

DIE FEEN

By sheer accident I was able to attend a performance of Wagner's first opera *The Fairies* at the Châtelet theatre in Paris in March this year. Not only was the performance wonderful in itself, but for me it was also a consolation prize, since a couple of nights before I had turned up at the Paris Opera to see Massenet's *Werther*, only to find that our tickets were for the previous day's performance. As I was mooching about wondering where I could borrow a pair of loaded pistols, I almost walked into a poster advertising *Die Feen*. What an opportunity! Apparently this is the very first production of the opera in France, so it is a real rarity, and it was only on for six performances. I had never seen it before, nor ever heard the music. All regrets over *Werther* vanished; this was a once in a blue moon window.

Looking back on the performance six months later, what stands out about the opera is not so much the singing and acting and orchestral music, lovely though all this was, but the production and the scenery and costumes. Since the opera will be scarcely known even to Wagnerians, as it was not by me, I will tell the story and comment mainly on the production, drawing on the excellent programme notes provided, which I must say shone in comparison with the overpriced and underinformative programmes that I have mostly found in Australia and elsewhere. But I might say that if anyone gets to the beautiful Châtelet theatre, it would be good to ensure at the box office that one's view will not be impeded by pillars. Our view from an upper balcony was clear, but others nearby were not so fortunate.

Wagner's own account in *A Communication to My Friends* gives the gist of the plot: "I wrote for myself an opera text, *The Fairies*, based on a fairy tale of Gozzi. The 'romantic' opera of Weber was all the rage, and this, along with that of Marschner who had recently come to Leipzig where I was living, inspired me to emulation. I had what I wanted, an opera text, and I set it to music under the influence of Beethoven, Weber and Marschner. But I was not stirred by Gozzi's fairy tale just because it made a good libretto: the subject itself spoke passionately to me. A fairy, who renounces immortality to keep a man she loves, can obtain mortal status only through the fulfilment of hard conditions, and if her earthly lover fails her in this she is threatened with a harsh fate. The beloved fails the test, which consists in this, that he must not lose faith and reject her, no matter how wicked and dreadful she (feigning under compulsion) appears to him to be. In Gozzi's fairy tale the fairy is then turned into a snake, which the remorseful lover kills and so frees her from the spell. I changed this conclusion so that the she was changed into stone and freed from the spell by the beloved's yearning song, and as a reward he was – not released to his homeland with his rescued wife, but himself welcomed with her into the immortal bliss of Fairyland."

This, Wagner's first opera, is itself almost something out of Fairyland, in that it was written in 1833-34 when the composer was only twenty years old. Here it is Fairyland and not the Medieval or Germanic myths that is the inspiration, but evident here already are some of the major themes of his later work. Wagner is concerned with the supernatural, the ordeal of the lover, the forbidden question, and above all redemption through love. The fairy's punishment and salvation tempts us with the Orphic dream that the power of music can change the world. There are intimations galore here of aspects of *Dutchman*, *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*, never mind the *Ring* and *Tristan*. Another typical touch is that he wrote his own libretto; and, of course, the opera is very long.

We have just seen Wagner's account of the musical influences upon him at that time; practically the only part of the opera which was performed in his lifetime was the overture, for he admired its orchestration but repudiated the work as a whole. The conductor of the Châtelet production, Marc Minkowski details some of the musical debts, eg the heroine at a supreme moment sings: "Ich bin sein Weib!" Minkowski comments that these same words occur in *Fidelio*, with "Weib" on almost the same note – exactly the same in the first version, *Leonora*. Whatever the influences, the music does sound intriguingly proto-Wagnerian, but that is not its only attraction. It is very thrilling and moving indeed.

The plot too is absorbing, if a little overpacked. Events in the spirit world are interwoven with those on Earth. The prince, Arindal (sung by William Joyner), has been living for eight years in the fairies' realm married to the fairy princess Ada (sung by Christiane Libor) and they have two children. When he cannot control his curiosity and asks the question about her identity which he has promised not to ask, he is cast out into a desert. Here he learns that his native land, Tramond, has been invaded, and heeds the call to come to its defence. Ada follows him there, for since he has failed to win the right to live in the spirit world, her love for him makes her prepared to share his mortality on earth. She will only be permitted to do so if he can be trusted; he fails this test too, and she is turned to stone. At last he does manage to pass a test, that set for freeing her, and when after their ordeals on earth they eventually return to Fairyland for eternal life in the spirit world, Tramond has been saved in battle and Arindal's sister and her husband, who has been loyally acting as regent in case Arindal should return, can now get their reward and rule in their own right. Arindal has a faithful servant who also has a beloved, and he forms a more down-to-earth foil to the protagonist's love, much like Papageno or like David in *Mastersingers*. Fairyland has its conflicts too: two fairies in particular conspire to thwart Ada's attempts to leave. Thus there is a multitude of prominent characters and a story line of some complexity.

The production at the Châtelet theatre is, to talk about it in the present tense, superbly colourful. The producer, Emilio Sagi, says in the programme notes that Wagner's magic world is that of the power of the soul and the imagination: Arindal's love for an immortal is our own search for the ideal person. Sagi links this with the toys of the child that is within us all: the characters are in fact looking for the magic that is within them. To illustrate this, he says, he has given the production a flavour of "pop", drawing on the brilliant worlds of Jeff Koons and Dan Flavin: that is, he wants "a world full of light and colour, and at the same time very abstract." The world of the fairies he has reified as perfect objects that the human characters, like children, want to possess and own completely. The scene is to have the power of a "forest of symbols."

The scenery (by Daniel Bianco), lighting (by Eduardo Bravo) and costumes (by Jesús Ruiz) are indeed brilliant. The backdrop is a mirror which reflects the shiny black stage and the actors in a double world, and the centre of the stage is occupied by a large black platform of three steps. The curtain rises on a starlit night of twinkling white, red and blue lights; a gauze veil is lifted and lights come up on a scene of many fairies in long dresses of rose-petal pink, all holding gold or orange lamps and facing left until they flow to the rear and slowly glide off. A huge pink rose is poised majestically upon the platform; Ada appears standing upon it, takes off her gossamer wings and comes front stage. Such is the start, symbolising Ada's forthcoming decision to abandon her immortal status for her love. Colourful it is indeed, and the hues which flood the stage from time to time may modulate to deep purple and red, or

deep blue with shining silver tinsel everywhere. Characters occupy themselves at times with childish things, glamorous blonde dolls, deconstructable dolls' houses assembled of geometric blocks, and bunches of red roses; gold and silver masks are worn by would-be deceivers, masks which fly off when their machinations are defeated by beneficial magic.

In Act 2 the earthly kingdom is symbolised by an immense inwrought golden medallion suspended above the platform; several glowing red vertical streamers extend from roof to floor in front of it. As Arindal faces the greatest test of his vow not to curse Ada no matter how evil she appears to be – the precondition for her becoming mortal - we have a piece of staging that is most audacious and yet is completely successful: an enormous head, a glamorous Marilyn Monroe physiognomy with blonde curls and bright red lips, appears backstage; as it slowly revolves we see that the back of the head is hollow, and as this is turned towards us it is transformed into a black, square doorway. Ada, her fingers ghoulishly extended with enormous nails, in full sight of Arindal directs the two children of their marriage up the steps of the platform and into the blackness of the doorway. They vanish from sight, and suddenly a brilliant flash of white lightning fills the stage and a veritable Wagnerian thunderclap rolls from the orchestra. A hurricane seems to burst from the doorway and travel round the stage anti-clockwise in a stunning simulation, all the crowded characters keeling over in succession like a pack of cards toppling until there is not the slightest movement on the stage. Into this stillness Arindal utters his curse upon his wife. Poor Ada must then reveal that it was all an illusion and the children are alive and unharmed; furthermore, the kingdom's foes have been defeated by her magic, and she herself, alas, must turn to stone for a hundred years. A multiple image of a female face shimmers dimly on a backcloth. Arindal seizes a doll and clutches it to his breast in despair and remorse.

The central platform in Act 3 carries an artifact which looks like an enormous solid chandelier of silver, gold and crystal, set about with a double ring of light bulbs, and tilted on its side. Arindal, insane in his misery, crawls about underneath it. He is granted a chance to face three more challenges in order to free Ada from the stone into which she has been metamorphosed: he must use sword, shield and lyre, symbolised in this production only by cubes which light up in turn, to fight against hostile spirits. Ada, freed from the stone by the power of love and music, appears standing high upon the chandelier. Arindal may now escape mortality and live with her in Fairyland. The end, like the beginning, is full of fairies in sweeping rose-pink gowns.

In such a gorgeous explosion of colours discipline is maintained by the abstract frameworks and artificial stage properties. A quick consultation of Google Images will suggest to the uninitiated like myself how the gigantic artifacts and neon defined spaciality of Koons and Flavin might have inspired this production's brilliance of colour combined with a sense of cool modernity that is far removed from natural scenery. Even the roses in this production are clearly factory made: indeed this is a "forest of symbols."

But why the dolls, dolls' houses, tinsel and so forth? Sagi says that the magic is the magic of the child within us. For myself, in performance the action carried one along and all seemed exactly right. On later reflection I wondered if the seriousness of the love of Ada and Arindal was not belittled by being blended with childishness. I cannot imagine that Wagner really wanted us to see anything childish in any sense in the trials and triumph of his lovers. But then again I thought I saw the point: this tragic knot is sliced through by the power of love expressed in music, and we have a

happy ending, an escape into a bliss beyond mortality. Only the domestic world of *Mastersingers* has a happy ending in later Wagner; *Tannhäuser* and especially *Lohengrin* bring lovers into a crisis from which no such bliss extends into the future. Wagner tells us in *A Communication to My Friends* how he agonised about whether to give Elsa and Lohengrin a happy outcome, but decided against it: the modern world in his view was such that true love was unattainable, and he looked forward to the revolution. But in *The Fairies* apparently he has not attained to that tragic vision. Such an outcome can seem possible only to the “child within us.” If this is what Sagio means, then I think he is right, and the toys of children are at home in the staging of this fairy story, as far as the happy ending is concerned, but not as an expression of Wagner’s meaning, rather as a modern critique of it, and indeed of romantic idealism altogether. And Wagner surely chose the right ending for *Lohengrin*, but even there his analysis, though based on a more mature vision than he had attained with *The Fairies*, would be superseded. For the connection that he made in *A Communication* between the tragic ending and the lovelessness of his contemporary society awaited correction into a vision of the human condition in any society whatsoever. There is a progress detectable from *The Fairies* to *Lohengrin* to *Tristan and Isolde*, and this is not the least of the values of seeing the first in this production.

For anyone who has been interested in Wagner for several years it is probably impossible any longer to come to a major work for the first time. Some familiarity with the texts, repeated hearings of the music and experience of a variety of productions contribute to a feeling of what is preferred and what is unacceptable for that individual. Boldly modernised settings, however striking, may seem to some to founder on the reefs of inescapable immutables of the myth. The price of openness to the power of the new idea is a blind spot for unity. But there will be very few spectators who have formed any sort of view at all as to how *The Fairies* should be staged. But when it is innocent of any acquired storehouse of prejudices and reference points the mind cooperates with complete trust in the action as presented. That at least was my response in the theatre to this splendid performance. One does not think “Yes, that is a good way of doing it” but simply accepts that this is how it is. And one gets a glimpse of a context in which opera was a living art form: then there were new operas being written all the time, as is clear from the range of operas that Wagner would conduct in the years immediately following *The Fairies*, as evidenced by his own accounts. Something completely new confronted opera audiences frequently; nowadays in the main only the production supplies novelty. So my final recollection of *The Fairies* is of a freedom of response, which I surmise might not be too far from the involvement which Wagner looks for in his theoretical writings, when he claims that the dramatist aims to arouse in his audience not intellectual but emotional understanding. But I fear that to recreate that in one’s response to the greatest lights in the Wagnerian galaxy, however much one yearns for it, is as impossible as it was for Lohengrin to escape from Monsalvat to Antwerp.

Such an escape would be another fairy story. Still, if ever I get to Paris again, I have not seen Massenet’s *Werther* yet.