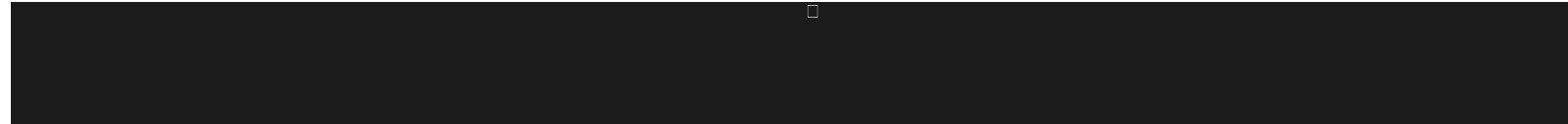


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Back-to-back ‘Hansel and Gretel’ stagings open up a world of opera for kids



Joshua Kosman | November 18, 2019
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| Elena Galván as Gretel and Talin Nalbandian as Hansel in Engelbert Humperdinck's "Hansel and Gretel" at Opera San José.
Photo: Pat Kirk

If you're anything like me, you can go years at a stretch without hearing Engelbert Humperdinck's opera "Hansel and Gretel." Before this month, the previous San Francisco Opera production was in 2002; I'd spun a recording once or twice in the interim, but that was about it.

And now, suddenly — Hanselmania.

Right on the heels of the **current San Francisco production**, a winningly dark-hued affair that blends the Grimm brothers with a little dose of Hitchcock, comes a more traditional but equally beguiling mounting of the same piece at Opera San José. And I do mean *right* on the heels — the San Jose production opened at the California Theatre on Saturday, Nov. 16, the night after its big-city counterpart, and both productions run through the first week of December.

So what's the deal with that? Don't these companies do any advance recon to avoid stepping on each other's toes? Do we really need competing productions of the same piece?

It's an obvious reaction, but a conversation with Joseph Marcheso — the music director of Opera San José, who's conducting the company's production — suggests that that may be getting things precisely backward. Perhaps, he says, the question should be: Why isn't there *more* "Hansel and Gretel" in our operatic diet?

" 'Hansel' is one of my five favorite operas, and when I first moved to California I became aware that the opera really hadn't penetrated out here the way it has in the East Coast and Europe. In Berlin, for example, you can see two or three productions every Christmas. So simultaneous productions by different companies doesn't seem that unusual to me."

If you look at “Hansel” as seasonal fare, in other words, it becomes an operatic analog to offerings like “The Nutcracker,” “Messiah” or “A Christmas Carol” — and who would raise an eyebrow at multiple go-rounds for those holiday staples?

There are other considerations in play as well. For one thing, San Francisco and San Jose are further apart, both geographically and culturally, than they might appear to a music critic trying to cover all of the Bay Area’s musical bounty.

“Except for more exotic titles, we’re not really too concerned about crossover with San Francisco Opera,” Marcheso says. “We have our audiences and they have theirs, and as the traffic gets worse and worse, people don’t necessarily want to travel for opera.”

The more telling point, though, is that it’s never a bad time to introduce the young ones to the world of opera — and that Humperdinck’s work, rooted as it is in the familiar terrors and triumphs of childhood, is a wonderful gateway.

“Any performance of ‘Hansel’ has the greatest percentage of first-time operagoers of any opera,” observes Marcheso, whose first encounter with opera came as a 9-year-old at a “Hansel” open rehearsal at the Metropolitan Opera. “If you’re evangelistic about it, you want to try and create a welcoming first impression.”



| Jamie Woodhull (left) as the Sandman and Kerriann Otaño as the Witch in Humperdinck’s “Hansel and Gretel” at Opera San José.
Photo: Pat Kirk

The San Jose production, directed by Layna Chianakas, is as overtly family-friendly as it can be. There are colorful stage designs drawn right from the world of storybooks, and in place of the eye-catching grandeur of the War Memorial, the California Theater offers close-up intimacy.

On opening night, the audience seemed well-populated by kids — many of whom lined up before curtain time to be photographed in the lobby as gingerbread people — and they laughed and gasped at all the right cues. The Witch’s ride, with a bicycle serving as a broomstick, was a nod to Dorothy’s nemesis, Miss Gulch, because it’s not too soon to teach the next generation the delights of intertextual allusion.

It could not have hurt anyone’s enjoyment that the casting was so strong. Soprano Elena Galván was a graceful, vivacious Gretel, mezzo-soprano Talin Nalbandian made a heroic last-minute substitution for an ailing colleague as Hansel, and bass-baritone Eugene Brancoveanu was a robust Father.

Perhaps most impressive of all was soprano Kerriann Otaño’s virtuoso double-duty turn as both the Mother and the Witch, singing throughout with a combination of well-

controlled vocal power and dramatic assurance. If there was anything Freudian to be made of the dual casting, it was left to the side.

Just how expressly “Hansel” is actually meant for children remains a subject for debate. Humperdinck was a protege of Wagner’s (at the older composer’s invitation, he helped prepare “Parsifal” for its world premiere), and the score for “Hansel,” his first opera, is a curious blend of uncomplicated folk songs and more shadowy late-Romantic harmonies.

That, says Marcheso, is exactly the point.

“The opera starts out in ways that are easy to understand, but then as the kids are unmoored from their home and go into the forest, they get pulled into the world of German Romanticism. It’s like a pool in which you slowly get deeper and deeper.”

In other words, a good performance of “Hansel and Gretel” is like the world of opera in general — you start with something reasonably straightforward, and before you know it you’re submerged in this thrilling and irrational art form. Maybe two productions are only enough to scratch the surface.

“**Hansel and Gretel**”: Opera San José. Through Dec. 1. \$29-\$219. California Theatre, 345 S. First St., San Jose. 408-437-4450, www.operasj.org. San Francisco Opera. 7:30 p.m. Through Dec. 7. \$26-\$398. War Memorial Opera House, 301 Van Ness Ave., S.F. 415-864-3330. www.sfopera.com

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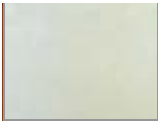
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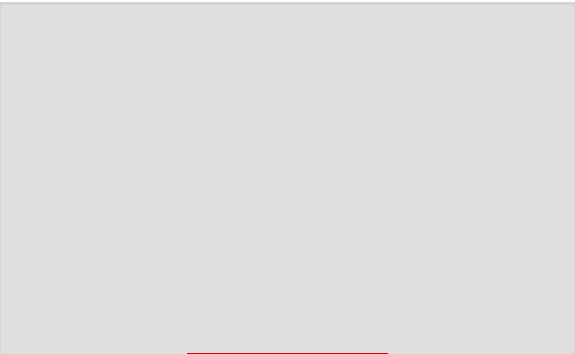
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