

Sensible Footwear

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The Deutsche Oper's new production of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* was nothing if not troubling. The staging of Jossi Wieler, Anna Viebrock and Sergio Morabito – which replaces the wonderful, if quite traditional Götz Friedrich production after nearly thirty years – had numerous great ideas and a few terrible ones; it conjured a convincing world and populated it with well-realised characters, then allowed entire scenes to fall flat. There was some very good singing and even a few moments of great singing, but also passages of extreme disarray. It was an evening about which it was impossible to feel anything other than ambivalent.

The staging was not without promise: the directors transplanted the action from sixteenth-century Nürnberg to a present-day music conservatory owned by Veit Pogner, attended by a select group of students (the apprentices), and staffed by a rogue's gallery of professorial stereotypes (the masters). Somewhat inexplicably, the faculty also included Hans Sachs, who seemed to be the academy's resident physiotherapist; it was unclear whether or not he was also a professor of music – the programme booklet informed us he was – but he seemed responsible more for yoga and foot massages than harmony and counterpoint.

(It was perhaps telling that the synopsis included in the programme booklet described not the story of *Meistersinger* as conceived by Wagner, but rather the story of this particular staging, taking care to fill in some of the gaps and elaborate on the directorial concept. Although helpful, it also seemed the operatic equivalent of adding a voice-over in post-production to make sense of an incoherent film; even with the clarifications, some of the action on stage was still baffling.)

Sachs was the most plausible, most completely realised character in the staging, and also by far the least likeable. He had an air of cheap spirituality – the kind that conflates physical well-being with moral virtue – and the laid-back, free-spirited vibe that allowed him to

Wieler, Viebrock,
Morabito. Die
Meistersinger
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Oper Berlin. Wagner: Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg. Jossi Wieler, Anna Viebrock, and Sergio Morabito, directors. Johan Reuter (Hans Sachs). Albert Pesendorfer (Veit Pogner). Gideon Poppe (Kunz Vogelgesang). Simon Pauly (Konrad Nachtigall). Philipp Jekal (Sixtus Beckmesser). Thomas Lehman (Fritz Kothner). Jörg Schörner (Balthasar Zorn). Clemens Bieber (Ulrich Eißlinger). Burkhard Ulrich (Augustin Moser). Stephen Bronk (Hermann Ortel). Tobias Kehrer (Hans Schwarz). Byung Gil Kim (Hans Foltz). Klaus Florian Vogt (Walther von Stolzing). Ya-Chung Huang (David). Heidi Stober (Eva). Annika Schlicht (Magdalena). Günther Groissböck (Night Watchman). Chorus and Orchestra of the Deutsche Oper Berlin. Markus Stenz, conductor

show up to staff meetings in bare feet was wholly consistent with someone who would have zero qualms about sleeping with his students. In the cloistered world of the academy, where everyone both lived and studied, there were undoubtedly some messy student/teacher entanglements – Magdalena and David, for example – but Sachs had the singular lack of judgement to have developed a long-term, albeit fairly casual sexual relationship with Pogner’s daughter.

The decision to make the relationship between Eva and Sachs explicitly physical was perhaps the staging’s greatest stroke of inspiration. It was amusing in the second act to watch Sachs get intimate with Eva only to back away and start staking out his independence the moment she mentioned the possibility of marriage; and in the third act, Sachs’s jealousy and anger gained in pathos, while Eva’s subsequent monologue was illuminated by the pain of letting go. Like *Rosenkavalier*, this *Meistersinger* was concerned with the difficult transition from an untenable relationship to a potentially more sustainable one; unlike the Marschallin, however, Sachs gained little nobility from his selfless act of rejection.



Wagner: *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*
Markus Stenz, conductor. Jossi Wieler,
Anna Viebrock, and Sergio Morabito,
directors. Deutsche Oper Berlin, June
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Indeed, Sachs seemed to grow less likeable as the staging went on. It is rare that one reaches the end of the second act feeling such sympathy for Beckmesser – a character about whom the staging had no strong feelings – and even less frequent that the final ten minutes of the third act leave such a bitter taste. Sachs’s final speech, a shameless appeal to popular taste over academic erudition, and his snatching the reins of leadership from a crestfallen Pogner emerged more as a victory of selfishness and vanity than an affirmation of artistic principles; neither the apprentices nor the masters (save for one devoted acolyte) seemed very happy about it. Certainly the Sachs of the libretto stands up to such a reading, and the decision of the directors to reveal the charismatic villain beneath the benevolent façade offered unorthodox insight into one of Wagner’s most fascinating characters; yet for those in the audience who view Sachs as a pillar of nobility, it may have been something of a letdown.

If the story of Eva’s liberation from Sachs gave the staging its guiding force – Walther, if nothing else, seemed like a decent guy – it was supported by a handful of other intriguing ideas: the vaguely cultish atmosphere of the conservatory, compounded by an unusually sinister Pogner, gave the opening act a uniquely disquieting edge, and the looks of disgust and outrage on the faces of the female apprentices when Pogner announced his intention to marry his daughter to the winner of the competition were an elegant acknowledgment of the allowances a modern audience must make in order to enter fully into the world of the opera.

In the second act, however, the staging collided abruptly with the limitations of its concept. The directors, having demonstrated their command of skilfully-wrought characters and complex stage action, somehow managed to bobble the tone of their own creation while missing out on the charm and comedy of what is undoubtedly the most charming, most

comedic act in all of Wagner. From the opening scene, which featured a long, laboured bacchanal of the apprentices, everything felt remarkably off; and things went downhill rapidly with the arrival of Beckmesser. With no shoes to cobble, Sachs was reduced to dumping a bin-bag full of multi-coloured Crocs onto the stage where Beckmesser was trying to give a recital of his song, then marking the song by hitting Beckmesser's piano – used here instead of the standard lute – with drumsticks.

Throughout the scene one could feel the dialogue veering further and further from the action on stage; but instead of recontextualising the libretto, the jarring gap between words and action simply caused the scene to lapse into incoherence. And if the climactic riot is notoriously difficult to stage convincingly, the directors built to a remarkably low level of energy: David attempted to whip Beckmesser with a curiously resilient bouquet of flowers, the apprentices decided to have a fairly tame dance party on stage, and Sachs sat zen-like on top of the piano until coming down and bashing Walther over the head with an also curiously resilient whiskey bottle.

The third act managed to repair some of the damage of the second, but also had its own lapses of judgment. Why, one might ask, did the arrival of the guilds and dance of the apprentices turn into a horror-movie nightmare set entirely in David's head? If there was a good reason, the staging kept it to itself. There were a few interesting symbolic threads that ran through the evening: one could judge the moral and spiritual state of the various characters by their level of back pain, and the footwear favoured by each character seemed to act as a sort of thematic index. Yet such details were not quite sufficient to overcome to the larger gaps in the action.

The production's greatest musical asset was Klaus Florian Vogt who has made a specialty of Walther in recent years, but who on this evening appeared to have uncovered new depths of vocal and physical expression. In the first act alone, his 'Am stillen Herd' opened with a subtle reticence, suggesting palpable trepidation, then blossomed to heights of wonder as he became lost in youthful memories; his trial song was madly exuberant, perfectly controlled but wild enough to upset the masters; and there was a wonderful note of overwhelmed resignation in his conversation with David. The first and final drafts of the prize song were both highlights of the third act – the latter polished and graceful, the former sparkling with improvisatory inspiration – although Mr Vogt has never given Walther's set-pieces anything less than the majesty they deserve. What was most notable about his performance on this evening was an ability to weave the various showcase moments into a subtly-delineated, fully-realised character.



Wagner: Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg. Markus Stenz, conductor. Jossi Wieler, Anna Viebrock, and Sergio Morabito, directors. Deutsche Oper Berlin, June 2022. © 2022 by Thomas Aurin.

Johan Reuter offered a near-faultless rendering of the staging's vision of Sachs, capturing both the surface of intense charisma and the self-serving vanity that lay just beneath. His performance seemed to benefit from the energy of interaction, and if his two solo scenes seemed more pragmatic than poetic – the Wahn monologue marched forward instead of soaring upwards – his subtle command of the meeting in act one, and the dramatic

spontaneity that drove his scenes with Walther, Beckmesser and Eva in the third act placed him firmly at the centre of the action.

Between the dominating presence of Sachs, the emotional volatility of Walther, and the increasing bewilderment of the staging, Heidi Stober's Eva spent much of the second act forced to the sidelines. In the third act, however, she revealed a voice of generous presence and pleasingly silvery tone: the startling 'O Sachs! Mein Freund' emerged less as a response to Sachs's jealousy than a sudden moment of clarity, a cathartic outpouring of honest feeling that cleared away the messy emotional turmoil of the earlier scenes. The same radiance and clarity carried over to the quintet in which she was the dominant force.

Although Magdalena was somewhat neglected by the staging, Annika Schlicht gave a strong reading, often severe but edged with moments of warmth. Ya-Chung Huang had a high, clear tone and flexible delivery that worked well for David, and his lithe enumeration of the tones was notable for its nuanced shading and expressive personality. Philipp Jekal was a nicely understated Beckmesser, forced by the staging to walk with varying degrees of feigned back and leg distress, but nonetheless able to deliver his lines with a clean, fastidious elegance that never overemphasized the character's pedantry; although the staging made little of his relationship with Sachs, he escaped the second act with considerably more dignity than anyone else. As Veit Pogner, Albert Pesendorfer had a depth of tone and solemnity of manner that imparted a welcome air of authority to his scenes.

In the finale of the second act and, most notably, in the interlude of the third act there were a handful of moments during which the orchestra, the choir and the on- and off-stage brass and drum ensembles seemed wholly disconnected from one another; the chorus of the guilds was especially chaotic. This may have been due to the very late replacement of Donald Runnicles – who was forced to withdraw due to shoulder surgery – by Marcus Stenz, and it seems certain that such moments will be ironed out in the course of subsequent performances. There were, however, a number of unusual elements in Mr Stenz's reading, which seemed generally more attuned to the score's smaller-scale textural flourishes than its moments of bracing grandeur. The overture had a contrapuntal clarity that gave equal weight to the various themes, but some of the more invigorating passages sounded curiously restrained. Small moments were often delightful in their attention to detail, while grand scenes could just as easily lapse into chaos or indifference.

If productions are judged on their ability to make an audience reconsider a familiar work, the new *Meistersinger* at the Deutsche Oper must be deemed a success. Whether or not one enjoyed the staging, or approved of the attitude of its directors towards the text, there were enough fascinating insights to deepen one's appreciation of an opera whose very immortality comes from the endless adaptability of its characters and situations. Yet insight will only go so far, and the staging, in attempting to posit its observations, was often forced to venture too far from the libretto, leaving entire scenes to languish. If the staging was troubling it was not because it forced us to consider the darker side of a much-loved character, but because it wasn't always able to integrate its fascinating insights into a coherent vision of the story.

