

Die Zauberflöte/The Merchant of Venice, review

David Pountney's production of Die Zauberflöte disappoints, while Erik Nielsen's The Merchant of Venice is a restitution to remember, says John Allison.



Eye catching: dragons loom large in Die Zauberflöte Photo: Anja Koehler

By John Allison

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David Pountney's decade-long tenure as intendant of the Bregenz Festival has featured some spectacular shows on the famous Lake Stage that dominates Austria's corner of Lake Constance. But, alas, his own final production there will not be remembered as one of them.

Die Zauberflöte (

★★★★★

), conceived as **Mozart's** attempt at mass entertainment, ought to lend itself well to Bregenz's crowd-pleasing style – nightly audiences number 7,000 – but in comparison to several recent productions there, it feels half-hearted.

Of course, no one here expects a philosophical reading of Mozart's endlessly fascinating masterpiece, yet somehow even the most basic Magic Flute ingredients get lost, not least through haphazard cutting of the score. It is little help that Patrick Summers steers the Vienna

Symphony Orchestra through a bumpy and often ponderous ride.

Johan Engels's set is eye-catching, for a few minutes at least. Three multi-storey cartoon dragons dominate the design, joined by suspension bridges and looming over a giant tortoise-back, sculpted from 20 singer-unfriendly steps. Rotating slowly, it reveals either huge inflatable blades of grass for the garden-grove scenes, or a big eye (one wink at masonic symbolism) for the Queen of the Night's domain.

And that is about it. Nearly all the good stunts, the most exciting of which is the giant python that rises out of the lake to catch Tamino, are used up early on – while almost everyone makes a waterborne entrance on craft that go anticlockwise with predictable regularity. The trials of fire and water, which ought to be a gift at Bregenz, are feebly represented. Marie-Jeanne Lecca's costumes spring few surprises.

It's never easy for singers to register with individuality on the Lake Stage, which makes the musically ringing heft of Norman Reinhardt's Tamino all the more impressive. On opening night, Ana Durlovski's Queen and Gisela Stille's Pamina were also notable.

The legacy of Pountney's own productions inside the Festspielhaus is a happier one, not to mention some of the rediscoveries he has also midwived there. Top of that list is surely this summer's world premiere of **The Merchant of Venice** (

★★★★★

) by the Polish-born, British pianist-composer André Tchaikowsky, who laboured for a number of years on his only **opera** before dying of cancer in Oxford in 1982, aged 46. (Notoriously, he bequeathed his skull to the RSC for use in performances of Hamlet.)

A complex, largely forgotten character, Tchaikowsky is eminently worth the trouble Bregenz has taken with his opera. Born Andrzej Krauthammer in Warsaw and smuggled out of the ghetto by his grandmother under the name of Czajkowski, he survived to enjoy success as a pianist, even becoming a finalist in the 1955 Chopin Competition. He left a modest number of published compositions.

At Bregenz, Erik Nielsen's strong yet sensitive baton showed how each note and every orchestral colour in this long, three-act score means something. Darkly lyrical and hard to pin down stylistically, the music is marvellously responsive to John O'Brien's libretto and Shakespeare's moods.

Keith Warner's elegant, flowing production evokes the time of the Dreyfus Affair, yet cleverly

alludes to the skull episode (in the Prince of Morocco's dance), while sensitively suggesting a resemblance between Shylock and the composer himself.

Though Adrian Eröd's poignantly powerful Shylock stood out, the rest of the excellent cast – including Christopher Ainslie's Merchant, Charles Workman's Bassanio and Kathryn Lewek's Jessica – helped make this a restitution to remember.

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