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A superb young cast sparks COT's eclectic "Magic Flute"

By Lawrence A. Johnson

Sun Sep 16, 2012 at 11:26 am

Sean Panikkar and Elizabeth Reiter in Chicago Opera Theater's "Magic Flute." Photo: Liz Lauren

It's not the *Magic Flute* your parents took you to at Lyric Opera.

Chicago Opera Theater opened the final production of its 2012 season Saturday night with a lean, stripped down, sometimes weird but often imaginative production of Mozart's Masonic fantasy, the first new staging of the opera seen locally in over a quarter-century.

This is the third *Magic Flute* heard in Chicago over the past year. The beloved but aged August Everding-Jörg Zimmermann production had what was likely its [final stand \(http://chicagoclassicalreview.com/2011/12/cabell-and-two-outstanding-chicago-debuts-spark-lyrics-irresistible-magic-flute/\)](http://chicagoclassicalreview.com/2011/12/cabell-and-two-outstanding-chicago-debuts-spark-lyrics-irresistible-magic-flute/) at Lyric Opera last season and Ravinia offered a semi-staged [concert version \(http://chicagoclassicalreview.com/2012/08/ravinia-s-magic-flute-proves-a-musical-triumph/\)](http://chicagoclassicalreview.com/2012/08/ravinia-s-magic-flute-proves-a-musical-triumph/) just last month.

This *Flute* is the concluding show planned under Brian Dickie, whose 13-year tenure as COT's general director ended last May. Dickie was in the house Saturday yet it was the company's new chief Andreas Mitisek who was front and center. The Viennese conductor-director-administrator began the evening with a curtain speech that showed his quirky humor by reading a letter purportedly sent to him by Mozart, which managed to work in some musical history and jokes about Chicago politics, along with a plea for financial support.

Rather than the storybook charm and gamboling animals of the Everding staging, COT's production offered a when-worlds-collide mix of visual styles. James Macnamara's unit set was a darkly lit Holstian landscape with large suspended planets and moons against a celestial Milky Way backdrop. Costumer Gregory Gale presents Sarastro as a Siddhartha-like figure with his priests as Buddhist acolytes, all clad in flowing pastel robes. The villain Monostatos is garbed Gaddafi-style as a North African dictator, and his henchmen, likewise, wear tan



military fatigues. The Three Ladies sport red fright wigs while the Queen of the Night wore a plunging, purple long dress and walked with a cane.

Not everything worked. The few stage effects were decidedly cheesy, like the opening serpent represented by a single tentacle with Christmas lights on it (unfortunately later reprised as the trial by fire).

Still for all its cost-effective, grab-bag eclecticism, COT's production—presented in Jeremy Sams' deft and faithful English translation—worked well enough to provide a worthy scaffolding for a superb cast of young American singers, many in their Chicago debuts.

Sean Panikkar has been making a name for himself in regional companies and it clearly won't be long before this gifted young singer is heard in major houses. The American tenor possesses an attractive, sweet-toned voice and sang with heroic timbre and finesse, one unfortunate high note in *Dies Bildnis* ("Such loveliness") apart. Panikkar made a forthright prince, aptly noble of bearing and speaking

with great clarity and dramatic point.

Elizabeth Reiter was an equally fine Pamina. Early on some of the petite soprano's top notes emerged rather shrill but she was always dramatically engaged and delivered an expressive and well sung *Ach, ich fühl's* ("Now I know").

Emily Hindrichs as the Queen of the Night in COT's "Magic Flute."

Photo: Liz Lauren

As the Queen of the Night Emily Hindrichs was magnificent Saturday. She tackled her two arias with rich tone, terrific verve and fearless bravura, nailing the stratospheric top F's with bracing attacks and pinpoint accuracy, earning the loudest ovation of the evening.

Markus Beam was a worthy Papageno. If not the most individual of birdcatchers, the baritone sang with full tone and handled the comedy with an easy light charm.



Grigory Soloviov proved a dignified and sonorous Zen Master Sarastro. Alex Mansoori was an inspired Monostatos, Bruce Hall an excellent Speaker, Valerie Vinzant a vixenish Papagena. The Three Ladies (Leila Bowie, Julia Hardin and Katherine McGookey) were especially fine, while the Three Boys were even more grimly sung than usual.

Director Michael Gieleta moved the action efficiently, and Steuart Bedford's conducting was first-class throughout the evening, a fine blend of Mozartian elegance and energy. The COT Chorus sang with full-bodied strength and corporate polish under Stephen Hargreaves' direction.

***The Magic Flute* will be repeated September 19, 21 and 23.**

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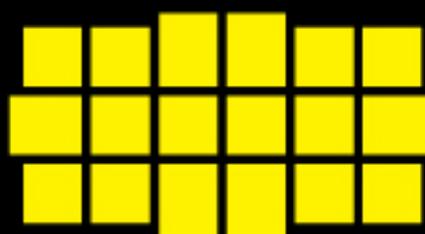
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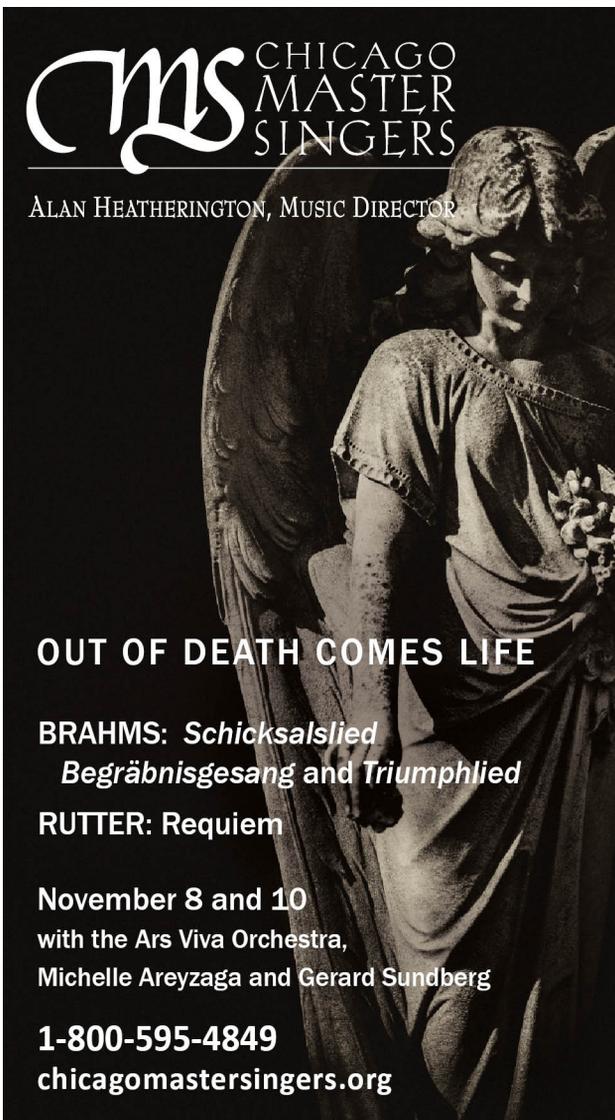
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