

## Opera Review: Imaginative, melodic production of "Hansel and Gretel"Ê

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One of the most popular operas worldwide since its premiere in 1893, "Hansel and Gretel" by Engelbert Humperdinck, cast its magical spells locally this week when Opera San Jose brought the fairy tale to the stage of the California Theatre. At the Sunday matinee a good percentage of the sold out house were youngsters and the grown-ups seemed to enjoy it as much as they did.

Retold from a Grimm Brothers fable, the story's harsh edges have been smoothed out. The wicked stepmother is now just a mom (sung by guest artist mezzo Buffy Baggott) struggling to put food on the table and the hideous, wicked witch who bakes little lost children into gingerbread to adorn her candy cottage is played by a tenor James Callon more like an over the top cross-dresser.

The playful brother and sister (performed on Sunday by mezzo Kindra Scharich and soprano Sara Gartland) manage to shove the witch into a remarkably capacious oven to break the spell and free all the children for the happiest of endings.

The music is made up of lots of German children's songs and folk dances but owes a great deal to Richard Wagner, who mentored Humperdinck. As a lad, he went on to tutor the master's children in music and even did some work on "Parsifal," Wagner's final opera.Ê

"Hansel and Gretel's" overture and several orchestral interludes are definitely Wagnerian harmonic tradition. These were beautifully played by the Opera San Jose orchestra under the strong direction of Conductor Joseph Marcheso. So even if you don't like fairy tales, go for the great score.

The current season will be the last for the company's founder and General Director Irene Dalis, who had a remarkable two-decade career at the Metropolitan before "retiring" to her hometown to a San Jose State professorship and then building this outstanding regional opera company and training organization. Dalis reminisced that she sang the mother in "Hansel and Gretel" many times when she began a long tour with German opera companies in Oldenburg, Hamburg and Berlin.

"Having the children (of the youth chorus) backstage and performing with me always made the holiday season better," she noted.

The work has a good dozen songs, which augment the fast-moving plot, many of whose melodies will linger long with listeners. Several invoke simple folk dances but there is also a complex ballet sequence involving dancers Hannah Vaughan and Gabriel Mata who perform dressed as Hansel and Gretel as in a dream sequence. A procession of 14 youthful angels comes down from heaven to guard them as they sleep in the woods. One familiar tune "now I lay me down to sleep" becomes almost a Wagnerian leitmotiv for the pair.

Two characters added by the librettist Adelheid Vette, the composer's sister, were the Sandman, nicely sung by soprano Antonia Tamer, and the Dew Fairy, rendered comically by soprano Christine Capsuto.

The children's father, Peter, was portrayed by baritone Krassen Karagiozof. His performance had a liveliness and sensitivity that was winning. The highlight of the vocalizing came in three of the duets between Sara Gartland's bell-like high soprano and the rich lower register of Kindra Scharich.

Heading the creative team, which mounted the show, was Stage Director Layna Chianakas, who has sung many a lead role at Opera San Jose. Larry Hancock, the company's man of many talents, designed a highly functional set using a series of receding flats to give a forest depth and mystery. The addition of a wide range of stage business helped as well. To spread the dew to awaken the two lost children, the Dew Fairy shot sparkling flakes in the air like confetti. But the most impressive effect was the huge menacing oven rolled onto the stage like a locomotive in full steam. It had evil eyes and enormous teeth forming the witch-devouring oven gate.

Maria Basile created the effective choreography and Pamila Grey put together an effective lighting scheme.

The opera, originally German, is done in English translation by Marcie Stapp with English supertitles crafted by Theo Cruikshank.

"Hansel and Gretel" is double cast with Lisa Chavez and Cecilia Violetta Lopez as the kids. The parents are Nicole Birkland and Evan Brummel. Marc Schreiner, a tenor, sings the witch. They will perform on Nov. 24 and 29 while the cast reviewed above will return for Nov. 23, 26 and Dec. 1. Chorus Director Andrew Whitfield will conduct the orchestra for the Nov. 24 and 26 productions.

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Mort Levine is founder and publisher emeritus of Milpitas Post Newspapers.