

Lyric Fest: Three operas for children

Opera for kids meets 'Anxious Parent Syndrome'

Tom Purdom

May 01, 2012 in *Music & Opera*



Beam: Practice, practice!

Everyone who values the Classical music tradition agrees that we must cultivate audiences if the tradition is to survive. The Lyric Fest song series supports that noble cause with an annual children's concert, which has become one of the gems of its schedule.

The children's events have succeeded partly because Lyric Fest's three artistic directors are all mothers. Mezzo-soprano Suzanne DuPlantis says they always run their selections past their own children to see what works.

In the past, the Lyric Fest children's concerts have been variety shows unified by a common theme. The children were wooed with a cavalcade of songs, arias and ensemble works in a variety of styles and moods. If a number didn't

catch their fancy, it would be replaced by something new before they had time to start fidgeting.

This year, Lyric Fest opted for a riskier format, presenting three "mini-operas" drastically abridged versions of *The Barber of Seville*, *The Magic Flute* and *Hansel and Gretel*.

Clowning with a box

The afternoon got off to a good start with actor Jake Miller engaging in some inspired clowning with a box while Laura Ward played the overture to *The Barber of Seville* on the piano. Miller's attempts to move the box included a moment when he tried to lift it while he stood on top of it. Whenever he retired from the stage in frustration, a female member of the cast entered through a rear door and moved it without any effort.

The scripts for the three abridgements were genuinely witty, with a steady stream of hi-jinks, audience participation bits and references to fairy tales and children's literature. The demise of the Queen of the Night in *The Magic Flute* deliberately resembled the end of the Wicked Witch in *The Wizard of Oz*.

The musical treats included baritone Markus Beam's rousing "Figaro" aria, *Largo at factotem*, from *The Barber of Seville* and soprano Abla Hamza's dark, lyrically romantic *Ach, ich Fuhl's* from *The Magic Flute*. Lyric Fest managed to pack 14 arias and ensemble pieces into a production that lasted about 80 minutes without intermission.

Nervous parents

But how did the children enjoy it? Did the mini-opera format succeed as well as the variety show format of previous years?

Many parents succumb to Anxious Parent Syndrome when they take children to cultural events. They watch their prodigies for signs that they're paying attention, and they fret if the poor kid misses an important musical moment because he studies a prop that's caught his attention.

I noted the problem when I was a working parent and did my best to control it. When I took my seven-year-old son to the Art Museum, I didn't worry if the view of the passing trains, seen through the big windows, interested him more than the pictures. He was learning that art museums are fun places. He could concentrate on the pictures later.

But Anxious Parent Syndrome is a persistent condition that can flare up at any time, and I must confess that I succumbed to it during this event. Was the plot of *The Magic Flute* too complicated?

Could the kids follow the parts where the singers sang in a foreign language? Were they really listening or just being polite?

The grownups in the audience all obviously enjoyed themselves, which is always a good sign. Works that captivate children usually please adults, too. A few very small children had to be carried out when they started crying, but I didn't detect any of the shiftings and mutterings that indicate children would rather be somewhere else.

Years of preparation

The best clue may have been the questions the children asked during the brief Q & A that followed the performance. They mostly asked about the costumes and the props, but some of them had obviously found the whole circus intriguing.

The first question even triggered a good example of the extra-musical lessons classical music can communicate.

How long did you practice? a child asked.

They had practiced for three weeks, Suzanne DuPlantis said. But before that, all the people in the cast had practiced for years and years, so they could get to the point where they could produce a show in three weeks.

Every modern American child should hear that lesson as often as possible.



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ARTICLE OVERVIEW

Lyric Fest, run by three mothers, opted for a riskier format for its annual children's concert, introducing its young audience to three famous but abridged operas.

WHAT, WHEN, WHERE

Lyric Fest: "Once Upon a Time." Excerpts from Rossini, *The Barber of Seville*; Mozart, *The Magic Flute*; Humperdinck, *Hansel and Gretel*. Abla Hamza, Maggie Moliterno, Randi Marrazzo, Sheryl Woods, sopranos; Katherine Pracht, Suzanne

DuPlantis, mezzo-sopranos; Jeffrey Halili, tenor; Markus Beam, Daniel Pantano, baritones; Laura Ward, piano; Jake Miller, actor/narrator. Suzanne DuPlantis, Randi Marrazzo, Laura Ward, artistic directors. April 29, 2012 at Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, 8555 Germantown Ave. [\(215\) 438-1702](tel:2154381702) or www.lyricfest.org.

ABOUT TOM PURDOM



Tom Purdom (tompurdom@verizon.net) is a science fiction writer and general freelance writer who has been writing about music since 1988.