

'Die Meistersinger' truly triumphant

By Janelle Gelfand • jgelfand@enquirer.com • June 24, 2010

Cincinnati Opera brought the Queen City into its performance of Wagner's "Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg," when the pageant of mastersingers came up Music Hall's aisles, the hall's old bricked-up windows glowed like stained glass, and the May Festival Chorus, as the townspeople, rose from their seats in the gallery and sang "Wach auf!" (Awake) in praise of their beloved Hans Sachs.

It was a moment that ingeniously linked Cincinnati's own singing society tradition with its German forebears.

Cincinnati Opera's "Die Meistersinger," which opened Wednesday night, was a triumph that held the audience of nearly 2,200 rapt for most of six hours (including intermissions) and often caused them to laugh out loud. It was a production of enormous beauty, marked by rapturous singing, gentle comedy and majestic playing by the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra.

The triumph was even more impressive, given that the company had endured a series of setbacks, from a change of its planned production to the recent turnover of its announced conductor, James Levine, and six leading cast members.

In the end, artistic director Evans Mirageas assembled a top-notch cast to replace the first one, and the orchestra was in excellent hands with the Metropolitan Opera's John Keenan. One could not have wished for more seamless staging than that by Chris Alexander, who allowed the humanity of these characters to shine through.

And one could not have wished for a finer Hans Sachs than James Johnson, who emerged at the end of the lengthy evening as the real hero in this tale. His rich portrayal was warmly dignified and effortless, and rang true whether he was philosophizing over mankind's folly or struggling with his own emotions regarding the young beauty, Eva.

The story is Wagner's warmest, taking place in 16th-century Nuremberg, where the tradesmen are members of an elite guild of mastersingers and the art of songwriting is held supreme. The goldsmith Veit Pogner offers his daughter's hand in marriage to the one who pens the best song. But the mastersingers are challenged when a wandering knight, oblivious to their rules, enters the picture as a contender.

Johnson was stirring as the widowed cobbler, a wise elder statesman and the town's finest mastersinger. He communicated powerfully, summoning a range of emotion in his two great monologues. He never wavered vocally or dramatically throughout the evening, despite the extraordinary demands of his role.

John Horton Murray was the self-possessed knight Walther, who swaggered with self-confidence and wielded a heroic tenor. After initial pitch difficulties in the treacherous "Prize Song," he triumphed in

his final rendition, tackling its high tessitura fearlessly. And if his delivery was somewhat rushed, Keenan stayed with his every note.

In her role debut as Eva, Twyla Robinson projected a sumptuous voice and a believable portrayal of the young woman who is torn between the elder Sachs and her young knight. The Finnish bass Johann Tilli added distinction as her father, Pogner, who magnanimously promised his worldly goods and his daughter to the winner.

Providing the evening's comic relief, Hans-Joachim Ketelsen, surely the world's leading Beckmesser, gave a very funny portrayal of the fussy town clerk. His serenade to his intended bride, which is foiled by Sachs' hammering, will not soon be forgotten.

As David, Sachs' apprentice, Norbert Ernst was a fine singing actor with a focused tenor, who gave a lively demonstration of the songwriting rules. He was well-matched with Magdalene, Eva's nurse, strongly sung by Maria Zifchak.

The large cast, in period costumes, included a fine component of mastersingers and a large chorus of apprentices and townsfolk. One of the evening's most memorable scenes was the Act II riot (K. Jenny Jones, fight coach), well-staged mayhem that disappeared as quickly as it began when the formidable Morris Robinson made his appearance as the Night Watchman.

The tale took place amid an engaging, realistic set designed by Günther Schneider-Siemssen (a stunning find from Düsseldorf, Germany), **with magical lighting by Thomas C. Hase.**

In the pit, Keenan was a dynamic leader, who propelled tempos, illuminated inner details and beautifully shaped Wagner's noble themes. The Act III prelude was breathtaking for its internal mood, as well as its glowing horn chorale. The musicians responded with precise, fresh playing, despite the challenge of performing nearly five hours of music.

"Die Meistersinger" repeats at 6 p.m. Saturday in Music Hall. Tickets: 513-241-2742, <http://www.cincinnatiopera.org/>.