

Report from the Bregenz Festival of 2013

Mozart's *Magic-Flute* Afloat on Lake Constance

Who knew that Mozart's *Magic Flute* was really about three giant giraffe-like hounds' heads thrusting into the skies over the Bregenz Festival's great lake-stage on the *Bodensee*? What the festival planners did know was that they had already sold some 220,000 tickets to the 2013 summer festival. The fame of this eclectic opera and theatre festival has grown so great since its modest founding in 1946—in the disastrous wake of World War II—that its outdoor bleacher seating for music-theatre on the lake has been expanded to nearly 7,000 seats.

If you have never heard of Bregenz—Austria's western-most city, nestled between German Lindau and the Swiss border—you are missing one of central Europe's most delightful spots to spend your summer holidays, though its annual Festival attractions make it all the more an important destination. What's more, if you missed this summer's devil-dog *Zauberflöte*, it will be repeated in Summer 2014!

Austria's President Dr. Heinz Fischer Invokes the Festival Theme: *Toward the Light...*

The Bregenz Festival customarily opens with the festive arrival of Dr. Heinz Fischer, the popular President of Austria. Although he is always greeted with an honor guard from the Austrian armed forces, this smiling, genial democratic potentate is never swamped with men in black suits, protecting him from the similarly smiling crowd of Bregenzers and festival guests. Dr. Fischer takes time to shake hands, pat children on their heads—especially those dressed in the traditional costumes of Vorarlberg, and wave to the onlookers, before proceeding into the Festspielhaus for the lively opening ceremonies. Every summer so far, he has always struck an inspiring note. In July of 2013, he took his inspiration from the Enlightenment-inspired Festival theme: *Dem Licht entgegen*. While it is true that Mozart and his librettist, Emanuel Schikaneder, did endow Sarastro and his Temple of Reason with Masonic-inflected Enlightenment ideas, the necessarily abbreviated text didn't dwell on them this summer. Nonetheless, President Fischer used those ideals to castigate the United States for its failures to live up to them. He alluded to Vietnam, where he said the principles of Humanism and Democracy had been invoked in the fight against Communism. But, unfortunately, the means—torturing prisoners, fire bombings and other barbarities—were said to justify the ends. Currently, said Dr. Fischer, democratic states are using fighting terrorism—instead of fighting Communism—in the same way. This problem, Dr. Fischer observed, is *Uralt*—or Ancient—but it is still not solved.

Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*

If you thought you already knew what happens in *The Magic Flute*, guess again! There is nothing in Emanuel Schikaneder's adventure-packed libretto about three towering horned and fanged heads that look like mad cows after an outbreak of their very own bovine disease. Or maybe like devil-dogs or hell-hounds? As *The Magic Flute* is already a fantastic work of imagination, there is no historical period that can be invoked as a point of departure for designers and directors. Thus, set and prop designer Johan Engels has been able to draw upon a vast trove of mythic images, ably assisted by the ingenious costume designer Marie-Jeanne Lecca. Not only will those three-horned monsters loom over Lake Constance all winter long, but next summer, as during this, the lofty catwalks linking them will once again be thronged

with daring stunt men and furious flamings.

Time was when every Bregenz lake show would end with a burst of fireworks that could be seen as far away as Lindau harbor, although live flames onstage were a big *No-No: too dangerous*. Not so with this David Pountney directed *Zauberflöte*. In fact, during dress rehearsals, some of the set got scorched! Watching the fire technicians at work below the domed revolving stage, I was impressed with all the precautions taken, as well as with the flaming results in performance.

If you have already seen the Royal Shakespeare's *War-Horse*—in London, on Broadway, or On-Tour—you may have marveled at the construction and operation of the puppet horses. If you attend Bregenz in Summer 2014, you will surely be even more astonished when you see the Queen's three ladies riding magical steeds that look like those golden dinosaurs in Louis Vuitton window-displays. One dazzled spectator exclaimed to me how remarkable it was that these horsey sopranos could ride such boney mounts and sing at the same time. I had to disabuse her: "There's no one inside those masks. The singers are all inside the *Festspielhaus*. As is the entire orchestra!" As with *War-Horse*, what seem to be attendants for the ladies of the night are actually puppet handlers for their prehistoric rides. This is also true of the *Geharnischters*, those mysterious armored knights who guard Sarastro's sacred temple.



The Magic Flute by Mozart, directed by David Pountney at the Bregenz Festival. Photo: Anja Köhler

Unfortunately for the endangered species that can still eke out a living by reviewing live performances, the miracle of the internet—aided and abetted by Google, Facebook, and You-Tube—now makes it possible for any interested theatre and opera lover to see fantastic set photos, as well as live-action performances on your own home computer, your cell phone, your iPad, or even—very soon—on your wristwatch. So, it may well be a waste of time and effort to try to describe sets, costumes, action sequences, and vocal

excellence in mere words. Hear Pamino sing for yourself! Don't take my word for it!

At Bregenz, with the previous *Aida* and *André Chenier* stagings, what were actually intimate scenes were spread out across the wide, wide lake-stages specially designed for those operas. For *Zauberflöte*, however, Johan Engels has concentrated the varied actions on the green-domed revolving stage and up above on the dragon-hound catwalks. But, as the Bregenz stage is always a bit separated from the audience by a bit of the *Bodensee*, there always has to be some kind of boat drifting by. Engels provides this effect ingeniously and repeatedly for *Zauberflöte*. You've heard of the underground railway? Well, he's created an underwater railway, which he and tech-master director Gerd Alfons call an underwater *carousel*. Unseen by the spectators—but lurking just below the *Bodensee* surface—is a circular rail-track, onto which spectacular set elements can be lowered backstage to cruise into audience view. One of these is a long funeral boat, bearing the coffin of the Queen of the Night's late husband, previous owner of the Magic Flute and an enchanted set of chiming bells—or a *Glockenspiel*, depending on the designer's whim. Then there's a gleaming giant turtle on which Pamina appears, encased in glass. Not to overlook that giant golden hand on which Tamino makes a watery journey. The three mysterious *Knaben*—those girl sopranos who advise Tamino at various stages, protecting him from some of the over-reachings of the Queen of the Night, also get a free turtle ride.

Tamino's hilarious side-kick, Papageno—a comic *tour-de-force* Schikaneder designed for himself—appears in a seeming jungle of waving green fronds. These are inflatable fabric forms, with changing colored lights from below. His fantastic headgear is composed of various bottle-brushes and an orange traffic-cone. He's also dragging along bags of plastic bottles ready for recycling. Papageno has a lot of *Singspiel* chatter to share with the audience, but since the show has to play only two-hours-plus—with no intermission—a lot of dialogue has had to be cut. But, as with Wagner-for-kids at Bayreuth, all the important musical moments are here! When Papageno's longed-for Papagena first appears—like an Old English tea-cart lady, with a piled-up teacup headgear, worthy of Walt Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*—her costume is almost more interesting than her performance.

For the Bregenz lake-stage, major roles are usually triple cast. For the record: I saw and heard Alfred Reiter [Sarastro], Norman Reinhardt [Tamino], Eike Wilm Schulte [Sprecher], Ana Durlowski [Queen], Gisela Stille [Pamina], Daniel Schmutzhard [Papageno], Dénise Beck [Papagena], and Martin Koch [Monostatos], among others. Patrick Summers conducted the *Wiener Symphoniker*, with the Prague Philharmonic Chorus—all inside the *Festspielhaus*. The power of the presence of the Queen of the Night and her throat-ravishing arias simply could not be electronically relayed from inside. At her most climactic moment, she is thrust high aloft on a pillar, from the center of the revolve, where she can still sing so she could shatter your eardrums. As for Tamino and Pamina actually successfully passing the trials of fire and water, stunt-doubles instead walked through real flames high up on the catwalks, while other white-clad doubles walked off the stage, down into the water, disappearing below! Truly harrowing to watch.

André Tchaikovsky's *Der Kaufmann von Venedig*

Not so long ago, the Bregenz Festival premiered Weinberg's *Der Passagier*, a previously-unknown Auschwitz-centered opera, by a previously-unknown Eastern Jewish-Soviet composer. Would Polish-Jewish composer André Tchaikovsky's *Der Kaufmann von Venedig* prove another such discovery? In the event, not really, although a reprise of this expensively-mounted staging was promised for Poland, which

also provided extensive lobby displays dealing with the plight of Jews in the arts in Occupied Poland during the Nazi Occupation. What was especially curious about this Bregenz premiere was that it was scheduled for only three performances during the Festival: the opening night and two weekend-matinées.

André Tchaikovsky was no relation to the great Peter of the same name, but was born Robert Krauthammer. His misfortune was to be born a Polish Jew, shortly before the Nazis began rounding up Warsaw Jews and confining them in the infamous Warsaw Ghetto. Fortunately, his grandmother rescued him by dressing him up as a very blonde little girl. Ultimately, he made his way to England, making a very successful career as a concert pianist. Clearly a prodigy, he was both admired and mentored by such greats as Nadia Boulanger and Artur Schnabel. But his Dream was to succeed as a composer, for which he had little spare time. In fact, he seems to have worked on his *Merchant* opera off and on until his death, in 1982, in Oxford.

Apparently, he had hopes that an opera director of the caliber of David Pountney—who first made his name at the English National Opera—would want to stage *Merchant*, but the project was turned down even by the Leeds Opera, hardly comparable to the ENO. Perhaps now that Pountney is completing his tenure as *Intendant* of the Bregenz Festival, he is trying to make it up to Tchaikovsky by not only staging *Merchant* but also by programming his settings of Shakespeare sonnets and other works.

Obviously André Tchaikovsky was fascinated by the character of the money-lender Shylock—a despised Jew in Renaissance Venice. The major problem with this *Merchant* is not that it has been awkwardly adapted for the opera stage, but that its pounding, thumping, dissonant score is not really very *singable*. That the staged version opens with a troubled Antonio having a session with Dr. Sigmund Freud seems an odd invention. Possibly he is disturbed that he has been cast as a counter-tenor? Christopher Ainslie made this Antonio something of a lightweight, but given his bizarre desires, the Shylock of Adrian Eröd was oddly compelling. That cannot really be said of the Christian Venetians, a smug lot.



Der Kaufmann von Venedig by Andre Tchaikowsky, directed by David Poutney at the Bregenz Festival.
Photo: Karl Forster

Quite aside from the challenges of the score, the stage direction of Keith Warner was highly eccentric. The most egregious of his visual innovations was his staging of the famous scene of the gold, silver, and lead caskets, in which three suitors vie for the hand of Portia. For some reason, Warner chose to set this in an English maze, with a slanting mirror above so that the audience could see all the supposedly hilarious hi-jinx that were going on in and out of the maze. Then, instead of three small caskets, with important contents inside, what looked like three large outhouses—resembling gold, silver, and lead refrigerators—were mounted at three points on top of the maze. When the first suitor made the wrong choice, the door of that outhouse was left hanging open, surely a cue to his successor that that giant casket was out of play!

Meanwhile, Portia and Nerissa—back from saving Antonio’s heart from Shylock’s knife—were lounging in the foreground in lawn chairs, savoring cocktails, just like fashionable ladies in a Noël Coward farce. Well, actually Nerissa [Verena Gunz] was typing up some stuff for Portia [Magdalena Anna Hofmann]. Shylock’s Venice—as imagined by designer Ashley Martin-Davis—seemed to be made of walls of safety-deposit-boxes. Somewhere in the proceedings there were Hitler Youths and echoes of the Spanish Inquisition. Even Marlene Dietrich was evoked. Nonetheless, there was a touching love-idyll between the Jew’s runaway daughter, Jessica [Kathryn Lewek] and Lorenzo [Jason Bridges].

Erik Nielsen valiantly conducted.

Speaking & Singing Shakespeare’s Less-Loved Sonnets...

David Pountney was not content to celebrate André Tchaikovsky with an expensively staged production of his only opera. He also made apparent psychic amends by personally introducing the Tchaikovsky Shakespeare sonnet cycle and reading aloud selected sonnets—none of them the most memorable—in English, arranging also to have them read in German by an actress in the Bregenz Theatre ensemble. As a Prelude, Polish pianist Maciej Grzybowski played ten inventions that Tchaikovsky had composed, each to specially salute personal friends. After the Sonnet-Readings, Grzybowski accompanied soprano Urszula Kryger, whose task it was to sing the lyrics. This she did more or less *between* the crashing chords of the settings.

It is interesting that David Pountney—who also is *Intendant* of the Welsh National Opera—does not plan to import his *Merchant* to Cardiff.

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