

'Wagner on a Shoestring' by Suzanne Chaundy, 25 March 2018

12.30pm: DVD: 'Das Liebesverbot', Act 2
2.00pm: Presentation by Suzanne Chaundy

DVD: Das Liebesverbot Act 2

Wagner's rarely performed early comic opera (1836), based on Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, enjoys its Spanish debut in a new production by director Kaspar Holten. The lively score boasts clear Italian, French and Weberian influences that predate the composer's mature voice, yet the music continually delights with the unmistakable emergence of Wagner's precocious genius. His adaptation of the Bard's play reflects the rebellious mood of a revolutionary Germany, vindicating sensual love and attacking the fanatical repression of sexuality by a puritanical and hypocritical authority.

Ivor Bolton conducts a vibrant cast with the chorus and orchestra from the Teatro Real, Madrid (2016).

'Wagner on a Shoestring' by Suzanne Chaundy

Suzanne Chaundy is a highly regarded director of opera, drama, outdoor spectacle and special events, and will speak about her Wagner productions for Melbourne Opera.



Miki Oikowa and Suzanne Chaundy

She began directing as an undergraduate at the University of Melbourne and was subsequently fast-tracked into the NIDA Directing Course. Best known as an opera director, she began on this path as a trainee director with the Victorian State Opera. Her 2012 production of *Così fan tutte* for Melbourne Opera at Melbourne's Athenaeum Theatre (nominated for Best Director – Green Room Awards) resulted in her becoming something of a regular for the company directing new productions of *Der Freischütz* and *Maria Stuarda* in 2015, *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, *Tannhäuser* and *Anna Bolena* in 2016, *Lohengrin* in 2017 and *Tristan und Isolde* in 2018.

<http://www.melbourneopera.com/creatives/suzanne-chaundy>

Suzanne's talk was a treat – both informative and witty – giving us an introduction to the impressive work that Melbourne Opera has been doing and the use of modern theatre projection techniques that enabled large scale productions of Wagner's operas to be mounted 'on a shoestring'. Suzanne was very engaging, with a bright and clear voice full of the passion she has for theatre. She was helped during her presentation by her assistant director Miki Oikawa with some wonderful illustrations and video clips.

Suzanne started with some personal background, then gave a brief history of Melbourne Opera followed by detailed descriptions of the three Wagner production she has directed. She told us that her uncle had introduced her to theatre, her grandfather was a tenor who loved opera, and she was the youngest ever student in the NIDA Directors course. Since graduating she has earned her living solely from directing theatre, events, outdoor spectaculars and opera. She started with Italian repertoire for the Victorian State Opera, took some time off from opera directing in order to have 3 children, and came back to Melbourne Opera with a new enthusiasm for German language opera.

She explained how Melbourne Opera is a not-for-profit company committed to developing artists, attracting new audiences and charging affordable prices. It receives no government funding – relying on box office takings and the generosity of philanthropic opera lovers. It is a fully professional company but surprisingly it only has one full time member of staff. Chorus members are not paid and come from a wide background – Conservatorium students, professional singers and community enthusiasts. Judging from the samples we heard it has a wonderfully rich and full sound.

Their first German opera was *Rienzi* in 2013, followed by *Der Freischütz*,

then Tannhauser, Lohengrin and Tristan und Isoldewith Der Rosenkavalier and Fleigende Hollander coming up – a remarkably ambitious repertoire achieved on a very tight budget – less that \$.5m per production.

Suzanne explained how the key to keeping the costs down was by having largely modern dress costumes and using new projection techniques. Sets have been a basic series of steps and platforms with large scale still and moving projections behind or all over the set, giving a remarkably wide variety of spatial impressions. Der Freischutz used dynamic images based on German expressionist movies, mainly in black and white with occasional bold colour. Tannhauser used photos and computer animations of beautiful abstract plant, cloud and water images which achieved a remarkably fluid and erotic impression without the need for all the (expensive) dancers called for by Wagner in the libretto. Shadowy pictures of rocks and naked bodies created a stunning three dimensional impression of the Venusberg cave.

Taking on Tannhauser was considered a big risk for the company but it was an outstanding artistic and commercial success and encouraged them to continue with Wagner productions, which have been staged in various Melbourne theatres, according to availability and cost, demonstrating the great flexibility and willingness to take risks that characterises the company. The continuing use of projections has helped save money as less time is needed to set up in the theatre, simpler, cheaper sets are possible and lighting setup is easier.

Suzanne's next production, Lohengrin, had a very strong concept of the new world of Christianity replacing the old tribal 'Viking' world and had a stunning magical effect for the swan – created by animations projected on to vapour – achieving a mystical shadowy image that characters could walk through. This built on the idea that the swan was possibly a mass hallucination. Suzanne explained in detail how the scenes were story-boarded and the animations timed to exactly synchronise with the music. This was illustrated with very evocative video clips. Suzanne expressed her opinion, shared by many others, that even before the invention of movies Wagner was effectively the first great film director and film music composer who has influenced all who came after. The chorus of 90 singers was very impressive.

Tristan und Isolde was the most recent production, presented at the Palais last February. Although dogged by illness it was a striking production. Members from Sydney who attended agreed with the critics that the performances were excellent, with the Isolde, Lee Abrahmsen,

on the verge of an international career. Suzanne was full of praise for all the singers and musicians and especially the film makers. The settings again used projections, with the difference that they were not animations but film. There were some wonderful images of moving water and the last act had some extraordinary Mark Rothko like images followed by what looked like the surface of the sun writhing with solar flares - matching the rapture of the music.

This was a stunning finish to a very stimulating talk. Our president thanked Suzanne and suggested that we should set up a theatre party from Sydney to go down to Melbourne for the next production. Thanks also to Leona, our hardworking vice president who organised the event.

By Mike Day and Mailis Wareham