

Unplanned, always new “Meistersingers”

Christian Thielemann’s Wagner Series threatened by Viruses...

The singer-switchboard on the second floor of the Vienna State Opera is extremely busy right now. It is not a question of replacing just any role, but the most important ones in Wagner’s *Meistersinger*. Hardly any opera in the repertoire is more difficult to cast. However, it is this opera that is currently on the programme five times, to be ultimately recorded on DVD in the venerated Otto Schenk production with new stars under the baton of Christian Thielemann.

Johan Botha, who was to sing Stolzing, had to cancel (after the opening night) the second performance as well. Michael Schade, as David, who for opening night was replaced by the lively Norbert Ernst, was on Wednesday back in form. For Botha, however, they desperately needed a replacement. As the courageous Peter Seiffert unavailable, they brought in by jet from New York the American Raymond Very. He arrived around noon in Vienna to perform the murderous role, which is a challenge of a special kind, even though he had sung the role impeccably in houses like the Semper Opera under Fabio Luisi in October 2007.

Now Very’s beautiful lyric tenor is everything but big and mighty. In order not to let him not sound light, Thielemann muted the philharmonic sound in pianissimo, not heard like this for as long time, and the orchestra demonstrated its extraordinary capability. And it showed itself world class, maintaining the drive and the engaging verses of Stolzing’s presentation songs in Act 1, even if the dynamics in the piano passages are reduced, with no loss to the beauty of sound.

This second evening was full of sound miracles, maybe due to consideration for the health problems of the singers. Also, the musicians had to adjust to Falk Struckmann as Sachs, who performed with style, although he had to fight an indisposition in the middle act that lasted to the end.

Lovely Lied singing by Schade

Michael Schade’s David provided a remarkable, lyric contrast to the art of his colleague Norbert Ernst, who had saved the first performance. Schade sings with a great line, his verses in the cobbler’s workshop are a beautiful lively climax of his interpretation.

In view of the problems with the Meistersinger concept that has already seen many cancellations due too illness (we are looking forward to the third performance on Saturday), friends of the opera understand why an opera director in the eighties decreed that January was a month too dangerous for great voice and he therefore reserved the month exclusively to ballet!

Translated by JPS