

Missing the Mark

JESSE SIMON

Since its première in 1821, *Der Freischütz* has remained a staple of the German operatic repertoire; indeed, the allegorical tale of a huntsman who enters into an agreement with the devil in exchange for magic bullets has proven so popular that the pressures of keeping it on the stage place it in danger of being musically undervalued. The new production at the Staatsoper thus offered a most welcome opportunity to hear Weber's greatest opera performed by a first rate cast and a well-prepared orchestra, here under the direction of Sebastian Weigle.

On the strength of Anna Prohaska and Dorothea Röschmann alone, one would not hesitate to recommend this new *Freischütz*. The fact that these and other performances of a similarly high quality were forced to gasp for air in such a joylessly oppressive production – a claustrophobic, non-traditional staging that stopped considerably short of provocative – is just one of the many reasons that going to the opera in the twenty-first century can be exhilarating and exasperating in equal measure.

It should be said from the outset that, despite its flaws, Michael Thalheimer's production was far from bad. Had it been merely dreadful, it would have been much easier to sit back and enjoy the music. Instead, it occupied an uncomfortable middle ground: it dispensed with the setting and action described in the libretto – opting instead to situate the narrative in a subterranean tunnel, hewn from coarse black rock – but, in doing so, it somehow failed to be baffling, confrontational or revelatory. It pursued its own vision of the story, but neglected to convey either its emotional or mythological essence to the audience.

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**Berlin, domingo,
18 de enero de
2015.** Schiller

Theater. Carl
Maria von Weber:
Der Freischütz.

Johann Friedrich

Kind, libretto. Michael Thalheimer,
director. Cast: Roman Trekel (Ottokar),
Victor von Halem (Kuno), Dorothea
Röschmann (Agathe), Anna Prohaska
(Ännchen), Falk Struckmann (Kaspar),
Burkhard Fritz (Max), Jan Martinik
(Hermit), Maximilian Krummen (Kilian) y
Peter Moltzen (Samiel). Staatsoper Berlin.
Sebastian Weigle, conductor





Anna Prohaska (Ännchen), Dorothea Röschmann (Agathe) in von Weber's 'Der Freischütz'. Michael Thalheimer, director. Sebastian Weigle, conductor. Berlin, Staatsoper im Schiller Theater, January 2015 © Katrin Ribbe, 2015

Is *Freischütz* fundamentally a dark work with a redemptive conclusion, or a light work with a core of darkness? In this production there was only room for darkness. Although the impressively bleak setting – which, incidentally, bore a not-inconsiderable resemblance to the ‘time-tunnel’ from the late Götz Friedrich’s *Ring cycle* – allowed for a handful of memorable images, it also robbed the Wolf’s Glen scene of its chilling power; without the pastoral splendour of the opening and closing daylight acts, the dark centre of the opera doesn’t seem quite so dark. Instead, the darkness of the production worked against the music without generating the necessary friction (or even irony) to make it seem worth the trouble.

Nor did Mr Thalheimer seem especially interested in the subtleties of Johann Friedrich Kind’s libretto. Much of the dialogue between numbers was cut or shortened, a decision which was undoubtedly designed to remove any references to actions and props that would not appear in the production (admittedly, it would have been strange to have Agathe and Ännchen talking about hanging a picture within the walls of their dismal cave). However the void created by the absence of such dialogue was not filled with enough meaningful action to successfully reorient the narrative; by stripping the folk-tale to its mythic essence, it left only a series of actions and gestures, unconnected by the thread of logic.

In the absence of a gripping story or a plausible setting, much of the focus tended toward the figure of Samiel, the black hunter, brought to life in an unhinged, physical performance from actor Peter Moltzen. With a horned fur hat, a bare torso encrusted with grime, and a few extra pieces of dialogue courtesy of the director, Samiel remained on stage for much of the opera. Although he could not be seen by anyone but Kaspar, he nonetheless spent a good deal of time moving slowly around the characters, yelping like an animal, pretending to direct the movements of the peasant chorus, and staring at the audience (he emerged during the overture and stood at the front of the stage until the curtain went up). Through his presence alone, he formed the inscrutable (and, one might say, insufficient) heart of the

drama.



Peter Moltzen (Samiel) in von Weber's 'Der Freischütz'. Michael Thalheimer, director. Sebastian Weigle, conductor. Berlin, Staatsoper im Schiller Theater, January 2015 © Katrin Ribbe, 2015

Where Mr Thalheimer did succeed was in creating scenes with a prevailing sense of discomfort. In perhaps the most ingenious of these, Agathe and Ännchen both smeared their hands with Eagle's blood (left over from Kaspar's bullet-forging ceremony from the scene before) and then spent the rest of their duet moving around one another trying to keep their hands free from their pristine white dresses. During Kilian's mocking song, the peasants advanced slowly toward Max, crowding him to the very edge of the orchestra pit; they did the same thing to Agathe in the third act. Yet for all the genuine physical awkwardness, the production seemed unwilling to push itself too far. It remained merely uncomfortable when it might have benefitted from being genuinely unsettling.

While it was tempting to try and make sense of the action, it was inevitably more satisfying to listen to the music. Although the character of Ännchen – who was forced, for some reason, to spend the second act walking as though she had two wooden legs – seemed almost entirely inessential to Mr Thalheimer's vision of the story, Anna Prohaska's performance was an undisputed high-point of the evening. Her voice, supple, dynamic and endlessly lithe, made easy work of Weber's fluid melodies, and her aria in the second act was an exquisite triumph.

Possessed of a completely different but equally compelling voice, Dorothea Röschmann's Agathe was also a source of great delight. There is a slight waywardness to Ms Röschmann's voice when she grows excited that verges on the ecstatic, and it imparted a genuine thrill to the most passionate passages of her second act aria. She is, however, at her best when quietly rapturous, and her restrained exclamation 'Welch schöne Nacht' while waiting for Max reached into the audience with an emotional authority – a beautiful mix of

anticipation and reverence – that transcended the disinterested gloom of the production.

There were strong performances to be found among men as well. Victor von Halem – who seems to become more comfortable the lower down the scale he goes – was a stern Kuno, and Roman Trekel made the most of his brief appearance as Prince Ottokar, bringing to the part a necessary air of disaffected authority. Burkhard Fritz's Max was never less than solid and frequently inspired, especially in his anguished first act aria. However, among the men, it was perhaps the Kaspar of Falk Struckmann who was the most captivating. His few key scenes – notably the song at the end of the first act and the Wolf's Glen scene – were delivered with a sense of heightened engagement that would have been compelling in any setting.



Peter Moltzen (Samiel), Victor von Halem (Kuno), Burkhard Fritz (Max), Staatsoperchor in von Weber's 'Der Freischütz'. Michael Thalheimer, director. Sebastian Weigle, conductor. Berlin, Staatsoper im Schiller Theater, January 2015 © © Katrin Ribbe, 2015

From the orchestra, Sebastian Weigle managed to coax a pleasingly lean sound from the orchestra that highlighted the classical antecedents of Weber's score. His reading, while remaining somewhat on the slow side, rarely wanted for drama, detail or a strong sense of line. He took the Adagio of the overture at a remarkably stately pace – the horns, when they appeared, sounded a touch unsteady at such a speed, although they recovered quickly – and despite a few brief passages where agitation got the better of control, he was rarely over-emphatic and never rushed. While his delicate handling of the chamber forces that accompanied Ännchen's two arias was delightful, there was no lack of dramatic flair during the Wolf's Glen scene – here infused with wonderful menace – or the third act denouement.

Between a strong outing from the orchestra and a series of fine vocal performances, the Staatsoper's new *Freischütz* was musically satisfying on just about every level. Its merits as a work of theatre, however, divided the audience: when the production team appeared for

their curtain call, they were greeted with 'boo's and 'bravo's in roughly equal measure. Both reactions seemed entirely too emphatic; while offending purists requires no great skill (the absence of a Bohemian hunting lodge virtually ensured some booing), the production seemed too tame to provoke genuine excitement in those who would favour an experimental approach. It was ultimately unsure whether to challenge or embrace its source material and, through its own uncertainty, ended up trapping the ancient huntsman's myth in a lifeless space between darkness and light.

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