

OPERA REVIEW; A 'Magic Flute' on the Stage With Invisible Instruments in the Orchestra

By JEREMY EICHLER AUG. 11, 2003

The small Opera Company of Brooklyn was thrust into the spotlight last week when its decision to use an all-virtual orchestra in a production of Mozart's "Magic Flute" prompted protests from the musicians' union that led to the resignation of two high-profile members of the group's board of artistic trustees: Marilyn Horne and Deborah Voigt.

One might have expected more demonstrations outside the Voorhees Theater on Saturday, but the sidewalks were clear. Inside, however, the technological demonstration was in full swing. The stage was strewn with speakers of all shapes and sizes, some hanging in the air, many of them assigned to individual instruments or sections.

Jay D. Meetze, the company's founder, conducted the singers while the assistant conductor, Stephen Jarvi, sat at a keyboard and manipulated the pacing of the orchestral playback. A third member of the team, David B. Smith, whose RealTime Music Solutions created this technology, sat in the back of the theater, making small adjustments in the overall volume.

While Operaworks, another small New York company, has used a different virtual orchestra system for years, this was the first "solo" performance of the RealTime system, without any additional live players.

The big question of course is how it sounded, and to these ears the answer is, better than expected yet still rather odd, and substantially inferior to a live orchestra. For the time being, musicians need not fear that their work will be obviated by computers; this technology still has a long way to go.

That said, Mr. Smith and his partners have achieved some impressive results. The most noteworthy aspect of the system is the way that the programmed elements of pitch and rhythm can be substantially manipulated in live performance to accommodate the demands of phrasing

and rubato. The orchestra, in other words, appeared to follow Mr. Meetze's lead quite aptly, and most of the performance did not have a mechanized rigidity to it. That alone is quite an accomplishment.

It was the physical aspects of the orchestral sound that were subtly disconcerting. With some notable lapses, this system is good at producing the tone of individual instruments (it draws from a giant bank of recorded samples), but the rich timbres and natural acoustic resonances are absent. So is a real sense of blending.

A proper woodwind section for instance is not merely the straight aggregation of several solo instruments; it is a carefully refined and uniquely layered acoustic event. What's more, the computerized version of this sound seemed to lack a focused core, so that when the orchestra was accompanying singers at a quiet volume, it was often completely covered by the brilliance of their live voices.

In matters of articulation, there was also ample room for improvement, particularly with note endings. The computer stops a given note at the correctly appointed time, but a real instrumental cutoff is more than just a flat cessation of sound; it can be sharp-edged or gentle, loud or soft, reverberant or muted. With the virtual orchestra none of these gradations existed.

Finally what I missed most were the tension and excitement that a live orchestra can bring. The introduction that precedes the first entrance of the Queen of the Night, to name just one example, should crackle with electricity (the old-fashioned kind, that is). Conductors can easily elicit this taut dramatic playing from a responsive orchestra, but this feeling simply cannot be sampled and stored on a disc for later use.

The comparison that the organizers would have us make is not between the virtual and real orchestras but between a virtual orchestra and a piano accompaniment, which Mr. Meetze has said would have been the only affordable alternative. These two options are clearly apples and oranges. I would not have minded the piano version, but this technology has ample benefits for singers and audiences intent on something closer to an orchestral experience, however synthetic. For long stretches the RealTime accompaniment was unobtrusive enough to let one focus on the singing and still enjoy a night at the opera.

On Saturday the cast offered much to enjoy. The leads were generally solid, but two singers stood out: Janinah Burnett, with her lushly rendered Pamina, and Kenneth Overton, with a drolly acted and finely sung Papageno. The production by Enrique Abdala was entertainingly if nonsensically futuristic, complete with androids and laser guns.

Will the virtual orchestra replace real players as part of this distant future? For now, anyway, a true symphonic simulacrum is safely in the realm of fantasy.