

## 'Magic Flute' at the Straz updates the Mozart classic

- By Jim Harper, Tampa Times Correspondent

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Photo by Rob-Harris

Aaron St. Clair Nicholson plays Papageno (the bird catcher) and Claire Coolen is Papagena in the Opera Tampa production.

In a cavernous space in the backstage recesses of the Straz Center, two singers, a stage director, a conductor and a rehearsal pianist go over a scene again and again. • How should the singers move? (For opera singers must be actors, too.) How does one of them telegraph his transformation from confidence to fearful acquiescence? How does she, singing the first of her two incredibly difficult arias, maintain her poise, her dominance, while carefully regulating her breath? How much sexual tension should there be? How should their steps flow with the music?

Such was the scene last week when artists were preparing for Opera Tampa's Friday premiere of *The Magic Flute*.

To many listeners, scholars and critics, Mozart's next-to-last opera is his most sublime theatrical achievement — a perfect marriage of musical form and human character. Throw in an aspiring lover, a devious queen, a mysterious priest, a bumbling bird catcher, a princess, and a musical instrument that can guide a person through danger, and you've got a show.

While the music has not changed in more than 200 years, each successful staging of it must be fresh. Eating a prerehearsal sandwich last week, the opera's artistic director, Daniel Lipton, discussed his approach.

The music of *The Magic Flute* is florid sometimes, as in the Queen of the Night's first aria mentioned above. Other times it has a stately elegance, a distilled purity, that fits the composer's use of Masonic ritual to bring order out of confusion, truth to light.

The juxtaposition of these opposites is so rich and nuanced that it may strike a listener differently each time he hears it. The same goes for performers.

"It should be different every time," Lipton said. "Not unrecognizably different — I mean the valleys are the valleys and the mountains are the mountains. But I tell my singers, try and watch me, and let's invent together. Let's improvise. Not completely, of course. ...

"I try to get the feeling that we're composing it on the moment, so that (the expression) is fresh."

To further enliven the production, Lipton has brought in a longtime colleague, choreographer **Ariela Siegert**, to be the stage director. The two worked together on many productions when Lipton was conducting opera, orchestral music and ballet in Germany.

"There is nothing in it that I've ever seen before," Lipton said of Siegert's most recent conception.

Siegert, who has directed more than 40 operas over the past 15 years, proposed that the stage action begin in the hero-prince Tamino's bedroom. "So you have his bed, you have his night table, you have a wardrobe. Pamina (the princess) comes out of the cupboard with a suitcase. She's furious with Tamino; he's a prince, a snob and he's arrogant. So she can't stay with him. She leaves. And so everything after that (including the conventional start of the opera) is Tamino's dream."

All the costumes except for the high priest Sarastro and the Queen of the Night are contemporary. Papageno the bird catcher, for example, will wear a Hawaiian shirt and Bermuda shorts.

"It's not the usual by any means," Lipton said. "But I think because of the freshness of the approach, it becomes magical."

By Kurt Loft, Tribune correspondent

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## Opera Tampa still spins magic after all these years

Nearly two decades ago, **Judy Lisi** sat at a table in a crowded Tampa restaurant, picking at her lunch salad. “What do you think of the idea of opera in Tampa?” she asked. “Of having a company of our own?”

Her visionary question would soon be answered. In 1996, after much effort and encouragement, the curtain rose on Opera Tampa and its inaugural, home-grown production of “Madama Butterfly.”

A second season followed, then a third, and soon the resident company of the then-Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center rode on its own artistic momentum.

But the real work had just begun.

“We had to build an audience,” says Lisi, a former opera singer who served as general manager of the New Haven Opera Company before taking over Tampa’s arts center in 1992. “And to survive as an opera company you have to keep building your audience.”

Opening its 19th season this weekend with its inaugural production of Mozart’s “Magic Flute,” Opera Tampa not only has found its faithful, but draws younger audiences through the cross-over appeal of touring Broadway shows. These cash cows help subsidize opera produced by the Straz Center, such as the recent musical theater adaptation of Gershwin’s “Porgy and Bess.”

This balance, although controversial, underscores the economics behind these expensive endeavors. Although “Magic Flute” might come close to selling out its two performances, ticket sales on average account for less than 40 percent of production costs. The rest has to come from somewhere else — or opera dies like an Italian diva.

“Opera as an art form will always go through these challenges,” Lisi says. “But as long as we get the support, if we get the funding and people buy tickets, we’ll continue.”

Artistically, Opera Tampa grew at the hands of conductor **Anton Coppola**, who in 2012 retired after 17 years at the podium. At 95, the rigors of rehearsals, travel, and live performances became too much. Coppola also gave the company its most rewarding moment: the world premiere in 2001 of his own opera “Sacco & Vanzetti,” which drew international media attention.

Coppola handed the baton to **Daniel Lipton**, formerly of Opera Ontario, who hopes to strike a balance between the popular and adventurous. This season, Lipton opts for the former as he leads the company in “Magic Flute”; a potpourri of opera and Broadway nuggets called “Popera!” next weekend; and in the return of Bizet’s “Carmen” in March.

Lipton believes such conservative or repetitive fare (this will be the company's third production of "Carmen") speaks to Tampa audiences. Such works as Weber's "Freischutz," Janacek's "Cunning Little Vixen," or even an early opera by Wagner, will have to wait. Next season, however, Lipton takes a chance by staging a new production of Andrea Chenier's "Giordano."

"I ran an opera company in Canada, and when thinking about a new season demographics always came into play," he says. "But choosing the operas here is very much left in my hands. I discuss my choices with the board and present my ideas, and Judy is always very accommodating. She goes along with my suggestions."

Lisi says Opera Tampa has to play it safe until it can afford to take chances without losing money or support from core subscribers who like a steady diet of Verdi and Puccini.

"We really have to stay with the ABCs," she says. "Even when we've done Puccini's lesser-known works, it's been a challenge. So, we have to meet the audience where they are. People are comfortable with the familiar."

The same argument can be made with most regional opera companies across the country, which don't enjoy the government subsidies of their counterparts in Europe. Nor do they have the budget or tradition of larger companies like the Metropolitan Opera in New York. However, Lisi says the issue isn't so much about playing it safe with the same masterworks, but doing them better each time.

"We have to strive to do opera well or not at all," she says. "Because there's nothing worse than bad opera."

#### 'THE MAGIC FLUTE'

When: 8 p.m. today and 2 p.m. Sunday

Where: Straz Center, 1010 N. MacInnes Place, Tampa

#### More Information

### **What's so magical —and mystical — about Mozart's "Flute"?**

Mozart's completed "Magic Flute" in 1791, and five weeks later he was dead. It holds a special place in the hearts of opera lovers, regardless of its implausible story line about a prince in a mythical land. A German singspiel, or "spoken opera," it blends fairy tale and morality play, infectious tunes and noble choral numbers. The coloratura aria of the Queen of the Night is among opera's most acrobatic numbers.

Despite its uneven dramatic progress, an alluring mix of tonal styles propel the fantasy. Mozart's characters don't just sing, their depth of feeling builds into multilayered, emotional theater. Mozart's musical architecture develops with each character's importance, from

simple and vernacular (the character Papageno), to idealistic and dignified (Tamino and Pamina) to severe and religious (Sarastro).

A frivolous fairy tale unfolds in Act I, but intermission gives way to a tangle of symbolism, liturgical anthems, and mysticism. Listen carefully to the overture, as it opens with three commanding chords and introduces a series of fanfares that suggest points of action in the opera. Fanciful themes appear, and a fugue grounds the overture on a firm footing of musical order.

Those three opening chords are significant, as the magical number 3 was of deep importance to the Freemasons of Mozart's time (he was a member of their secret society). It can be found in references throughout the opera: the three ladies, the three priests, a snake cut into three pieces, the three doors the character Tamino opens, and even the three flats of the opera's home key of E-flat major.

Don't worry about understanding all the action. The characters will speak their dialogue in English and sing in German, with English translations projected above the stage.