

## Live Performances

### Where it all began: Fairies in Leipzig

*Mark Berry is enchanted by both Wagner's first opera and Oper Leipzig's new production*

*Die Feen.* Igor Durlovski (Fairy King, Voice of Groma), Christiane Libor (Ada), Viktorija Kaminskaite (Zemina), Jean Broekhuizen (Farzana), Arnold Bezuyen (Arindal), Eun Yee You (Lora), Detlef Roth (Moral), Jennifer Porto (Drolla), Milcho Borovinov (Gernot), Guy Mannheim (Gunther), Roland Schubert (Harald), Tae Hee Kwon (Messenger), Lukas Gosch, Leon Heilmann (Children of Ada and Arindal); Chorus of Oper Leipzig, Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra/Ulf Schirmer; Renaud Doucet (director), André Barbe (set and costume designer), Guy Simard (lighting). Leipzig Opera House, 20 April 2013

Wagner's attempts to have his first completed opera staged were to no avail. It would eventually be staged in Munich in 1888, five years after the composer's death, a production that received numerous repeat performances; thereafter, stagings and concert performances alike have proved at best sporadic. Angelo Neumann staged the work in Prague in 1893, as part of his cycle to commemorate the eightieth anniversary of Wagner's birth and the tenth of his death. The first Leipzig performance took place in 1938, conducted by Paul Schmitz and directed by Hans Schüler, with designs by Max Elten, forming part of another cycle, in this case the *Geburtstadt's* celebrations for Wagner's 125th birthday. In more recent years, especially celebrated was Wolfgang Sawallisch's 1983 cycle of the complete operas, from which *Die Feen* was made available on an outstanding CD set (Orfeo 62833). Other stagings have been proffered by Munich (Gärtnerplatz, 1989), Kaiserslautern and Würzburg (2005), and the Châtelet (2009, on period instruments). Though the present production is offered in collaboration with the Bayreuth Festival, Bayreuth's performance of *Die Feen* was, somewhat oddly, and unlike those of *Das Liebesverbot* and *Rienzi*, to be in concert. (None of those performances belonged to the Festival proper, instead taking place in July, in the Stadthalle.) The opera would not be staged in Britain until 1969, under the auspices of the Midland Music Makers Grand Opera Society. The Chelsea Opera Group, as is its custom, gave the work in concert earlier this year; although it performed a signal service in making Londoners aware of *Die Feen*, and in presenting a splendid assumption of Ada's part by Elisabeth Meister, a severely underrehearsed orchestral performance left one needing more, which was certainly achieved in this excellent new production from Oper Leipzig.

It is a splendid work, at times perhaps 'immature', yet far superior to a number of works, even oeuvres, that bafflingly continue to hold the operatic stage. For the Wagnerite, and indeed for those with any interest in musical history, there is considerable additional pleasure to be derived from the parlour game of identifying both the many influences upon the work and the ways in which it offers a true starting point for Wagner's subsequent explorations. According to Wagner, in *Mein Leben*:



Fairies above, humanity below. Copyright: Kirsten Nijhof. Christiane Libor (Ada), Arnold Bezuyen (Arindal).

While I had written [the incomplete, preceding work] *Die Hochzeit* without operatic embellishments and treated the material in the darkest vein, this time I festooned the subject with the most manifold variety: beside the principal pair of lovers I depicted a more ordinary couple and even introduced a coarse and comical third pair, which belonged to the operatic convention of servants and ladies' maids. As to the poetic diction and the verses themselves, I was almost intentionally careless about them. I was not nourishing my former hopes of making a name as a poet; I had really become a 'musician' and a 'composer' and wanted simply to write a decent libretto, for I now realized nobody else could do this for me, inasmuch as an opera book is something unique unto itself and cannot be easily brought off by poets and literati.<sup>1</sup>

And so of course, it would continue, Wagner furnishing all of his own musico-dramatic texts, even if in this instance he reworks – perhaps too modest a verb – Carlo Gozzi. One may trace a multitude of other continuities or presentiments, not least the idea of the forbidden question, albeit the other way round from *Lohengrin*, at least in terms of gender: Ada, the half-fairy, half-mortal, has agreed to marry Arindal, the King of Tramond, with the condition that he never ask her who she is. *Die Feen*, however, is no tragedy; for, after inevitably having asked the question, having therefore seen Ada disappear, and having followed her to the underworld, where, Orpheus-like

<sup>1</sup> Richard Wagner, *My Life*, tr. Andrew Gray, ed. Mary Whittall (Cambridge, 1983), 72.



Wagner as Fairy King. Copyright: Tom Schulze. Igor Durlovski (Fairy King).

(a tribute to Wagner's beloved Gluck?), he restores her to life with voice and lyre, Arindal gains immortality and joins Ada in the land of the fairies. Immortality would, of course, become a curse or chimera to the later, Feuerbachian Wagner; consider Wotan. Here, however, the trials Arindal must undergo both recall *The Magic Flute* and presage *Die Frau ohne Schatten*. That is not, of course, to say that *Die Feen* itself is a crucial link between Mozart and Strauss – though Wagner certainly is, and Strauss actually served as assistant conductor for that Munich premiere – but rather to remind ourselves that so many of the ideas on which dramatists draw are part of common currency, not least the resolutely unsentimental fairytale. And then, there is Arindal's hallucinatory Wild Hunt, which cannot but have us think of *Gurrelieder*.

I could happily continue with respect to the 'dramatic' content, yet ought at least briefly to say something in similar vein, if equally selective, about the music. For instance, there is a second-act figure that naggingly anticipates *Tristan*, and the choral writing certainly at times looks forward to *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*. Looking back, Weber, Marschner, and only slightly less, Beethoven and Mendelssohn loom large in the general music language, this being a more unalloyed 'German' opera than either of its two immediate successors, *Das Liebesverbot* and *Rienzi*, though the Italian and French influences upon those works have often been exaggerated. In any case, the broader point is that, for Wagner at this time, standing firmly in a dominant tradition of 18th-century German aesthetics, perhaps the key to understanding 'German art' was its power of synthesis, overcoming merely 'national' styles to progress, in his later Zurich 'reform' language, toward the universal.

Wagner's subsequent intellectual journey, via Feuerbach's *Thoughts on Death and Immortality*, complicates the notion of 'German art' further. It is fitting, then, that Romanticism is both embraced and kept at a distance. (There is more than a little Romanticism in Feuerbach's writings and indeed in Schopenhauer's too.) At the time of writing, it was, especially in its German manifestation, a somewhat problematical notion. (One might ask, in Goethian fashion, whether it has ever not been.) In the context of Metternichian repression, Heine and Young Germany suspected and attacked Romanticism's reactionary tendencies, yet its progressive – a loaded word, but let us have that pass just for the moment – seeds were far from fruitless yet, especially in the musical world. The celebratory final scene, in some senses perhaps an early presentiment of the Festival Meadow Scene from *Die Meistersinger*, is thus neither presented

nor received straightforwardly. As ever with Wagner, we are left with more questions than we started with.

Renaud Doucet has a background in dance, though he has now directed a good number of operas too. In this staging, metatheatricality is worn lightly, humorously, yet tellingly. Following a Saturday evening family meal, a father tunes in to a live broadcast of *Die Feen* from Oper Leipzig. (A nice touch is his turning up the volume for the Overture as the conductor does similarly in the pit.) The rest of the family departs, leaving him in peace to listen. Music becomes the key to the work as a whole; it enlists his emotions, transforms his understanding. In something of a modern fairytale, his living room becomes the performance space, not entirely unlike *The Nutcracker*, or indeed, closer to home, the tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann. Romantic, pseudo-Nazarene medievalism, Wagner's (relative) youth, and our own time come together, in a (*Midsommer Night's?*) dream-like mélange that prompts rather than answers our questions. What might seem a counterpart to all-too-comfortable *Biedermeier* home life soon has its tensions exposed. Although the paterfamilias – and he is at best a weak example of the type – welcomes back his wife at the end of the broadcast, and leaves Ada to the fairies, beret-clad Wagner included, will he tire of his quotidian existence and hanker again after the immortality of that other world, that to which, as Arindal, he had exceptionally been admitted?

Ulf Schirmer's conducting of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra proved well-judged. Early Romantic influences were apparent, but so, as in the staging, were hints – and sometimes rather more than hints – of what was to come. A phrase here or there might be ever so slightly underlined, or so I fancied, to alert one to a similarity with a phrase in *Lohengrin*, and indeed beyond. More importantly, the straining even at this stage towards through-composition was readily apparent, without entirely undermining the 'number' structure of this Romantic opera. Wagner without a great, or at least a very good, orchestra is a waste of everyone's time; the dark, 'German' sonorities of the Gewandhaus Orchestra suited *Die Feen* to a tee.

The cast was strong too. Early Wagner, like early Mozart or early Beethoven, does not take kindly to condescension; there was not a hint of that here. First among equals was Christiane Libor's stunning Ada, her insane, *Abscheulicher*-to-the-nth-degree aria fully realising Wagner's Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient-inspired vision. Arnold Bezuyen, quite understandably, tired a little at one point as Arindal, but otherwise impressed with a fine combination of heft and tone. Detlef Roth was everything one might have hoped for as Morald, words and vocal line in properly Wagnerian, even musico-dramatic, tandem. Jennifer Porto and Milcho Borovinov delighted as Drolla and Gunther, their *buffa* duet, often cut, triumphantly vindicated by its inclusion here – even though one could readily tell that it marked for Wagner more or less the end of a line, give or take a *Liebesverbot*. Only Eun Yee You's Lora was a little disappointing; the voice simply sounded too small and tuning was more than occasionally awry. Choral singing was of a consistently high standard throughout, as was stage direction of the chorus.

London and many other cities desperately need a first-class performance of this wonderful work. If none of our companies can marshal the resources for a new production – and frankly, it is a matter of priorities; there is no reason why it should not be done – then this staging should tour as a matter of urgency. Let us hope, also, for a DVD release.