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Yuval Sharon's *Flute* Ultimately Wins Over Berliners

March 20, 2019 | By [Thomas May](#), *Musical America*

BERLIN — Nowhere is *The Magic Flute* more over-analyzed and over-fetishized than in the German-speaking world. So the stakes were especially high for director Yuval Sharon when he agreed to stage a new production for the Berlin Staatsoper. The Los Angeles-based director has won kudos for his work in contemporary opera elsewhere in Germany and in Vienna. And even though the general tenor of this *Flute* struck me as rather less controversial than usual for Sharon, its mid-February opening was greeted with an onslaught of negative reviews that reported heavy booing.

That said, the final, March 16 performance (which I attended) was sold out, and the audience's engaged response indicated an eagerness to learn what Sharon and his colleagues had to say about Mozart's inexhaustibly enigmatic opera.

This is the Staatsoper's first new *Magic Flute* in a quarter century and it will coexist in the company's rep with its much-loved predecessor (which features designs derived from the architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel). What sets it apart is Sharon's focus on conjuring and maintaining the opera's sense of wonder by using a provocative collage of cultural references.



Papageno (Florian Teichtmeister) and Tamino (Julian Prégardien), with dead serpent

One of the production's key inspirations comes from the world of marionette theater. Tamino makes his entrance aloft, attached to strings that lower him onto the stage, and the other main characters are similarly cast as human puppets: The entire show is revealed at the end to be under the control of a group of children manipulating the marionettes. This isn't a glib denouement but is built up in a curious way: much of *Flute*'s lengthy spoken dialogue is from a recording of children reciting the roles.

At the same time, Sharon wants this marionette imagery to work on a metaphorical level and address the opera's serious philosophical concerns. For him, these seem to involve the contradiction between mechanical control and free will. That clash interests him far more than the traditional symbolism of night versus day in Schikaneder's libretto, not to mention its abstruse Masonic elements—though Sharon introduces a certain esotericism of his own. The director's teeming imagination is prone to fire on too many cylinders at once, resulting in an excess of stimuli that can be exhilarating but also, at times, perplexing.

The marionettes are actually just one component in a wide-ranging collection of visual references. For example, the hot-air balloon experiments during Mozart's Vienna decade are used: One of the most memorable images shows Pamina and Papageno—each with distinct social status but both outsiders from Sarastro's brotherhood—climbing ladders to escape Monostatos, singing as they ascend weightlessly into a utopian sky.

Sharon's creative partners Mimi Lien (sets) and fashion designer Walter Van Beirendonck (costumes) blend in additional cultural allusions to Japanese manga comics, 18th-century toys (Monostatos is a wind-up automaton), sci-fi, Surrealism, Art Deco (the Queen of the Night's accoutrements), and even a nostalgically simple kitchen design out of *Good Housekeeping*. This last serves as the scenery for the final trials. Pamina and Tamino pantomime a newlywed couple lovingly preparing a meal together—a bizarre, anti-climactic moment of ironic kitsch that's hard to square with the overall vision.

The high-tech, acrobatic requirements of the staging—much of the singing takes place from precariously suspended positions—likely interfered with the presentation early in the run. But things ran smoothly during the final performance, which featured several delightful interpretations.

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Julian Prégardien’s Tamino projected a persuasive sense of wonder at his unfolding adventure and sang with passionate, lyric warmth. Ensemble member Serena Sáenz Molinero made an affecting Pamina, free of sentimentality, while Tuuli Takala reinforced the production’s mechanical motif with the pinpoint precision of her coloratura. But I was surprised that Sharon failed to grapple more with the issues of *Flute’s* misogyny and “othering”—the failed coup she plans with the humiliated Monostatos (Florian Hoffmann) barely registered. A fascinating and effective choice, meant to underscore the hybrid aspect of Mozart’s score, was the casting of the Austrian actor Florian Teichtmeister as Papageno, whose non-operatically trained voice conveyed winning charm. Kwangchul Youn depicted Sarastro not as authoritarian but with a touch of pathos and even vulnerability.

Filling in at the last minute when Franz Welser-Möst canceled, Mexican conductor Alondra de la Parra had to suddenly accommodate a complex staging. But the gremlins reported at the start of the run were mostly tamed. While more flexible shaping of lines would have been welcome, her fleet pacing was elegant and nicely complemented Sharon’s airborne vision.

Production photo: Monika Rittershaus / Staatsoper Berlin

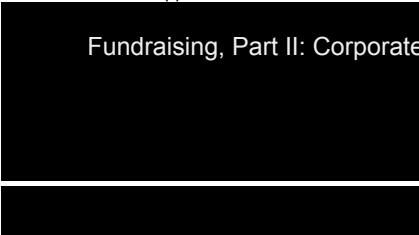


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