

## EXCELLENT: CITY PRODUCTION WAS BETTER THAN ANYTHING LONDON CAN OFFER

**Leicester Concertgoer's Diary**  
Curve, Leicester

There was a time when touring opera conjured up a picture of a missionary company on a shoestring budget trying to introduce provincial audiences to the wonders of music drama.

But doing so with production values and musical standards that only conveyed a pale ghost of the real thing.

On the evidence of English Touring Opera's two-night stand at Curve that is long past and Leicester got very much the real thing.

Indeed, one would go further. Their production of Mozart's *Magic Flute* was simply one of the best this listener has heard, quite outdoing what the London opera houses have to offer at the moment.

It was sublimely simple yet hugely effective. It clarified what can sometimes be a difficult narrative, was intensely funny at times and had some moments of great spectacle.

The way the Queen of the Night entered, her shimmering purple cloak billowing out to cover the whole stage, was unforgettable, as was later, the way a lamp standard and its shade gradually took on female



shape as Papageno yearned for female companionship.

The whole production was full of delightful inventiveness.

Of course, none of this would have really worked if the musical values had not been of the highest standard.

As opera becomes ever more popular through such things as cinema transmissions, one

was reminded that there is no substitute for hearing opera and the unamplified voice in the theatre.

Forget *The Voice UK*, forget the ear battering and mushy amplification which passes for drama in otherwise excellent Curve musicals, here mostly young voices reached the back of the theatre with ease and

consequently retained the personality of the individual voice which is the basis of all good singing.

Nicholas Sharratt and Anna Patalong gave outstandingly stylish and beautiful performances as Tamino and Pamina, Wyn Pencarreg and Caryl Hughes were delightful as Papageno and Papagena, An-

drew Slater navigated the awesome challenges of the High Priest Sarastro's vocal part with great aplomb and Laure Meloy was simply a knock-out as *The Queen of the Night*.

With orchestral playing of real finesse under James Southall, this was an outstanding evening.

Another admirable feature of

ETO is its determination to explore works not often found in the major opera houses.

Britten's *Paul Bunyan*, his first foray into music drama, certainly is in that category.

The music is at times melodically very arresting; Britten had already written some masterpieces by 1941 and was only three years away from composing *Peter Grimes*, one of the greatest operas of all time.

The first act of *Bunyan* is like watching someone try on a number of coats for size.

It is indeed often a dramatic patchwork, but with Auden's quirky libretto there is often little sense of onward momentum, so unlike Britten's great operas of the next three decades.

In the second act, as the mythical *Bunyan* recedes into the pioneer past and modern America takes over, momentum builds and the operetta/musical achieves a thought-provoking and memorable end.

However, two things perhaps got in the way of the work making its full impact.

Firstly, it really does require a larger orchestra and chorus to make its full impact.

Secondly, having virtually the whole cast on the stage throughout, produced a clutter which blurred the plot further. Even something as basic as identification of the many characters would have been a struggle for anyone who did not know the work intimately. It was only a qualified success.