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Fluting around

by Jay Nordlinger

So, James Levine is the greatest Mozart conductor since—Szell? Mahler? Mozart? He was in the pit for *The Magic Flute* at the Metropolitan Opera on Thursday night, but the thing about the evening was that it was so well sung. *Very* well sung.

The tenor, as Tamino, was Charles Castronovo. He sang with strength, smoothness, and taste. I have one complaint, or complaintlet: he had a tendency to scoop, i.e., to approach notes from below—just a *hair*. For example, the first notes of Tamino's aria are a B flat and a sustained G. Castronovo gave just a hint of an F sharp before settling into the G. And this was a pattern, throughout the night.

But this, again, is a minor complaint. A Mozart tenor is a gratifying creature, and Castronovo is one.

His Pamina was Golda Schultz, the South African soprano. Last week, I did a podcast with her—a Q&A, here—and you should not review someone on whom you've done a feature piece. A podcast, we might say, is a modern-day feature piece. Also, I know her a bit. So discount what I say (though it's still true).

She sang with great freedom—with flexibility and confidence. Her aria was arching and aching. Her soft singing was particularly effective. At every turn, she sang with purity and beauty.

That aria, incidentally, is one of the killers of the soprano repertoire. It exposes you to every danger. Golda Schultz came through without a scratch.

Papageno was a veteran Papageno, the Austrian baritone Markus Werba. Google tells me that I have been reviewing him in this role since 2005. My reviews of him never change. He is a model of consistency. Here, for example, is a paragraph from 2008:

Papageno was the Austrian baritone Markus Werba (who happens to be the great-nephew of the late and distinguished accompanist Erik Werba). He is a lithe, personable fellow who makes a winning Papageno, in every way. Plenty of sound comes out of his small, slim body—but it is lyrical, unforced, and smooth.

Until Thursday night, I had never heard him at the Metropolitan Opera. Probably, his voice is a size too small for that big house. But if this is so, he more than made up for it with his charm and skill. His skill set includes physical comedy. Moreover, his native German is a bonus in this talky opera.

The Queen of the Night was Kathryn Bowden, an American soprano. She was subbing for another Kathryn, Kathryn Lewek, who was indisposed. The Queen has two arias to sing, as you recall. In the first, Bowden was competent but slightly uncertain. In the second, she hit her stride, hurling out that aria with precision and fire.

Sarastro was a German bass, Tobias Kehrer. What a beautiful voice: rich and reverent. Excellent for Sarastro. One thing marred Kehrer's performance on Thursday night: his intonation deserted him at the worst possible time—in his big aria, "In diesen heil'gen Hallen."

The name "Kehrer" has been on my mind. Not long ago, I was writing about Rudolf Kehrer, a Russian pianist in Soviet times, who endured much, as so many did.

Greg Fedderly was a top-notch comic villain as Monostatos. Christian Van Horn displayed an arresting low voice as the Speaker. And it was a good night for Utahans in that two of the Three Ladies were from that state: Wendy Bryn Harmer and Tamara Mumford. The odd-woman-out was Sarah Mesko, an Arkansan.

In *The Magic Flute*, you need a flute, and a good one. The Met's Chelsea Knox played this part with beauty and sparkle. Speaking of sparkle, J. D. McClatchy's English translation was a delight to read—a translation showing up in the Met's patented seatback titles.

At this point, I should return to Maestro Levine. He was, for some of the show, Levine. He was, for some of it, less than that. At any rate, I look forward to the next time I can hear him, and the time after that.

Jay Nordlinger is a Senior Editor at *National Review*.

His podcast with *The New Criterion*, titled "Music for a While," can be found [here](#).