

Annandale-on-Hudson

One of the thorniest and least loved of the Strauss-Hofmannsthal collaborations, *Die Ägyptische Helena* is saddled with a libretto that is considered by many to be overstretched and convoluted, one that did not draw from Strauss a consistent stream of inspired music. Its most famous and frequently excerpted passage, Helena's awakening scene at the beginning of Act 2, comes and goes all too quickly. But at this year's BARD SUMMERSCAPE festival, *Die Ägyptische Helena* received an insightful staging by Christian Räth and a powerhouse performance from the conductor Leon Botstein and his cast that overcame many of the work's difficulties.

In a programme note, Räth posited his take on the work as possibly the first 'surrealistic' opera, one in which 'logic and rationality seem almost deliberately suspended. [...] The key to making sense of the opera may actually be to stop trying to grasp it intellectually and instead allow it to unfold as an emotional and psychological journey.' He sees the sorceress Aithra as the driver of the story and, in effect, the director of her own dream from her own enchanted 'dream factory'. It's not a huge leap from here to elements of classic Hollywood film-making, which Räth and his creative team subtly alluded to in their production with silhouettes, projections, tones of black, white and grey, and shadowy lighting schemes. Epitomizing this was their Aithra, Jana McIntyre, projecting the old-school glamour and charisma of Hedy Lamarr. She sang the difficult role with her penetrating, characterful lyric instrument, skilfully negotiating its trills and staccato runs while moving with the grace of a dancer—rendering this a star-making performance.

Räth co-designed the impressive production with his frequent collaborator Daniel Unger, continuing the high level of work they produced together on other Bard SummerScape productions including *Das Wunder der Heliane*, *Die schweigsame Frau* and *Le Prophète*. Among the

OPERA IN THE USA

- 1475 **Annandale-on-Hudson**
- 1477 **Chicago**
- 1480 **Cincinnati**
- 1484 **Des Moines**
- 1488 **Katonah**
- 1489 **Laguna Beach**
- 1490 **Lenox**
- 1492 **Napa**
- 1493 **New York**
- 1497 **Oakland**
- 1499 **Portland, ME**
- 1501 **St Louis**
- 1505 **Vienna, VA**

OPERA
NEWS



Jana McIntyre as Aithra in 'Die Ägyptische Helena' at Bard

memorable costume designs by Mattie Ullrich were a black skin-tight dressing-gown for Aithra, trenchcoats and fedoras for a phalanx of Hollywood photographers, and the expected off-the-shoulder toga for Helena. Tyler Micoleau's film noir lighting effects were a key element, as were the projections by the video designer Elaine J. McCarthy, which incorporated ancient Greek and Egyptian motifs.

Despite the overall high level of R  th's concept and execution, he fell victim to the current directorial trend of populating the stage with utterly superfluous dancers. There was simply too much of Catherine Galasso's busy choreography here, and it detracted from the fine work of the cast. Helena's awakening scene is meant to be a solo moment for the soprano to hold the stage, and for the audience to enjoy her artistry in this testing aria. Why, then, did she have to be surrounded by a half-dozen relentlessly gyrating male dancers who dipped, flipped and twirled her when she should have been permitted to just *sing*?

As Helena, at the matinee on July 26, Hailey Clark displayed such a strong, sinewy, enveloping dramatic instrument that one wonders how she could have been singing Neddas and Fiordiligis as recently as last year. Her sound and her sense of emotional commitment made her seem nearly ready to take on Elektra. Matching her in power and stamina but possessing the edge in sheer vocal beauty, John Matthew Myers as Menelaus unfurled the glorious Heldentenor sound that marked him as a singer to watch last season in SummerScape's *Dalibor*. His glowingly handsome timbre rang out easily over Strauss's surging score, and he found some humanity in this difficult-to-love character. Myers is an unmistakably gifted singer ready to be fast-tracked to major Heldentenor roles.

As Altair, Blake Denson offered a strong stage presence and a massive, full-bore baritone that he wielded like a blunt instrument—not an inappropriate approach with this tough, bullying character. The only truly sweet singing of the evening came from the tenor Shawn Roth as his tragic son Da-Ud, who brought welcome contrast to the forceful, dramatic utterances of the rest of the cast. One wishes Strauss had written more music for the Omniscient Seashell, particularly with the mezzo Deborah Nansteel rolling out her rich contralto-sounding tones, but at least there was more of Nansteel later on in the role of Aithra's Second Servant. (The First Servant was Catherine Creed, whose soprano was a bit too light in this company.)

Leon Botstein has a long association with this work; he has conducted it in concert, written extensively about it, and recorded it in the studio. He brought many years of familiarity and expertise to his reading, which resounded thrillingly in the SOSNOFF THEATER in Bard's Fisher Center. His exciting interpretation was appropriately detailed and emphatic, but he never allowed the American Symphony Orchestra to cover the cast. His massive forces also included the Bard Festival Chorale under the seasoned direction of James Bagwell.

It's understandable why *Die Ägyptische Helena* has not become an audience favourite, but a performance as effective as this makes one consider it in a new light.

ERIC MYERS

Chicago

Die Entführung aus dem Serail has led a prodigal life on local stages. The most recent time Lyric Opera of Chicago ventured Mozart's endearing *Singspiel* was in 2009. Seven months earlier, James Conlon had conducted a concert version at the outset of his multi-season survey of the canonic Mozart operas at the RAVINIA FESTIVAL in suburban Highland Park with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Conlon (who was the festival's music director from 2005 to 2015) brought his Ravinia traversal full cycle on July 18 in the MARTIN THEATRE, where he presided over a superior Chicago Symphony performance of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*. It proved a fitting summation of Conlon's decades-long advocacy of Mozart's operas in Chicago as well as at Los Angeles Opera, where he recently completed a 20-year tenure as music director.

The *Singspiel* again was given in modified concert form, sung in German, with an effective semi-staging directed by Harry Silverstein and a strong cast headed by some of the leading lights among the younger generation of Mozart singers. Conlon delivered the score substantially complete, replacing virtually all of the German dialogues with his own smart English-language narration, uncredited in the programme book. The play-by-play was delivered with elegant aplomb by the actor Jefferson Mays, who doubled adroitly as Pasha Selim.

A born Mozartian, Conlon made certain the musical flow and dramatic pacing were all of a piece, mouthing the German text along with the singers traversing a

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