

Papageno as a supplier of chooks

The “Magic Flute” in Australian style – an unusual jubilee evening at the Stadthalle
By Christoph Pepper

Minden. Sarastro and the Queen of the Night as a gastronomic couple, Papageno as a chook supplier, Monostatos as a greasy chef, and the Three Ladies as waitresses – setting the “Magic Flute” in a restaurant could be considered one of the tiring ideas of self-obsessed European director’s theatre.

The plain steel scaffolding on the stage – or rather *as* the stage – could well be labelled platitudinal if it were sprung from the mind of any German National Theatre star designer. Yet the Minden Stadthalle did not host a subsidised troupe who was trying its hand at long bygone citizen provocations along with boring spotlight singing. Here a travelling Australian company was twirling and celebrating Mozart’s esoteric late work with unbridled enthusiasm and a joyfully fresh sound landscape – a hymn to the musical art form of opera! The outcome was standing ovations of an enraptured audience who had followed the performance as part of a jubilee celebration program while seated at decked-out tables enjoying gastronomic services – a circumstance owed to the nature of the invitation but not to a director frantically looking for novel ideas.

The 24 person troupe is called “Co-Opera – Opera on the Move”. As a rule, its agenda is to tour the expanse of the Australian outback in order to bring the art of beautiful singing closer to farmers and stockmen, fortune-seekers and miners in multipurpose halls under the open sky, on factory floors, or in large barns of even the most remote and small one-horse towns. One has to be an idealist in order to cover a distance of twenty to thirty thousand kilometres year after year in three minibuses and a truck carrying the set so that *La Traviata*, *La Bohème* or, as in this case, *The Magic Flute* is brought closer to an audience which is – to put it mildly – predominantly orientated towards different music. And yet the matter can be so enjoyable that, on occasion, Mozart is spontaneously mixed up with a Supremes song.

Touring Europe for the first time

The sustained success of this troupe, which was founded in 1990 and time and again has brought forth young talents, is explained by its profound musical, vocal, and theatrical qualities. In this way the company’s modest means – as exemplified by the reduction of the orchestra to a chamber ensemble with piano accompaniment – are even turned into directorial assets.

For the first time underway on a small European tour, the troupe ended up in Minden thanks to business connections of the local tax consultancy firm Meyer, Brockmeier, Becker und Partner with Hans Henkell, their longstanding business associate in Australia. The investment manager and opera madman from Melbourne, who has roots in Wiesbaden and close ties with the Hessian Staatstheater, organised the European trip and facilitated the detour to Minden.

As of this evening, the roughly 300 patrons of the unusual jubilee event know why the art form opera cannot be silenced at European director’s theatres but has even been able to tap into new fan groups in the Australian wilderness. Freely quoting Bill Clinton, “It’s the music, stupid.”