

BROOKLYN, NY

Amid much controversy — including the resignation of advisory-board members Marilyn Horne and Deborah Voigt — the scrappy, three-year-old Opera Company of Brooklyn presented Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* in a one-night-only performance on August 9 at the Voorhees Theater, using a “virtual orchestra” instead of live musicians. Not unexpectedly, the musicians' union cried foul, perceiving a threat to the future of live music, while the opera company maintained it would have loved to use a live orchestra but couldn't afford it. Regardless of which side one takes in this incendiary debate, it is reasonable to wonder what the virtual orchestras (or “wank-o-trons,” as musicians derisively call them) actually sound like.

Two things must be said here: first, the technology is undeniably impressive. The computer program that runs the virtual orchestra contains digital samples of every orchestral instrument, with a variety of choices for articulation, dynamics and phrasing. In performance, the operator taps one key on a small keyboard in time to the conductor's beat, triggering changes in tempo and advancing from one pre-selected sound bank to the next in sequence. For this production, twenty-eight speakers were strewn across the otherwise spare, platformed stage, each dedicated to a single virtual “instrument,” in an effort to reproduce the physical soundscape of a real orchestra. Obviously, a huge amount of effort goes into the preparation.

That said, however, the virtual orchestra does not sound real. At best, it's a freeze-dried imitation. Despite the lifelike instrumental sampling and flexibility of tempo, the virtual orchestra stands in comparison to a real one much as the HAL 9000 computer in *2001: A Space Odyssey* resembled a real person; the crackle of liveness is chillingly missing. For the time being, at least, the membership of Local 802, American Federation of Musicians, can sleep soundly.

Overlooked in the advance furor over real-versus-fake were the other unconventional elements of this *Zauberflöte*. The director, Enrique Abdala, in a good-natured effort to elucidate confusing plot elements, gave the opera a spoofy, futuristic setting. The Queen of the Night murdered her husband during the overture, and Monostatos (now Chief of Security for planet Earth) and the Queen were presented as nefarious collaborators from the beginning. The rewritten scenes (spoken in English) contained such lines as “We must subject him to the cybernetic chambers of Isis and Osiris and alter his genetic makeup.” Ridiculous, yes, yet entertaining. In such a context, with sci-fi projections, silly space guns, day-glo wigs and three masked androids ambling jerkily around like female C-3POs, why not have computerized music? (The performance, by the way, was mostly well sung and winningly acted by a talented, intrepid young cast.) Still, the question remains: is a virtual orchestra a valid option for a small, cash-strapped opera company that wants options beyond four-handed piano arrangements? Opera Company of Brooklyn may have gotten away with it for this cyber-Flöte, but with a more conventional production, audience tolerance for computerized accompaniment will undoubtedly be much lower.

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