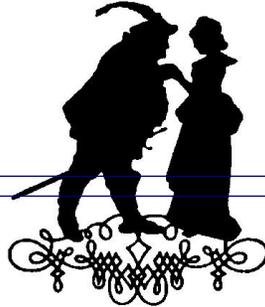


Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



Opera Philadelphia's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Robert Carsen's Magical Production of Britten's Opera Lands in Philly for its North American Premiere

A review by British critic David Drew in 1960 following the premiere of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* praises the extraordinary achievement of composer Benjamin Britten and librettist Peter Pears in shaping a new opera that so measures up to its famous source:

A corner of Shakespeare's Empire has undergone a subtle change. It has not been ruthlessly invaded; it has not even been quietly exploited. But for those who were at Aldeburgh on June 11, and for those who will follow them to Britten's new opera in the months and years to come, Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream will never be quite the same again.

Prophetic words indeed, as evidenced by my own experience with more than a dozen different productions over the last half-century. And for those who attended Robert Carsen's well-traveled production of the opera in February at Opera Philadelphia, for a first hearing or for one of many, their experience with the opera (and with

the play) may never quite be the same again. Opera Philadelphia's Music Director, Corrado Rovaris, captures wonderfully the flavor of Britten's score with its distinctive, chamber-like sonorities, and the production itself captures marvelously Britten's preoccupation with the healing power of dreams and the magical qualities of sleep.

Carsen's production, which premiered in 1991 at the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, has been circulating in Europe for just about half the opera's existence, with such success that the ENO in London has presented it on five different seasons. The Philadelphia performance was its long awaited North American premiere, and it came complete with much of the original production team, including Revival Director Emmanuelle Bastet and a first rate cast, many with long experience in their roles. Especially compelling was how the original set by Michael Levine, still fresh after 28 years, mirrored the progression of Britten's score from its opening chromatic ambiguity to its final diatonic clarity.



Siena Licht Miller, Hermia; Brenton Ryan, Lysander Photo: Kelly & Massa

At the opening of Act III and the dawn of a new day, four beds, each containing one of the four lovers, hang suspended in thin air as a diatonic string ensemble takes over from the earlier chromatic sequences. With the shift to the final scene in which the rustics perform their play for the reunited and now correctly paired lovers, the bare stage is stark white, far removed from the muddled, increasingly nightmarish scene in the forest. The production thus imaginatively and vividly captures a central theme of both Shakespeare and Britten: the lost and quarreling lovers work out their

Beds are a prominent element in Levine's imaginative set. At the outset of Act I, a giant bed, covering the full stage with a forest-green blanket and large billowy white pillows, commands our attention as the hushed glissandi of strings stretch and yawn. The amorphous groans return periodically through the act introducing the various groups - fairies, lovers and rustics - who wrestle with their various concerns. In the background, a dark sky and small crescent moon capture the feel of a forest at night.

aggressions and confusions in their dreams, as do Oberon and Tytania, so that with the new day they can start a more harmonious life.

Carsen's vivid lighting helped open stage spaces to let the production breathe and to facilitate a seamless flow of action, while the kaleidoscope of color from Mr. Levine's set and costumes caught wonderfully the myriad personalities of this multi-layered work. Without a literal

In Act II numerous smaller beds now replace the large bed as four mysterious chords (on muted strings, muted brass, woodwinds, and harps with percussion) replace the amorphous glissandi of the opening. The ensuing sequence of variations anticipates the squabbles and mix-ups between the lovers. At the act's conclusion, Puck will lead each of the confused lovers to one of these beds, as the four chords, now rocking with the gentle rhythm of the Fairies' lullaby "On the ground, sleep sound," suggest sleep's healing power.



Tim Mead, Oberon

Photo: Kelly & Massa

forest, dark green and deep blue dominate the color scheme of the forest world: the King and Queen of the fairy world, Oberon and Tytania are in green and blue respectively, while the some two dozen fairies, sung impeccably by the Philadelphia Boys Choir, wore a mixture of green tails and shoes juxtaposed with dark-blue trousers and hair. A fairy mix indeed! The lovers are in white (the two fleeing Athens, Lysander and Hermia, more formally so), but their garments peel off and are smudged with green grass stains as the evening moves on. Finally, the pure white of the final scene, clothes intact, suggests that indeed they have finally sorted things out, or rather found their true selves. As for the delightful group of rustics, oblivious to the nuance of all this, earthy browns do just fine.

The sets and costumes, of course, could not work so well if it were not for a cast outstanding across the board in both vocal and acting skills. It's hard to believe that the first ever countertenor in opera was Alfred Deller as Britten's Oberon back in 1960; today many fine countertenors essay this difficult role, and British countertenor Tim Mead, with his commanding presence and pure tone, is one of the best. His casting of the spell "Be it on Lion, Bear or Wolf or Bull," with accompanying celesta, was mesmerizing. Opposite him, soprano Anna Christy was both alluring and vocally secure as Tytania, especially in her playful coloratura.



Tim Mead, Oberon; Miltos Yerolemos, Puck
Photo: Kelly & Massa



Tim Mead, Oberon; Anna Christy, Tytania; Fairies Photo: Kelly & Massa

As for the lovers, each projected his or her prescribed personality with élan: tenor Brenton Ryan and mezzo Siena Licht Miller, expressive and impassioned as Lysander and Hermia, and baritone Johnathan McCullough and soprano Georgia Jarman, justifiably feisty at times, as the ever-frustrated Demetrius and Helena. The animated catfight of the two women, with the lovers leaping in and around the beds, was wonderfully rowdy.



Georgia Jarman, Helena; Brenton Ryan, Lysander;
Siena Licht Miller, Hermia; Johnathan McCullough, Demetrius
Photo: Kelly & Massa



Matthew Rose, Bottom; Anna Christy, Tytania
Photo: Kelly & Massa

Complementing them was the hilarious group of rustics. Grammy Award-winning bass Matthew Rose as the pompous Bottom stood out, as well he should with his commanding and preposterous role. Yet while he dominates the clueless world of the rustics, he did not overshadow their antics, thus insuring that their rollicking fun-filled rendition of “Pyramus and Thisby” at opera’s end was a hit for both the audiences on and off the stage. Among the Philadelphia young artists, tenor Miles Mykkanen as Flute (alias Thisby) was a delight in the role, sung originally by Britten’s partner and co-librettist of the opera, Peter Pears.



Miles Mykkanen, Flute/Thisby
Photo: Kelly & Massa

As for Oberon’s obedient minion, Puck, an acrobatic speaking role often given to a young boy, he was the highly anticipated English actor Miltos Yerolemou, known to many for his role as Syrio Forel in TV’s *Game of Thrones*. So animated was this trained tumbler in his flamboyant stunts – even once flinging himself head long into a box off stage - that it’s hard to imagine he has been going at it since the outset of Carsen’s production in 1991. He also brings to the role all the attributes of a seasoned comedian, in some ways even stealing the show where perhaps he ought not to. His comic antics ending Act II, with his hammy confusion in leading the lovers to their respective beds, undermined the beauty of the moment, and the soft lullaby that embodies the restorative power of sleep.

That said, his commanding presence was a unifying element in this magical production. Creating a fine frame, he appeared from beneath the fluffy pillows at the opera’s outset and then again suddenly from behind the curtain at the opera’s end. Releasing the audience, his final speech, spoken with his usual eloquent diction, brought the captivating dream world of the production to a close:

*If we shadows have offended,
Think but this – and all is mended –
That you have but slumber’d here,
While these visions did appear.*



Miltos Yerolemou, Puck; Tim Mead, Oberon
Anna Christy, Tytania Photo: Kelly & Massa