luminescent magic flute, red wine turning into water, and wild creatures, all designed by Robert O'Hearn – contribute to this lighthearted approach. So does the eye-catching lighting from Michael Schwandt who found convincing solutions for the technically challenging fire-and-water trial.

Alas, some of the deeper meanings of the piece – not just in terms of Freemasonry, but general virtues – are overseen and get lost along the way. Obviously, some people prefer "Mozart light." There is no better metaphor for this malaise than the cell phone that went off during Act II, tootling a degenerated "Little Night Music."

But the true heart of the opera, unaffected by any kind of staging, is Mozart's terrific music, augmenting this production from entertaining to impressive. Indeed, Friday night's performance left not much to be desired in this regard. Successfully conveying the tonal message is the merit of the inspiring conductor, Uriel Segal, the precise and sonorous IU Chamber Orchestra, and an excellent cast.

This large-scale opera features some of the most demanding arias in operatic literature, and it was thrilling to see how competently the young talents on stage handled them. Tenor Jordan Bluth as Tamino certainly left the strongest mark, turning the "Bildnisarie" ("This picture is wondrously beautiful") into the highlight of the evening.

Vera Savage as Tamino's beloved Pamina also proved convincing; especially heart-moving in the scene of attempted suicide ("Ah, all is lost").

Technically even more challenging are the coloratura arias of the Queen of the Night and the low, almost infrasound tones sung by Sarastro. Haggard Leibovich managed to hit all the notes in the Queen's "vengeance aria" superbly, but failed to connect them to a musical phrase. On the other side, John Huckle as Sarastro succeeded in this task, but lost quite a bit of his vocal power in the low regions, and sometimes even the rhythm.

The figures of Papageno and Papagena are less complicated vocal parts and put more emphasis on nonmusical acting. Baritone Chris Carducci and soprano Laura Stelman portrayed them vividly, with all the slapstick features as well as the necessary vocal abilities. Also amply applauded: the three young genies (Tony Ponella, Nick Heinzen, Adam Nichols) and the three flirtatious ladies of the Queen of the Night (Rachel Fulton, Ann Sauder, Sarah Mabary).

The only dissonance in the ear of this reviewer was the fact that the opera was sung in English. All over the world, the tendency seems to go to performing operas in their respective original language – neither for the sake of it, nor because it satisfies picky critics, but because it just sounds better. Now that IU has this wonderful supertitle screen, why not use it for the purpose of translation instead of explanation (which only spoils punch lines anyway)?

This criticism, however, does not derogate the impressive achievement of staging this full-scale opera in such a superb way. It is always striking to see what young musicians and singers accomplish, and what amazing level of technique, expression, and intensity they can reach. This is why not only Schikaneder but also Mozart would have been proud of them.