

Opera Now

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LIVE REVIEWS

In review:

OPERA NORTH

The Magic Flute Mozart
La damnation de Faust Berlioz

Tim Supple's new production of Mozart's **Magic Flute** certainly had the audience rolling in the aisles, which was good news for both Opera North and Mozart. Yet the *Flute* is no mere entertainment. Supple certainly understands the work's *commedia* elements, which worked well for Matthew Sharp's chipper and youthful Papageno laying on the *lazzi* with lashings of charm, though sadly his singing was woolly and unfocused. Elsewhere, however, Supple's gag-driven staging aimed more to please than to plumb the work's profundities.

Helen Williams' imperiously sung Queen of the Night, sporting a black '30s evening gown and ash-blonde wig, sashayed around like Mae West, her Three Ladies switch-carrying dominatrices clad in black suits, red stockings and shades, who straddled Tamino suggestively after rescuing him. The Three Boys might have stepped straight out of a *Just William* book. Dancers brandishing knives conga'd on as the serpent – so much for Tamino's 'Zu Hilfe! Zu Hilfe!' Children wearing do-it-yourself accessories skittered around as animals. All great fun, but an evasion of the work's dark underbelly.

However, Supple eschewed pussy-footing PC by casting a handsome black singer, Brian Green, as Monostatos, his formidable physique exuding a dangerously seductive power. With fine black singers also playing Sarastro and his aides, Supple unemphatically demonstrated how good and evil reside in men's souls not in their class, colour or creed. Mark Coles was the sonorous Sarastro, while as Speaker and Priest (they also doubled as Armoured Men), Keel Watson and Ronald Samm were an endearing roly-poly double act, the voices strong and finely focused.

Supple rounded off the evening with



Testing times: Phillippe Do as Tamino and Thora Einarsdottir as Pamina

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Sarastro and the Queen reconciled and exiting upstage with their executive familiars in tow, leaving the young lovers to inaugurate the new order. The preceding jollities hardly justified the directorial gloss. Would that old regimes always stepped down with such grace and alacrity.

Phillipe Do's ardent, stylishly sung Tamino was a definite plus, a genuinely princely figure, though his tone tends to become trapped at the back of the throat. Thora Einarsdottir's fearless Pamina fielded a serviceable soprano which would benefit from more bloom to the voice. The seasoned Jean Kalman created unfussy picture book settings with moveable door-frames and drop-curtains, which he lit with expressive finesse. William Lacey conducted a straightforward, at times strait-laced,

reading with the Opera North chorus and orchestra on cracking form.

Berlioz' 'légende dramatique' **La Damnation de Faust** should prove ideal for semi-staging in concert. It is not operatically conceived but instead relies almost wholly upon each listener's imagination. That makes it dangerous fodder for directors with 'ideas'. Opera North's semi-stagings have in the past been knockouts: Wagner's *Tristan*, with a radiant Susan Bullock as Isolde; the rollicking and racy version of Gershwin's *Of Thee I Sing*. Sadly, Matthias Janser's way with *La Damnation* is drab, passionless and pretentious, though there's the odd incidental pleasure.

The chorus' serried ranks are seated

on banked rostra behind a gauze, which rises and falls to enable effects, notably Katja Lehmann's film projections. These would be distracting even were they of any interest. What we get is sludge-coloured rippling water and a camera following a beaten path, all twigs and sere grass, which is particularly baffling as accompaniment to the Rákóczy March. At one point the projections render the chorus vague figures in a snowstorm.

Up front, Stephen O'Mara's Faust mostly lounges around looking smug, score frequently in hand. Is this a directorial gloss, the composer as Faust conjuring his own production as he reads the music? If so, Janser must think Berlioz a dull dog. However, since O'Mara had replaced a stricken predecessor, I assumed charitably that he hadn't time to memorise the role.

Not so Peter Lindroos, who stepped in as Méphistophélès on press night having recently sung the part in Leipzig. He possesses a modest bass, nimble but tonally somewhat woofy, but he cuts a dashing, sexy figure on stage. A pity he was encouraged interminably to leap around like a frisky chamois.

Only Lilli Paasikivi's moving Marguerite was the genuine article, her vibrant mezzo shaping the long-breathed vocal lines with style and confidence. She was perplexingly kitted out in a Help the Aged floral dress and happy-hooker red shoes and is required, during her fine delivery of 'D'amour l'ardente flamme', to wrap herself in a red drop curtain then crawl off stage.

How I longed for a straightforward concert performance. I do hope we have seen the last of Mr Janser. Nor did Frédéric Chaslin's dutifully 'correct' way with the score raise the temperature much. Chorus and orchestra sang and played committedly – there was some ravishing wind playing on press night – but ensemble was often rocky. It was also a bad evening for the French language, which prompts the question, why was it not sung in English? A disappointing close to the 2002/03 season.

DAVID BLEWITT