

A SYNTHESIZER PLAYS IN BROOKLYN

By SHIRLEY FLEMING

August 12, 2003 -- THE musicians' union growled, but it did not bite - and Saturday's performance of "The Magic Flute" by the Opera Company of Brooklyn, accompanied by a computerized, or "virtual" orchestra, came off without a hitch.

Not that the prelude was easy. Two of the company's most prominent board members - soprano Deborah Voigt and mezzo Marilyn Horne - resigned over the issue, and Horne voiced a general fear: "The use of synthesizers for opera means we can kiss great singing goodbye."

But there was not a sign of protest outside the Voorhees Theatre that night, and the cast sang its heart out.

The Virtual Orchestra, developed by Realtime Music Solutions, which donated the hall and its services, behaved well. It allowed for pauses and shifts in tempo, thanks to the real-time control of an assistant at the synthesizer, and its surround loudspeakers (nearly 30 of them) created a sense of space.

It sounded a little thin and tinny in the overture, but it never overpowered the singers and they appeared comfortable with their high-tech partner.

Conductor and company founder Jay D. Meetze gives a simple reason for his turn to technology: no money. After two years of live orchestra productions, he could afford only piano accompaniment for his nine operas earlier this season. He says he hopes to return to the real thing in the future.

This "Flute," with minimum trappings and a futuristic setting suggested by slide projections, was a game and often witty theatrical effort, occasionally over the top, but endearing for its shoestring effort.

Some good voices were on display: Kenneth Overton's powerful Papageno stole the show, and Janinah Burnett's vibrant Pamina clearly could fill a much larger house. David Chase was the capable Tamino.

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