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Magic & Bullets Souls for Sale

An English-speaking design team boldly reimagines
a German opera favorite in Vienna

By: David Barbour

The art of Maria von Weber's *Der Freischütz* is not well-known in the US, even among opera fans, thanks to a paucity of productions here; it is, however, a favorite in Germany, making all the more intriguing Christian Rätz's high-concept production, which opened at the Vienna State Opera in June. It proved to be controversial with reviewers—in a sure sign of its innovative quality, there were audience protests on opening night—but it offers a visually alluring take on a piece that, staged straightforwardly, runs the risk of seeming quaintly folkloric. Working with an English-speaking design team, Rätz reinvented a beloved work—making the central character's dilemma more relevant for today's audiences and delivering a production filled with visual provocations.

The title of *Der Freischütz* translates, roughly, as *The Marksman* and its action, which contains echoes of Goethe's *Faust*, focuses on the timeless conventions of village life. Johann Friedrich Kind's libretto, based on a German folk legend, focuses on Max, a young forester in Bohemia at the end of the Thirty Years' War. Max loves Agathe and hopes to replace her father, Cuno, in the head forester job. To earn both these prizes, he must win a marksmen's competition—which is bad news, as Max has suddenly lost the ability to hit his targets. Caspar, a tragic local figure who is about to lose his soul to the devil, thanks to a deal made many years earlier, schemes to win more time on earth by persuading Max to cast a set of magic bullets that will guarantee his success—an arrangement that would also doom his soul. Meeting with Caspar in the nearby Wolf's Glen—a wild and strange forest location—for the casting of the bullets, Max demurs until Samiel, aka The Black Huntsman—a Satanic figure—appears, quelling Max's fears by conjuring up a vision of Agathe killing herself if he loses the shooting match. Max

nevertheless demands to use his own bullets, but Caspar switches them, leaving Max open to being claimed by Samiel when he shoots on the morrow.

In Rätz's production, this sequence of events was transformed, and a new interpretation was layered onto the action of the libretto. "Establishing the visual world of the performance was a challenge," says production designer Gary McCann. "There's no obvious depth to the simple folk tale that the narrative hinges on."

Instead, the director and designer reenvisioned the story in terms of a struggling, blocked artist. "Christian and I came up with a theatrical dreamscape—in which we reveal to the audience the workings of a man's imagination," McCann says. In their version, "Max is a musician and composer, a troubled young man who is excluded from society and prone to seduction by malevolent characters. This initial idea evolved into the thought that Max is Weber himself, whom we see during the performance as actively involved in the construction of the opera we are watching. In effect, we have two layers of narrative unfolding simultaneously."

(McCann, who is new to these pages, was born in Northern Ireland and is now based in Sussex, England and Berlin. His recent credits include *Le Cenerentola* di Tilo at Opéra de Lausanne, a UK/International tour of the musical *Saturday Night Fever*, *Ariadne auf Naxos* and *The Flying Dutchman* with the Nederlandse Reisopera, *The Golden Cockerel* at Santa Fe Opera, and *Folly!*, a pair of installations, commissioned by the UK's National Trust, at Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire. He is currently preparing designs for *Anna Bolena*, which will travel from Switzerland to Belgium and then on to Oman and Spain.)

"To me, the metanarrative we developed really makes a lot of sense in the context of the time the opera was origi-

Photo: Anne Rastbach / Theaterphoto

OPERA



Above: The stage is stripped bare at the beginning of the Wolf's Glen scene. Dunn's imagery extends McCann's set design, seemingly to the infinity point. Opposite: Hase uses stark sidelight to carve the singers out of the darkness.

nally presented," McCann continues. "If you look at the core ideology behind German Romanticism, time and again you come across the idea of an artist delving into the depths of his unconscious in order to explore the darkest aspects of his soul. The exciting aspect of this concept is how it unlocked our own sense of creativity and freedom in building the *Freischütz* world." Indeed, the production provides many bizarre and captivating images suggestive of psychological dislocation and spiritual torment.

With the notion of Max as Weber in place, McCann came up with a scenic concept that merges the opera's sylvan settings with the concept of an opera-within-an-opera, complete with an onstage audience of decayed Viennese gentry. The basic set design is represented by a cage-like series of leaded windows that seem to extend into infinity as they move upstage. "It's almost like a holodeck," the designer says, referring to the virtual reality environment seen on *Star Trek*. "It's a void-like black tun-

nel into which characters and scenic elements, including rows of old theatre seats and dense clusters of pine trees arrive magically, sliding or rising into view."

From the beginning, notes McCann, who also designed the costumes, the metatheatrical elements are in place: "We see Weber as Max, at the piano, composing the overture; he wrestles with various musical motifs, laying pages of musical scores on the floor or tearing them up." The piano becomes a visual leitmotif that appears in different contexts as the performance unfolds. "We have a rotting red front cloth, made of 50m-wide velvet and painted to look like it was covered in moss. At the end of the overture, a gunshot is heard, and the chorus is revealed behind it. This scene, notionally set in the village, features choral music which has a mocking, satirical element. Rather than being a critical village society watching a gun competition, the cast are presented as a theatre audience clothed in decrepit suits and evening gowns, in a style which fuses

contemporary and 19th century elements. Their dress is deliberately animalistic, with fur, leather, and feathers. Another important part of our cast are extras wearing realistic bird masks, like the seven crows which haunt Max, representing the darkest manifestations of his psyche. His muse is a white dove, who is killed and subsequently revealed covered in blood."

Overall, McCann says, "The set operates as a giant display cabinet, in which one would house a trophy. It's a space in which the characters feel suffocated by strict social conventions. Agathe's cottage is defined by another glass wall that flies in; beyond this, you see a vista of theatre seats and pine trees. Max also has glass boxes, containing a stuffed crow and dove, on top of his piano." McCann notes that the set is built of Perspex with timber framing. "We spent much time getting the paint finish right; it had to be sprayed in a particular way for the lighting [by Thomas Hase] to get through. The portals, which frame the fronts of the sidewalls, are opaque; the timber is painted with a silvery metallic finish.

"The greatest challenge in presenting *Der Freischütz* is the famous Wolf's Glen scene—the moment Max and Caspar commune with the Devil and create seven magical bullets which will unfailingly hit their target. The libretto goes into great detail about the many strange visions revealed to Max during the ritual—a giant owl with glowing eyes, a flaming chariot in the sky, and so on. Christian and I had little interest in presenting what was proposed here. Instead, we start off the sequence in an infinite black corridor; it's the first time the space is empty and it is extended by Nina [Dunn, the projection designer; more about this in

a minute]. Our concept is that, going into the Wolf's Glen, we are really going into the most tormented depths of our composer's imagination. Rather than throwing a huge forest set at the stage, we strip it bare, making it oppressively empty. Then we introduce all sorts of things—pieces of the floor move mysteriously and whole sections of the set have offstage twins which slide on and off, carrying people, trees, and theatre seats. It climaxes with the piano coming onstage and bursting into flames: it is the crucible for the magic bullets, and the characters throw pieces of the score into the fire. Samuel is lowered, upside down, from the ceiling; this ends the first act."

Nina Dunn, the production's projection designer, worked with McCann to extend and expand upon his stage imagery. "I am very interested in forced perspective," McCann says. "You can see numerous examples of it in my designs. This, however, was one of the more extreme examples. The set is 10m deep, with an extreme rake. It was an interesting challenge to explore the use of front and rear projection to such a strong degree. The upstage screen became a blank canvas for lighting and projections."

"All my work comes from what the design is," she says. "Gary created this magic box, and the idea was that, throughout the opera, we would be blurring the boundaries between reality and unreality. It could open up to become a forest, a tunnel, or, perhaps, just tricks of one's mind."

(Dunn, who also makes her debut in these pages, is also UK-based, with credits that include Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen*, at Chichester Festival Theatre; the musical *Miss Littlewood*, at Royal Shakespeare Company; another



OPERA



In this version, Max, originally a marionette, is a blocked, struggling composer.

musical, *The Assassination of Katie Hopkins*, at Theatr Clwyd in Flintshire, Wales; and a live artwork, *Dynamic Shift*, at the Barbican in London.)

Arguably, the most show-stopping of Dunn's images are those that seemingly extend McCann's design to astonishing depths. So seamless is the match-up between scenery and imagery that, at the time, the result fooled everyone. "At one point," Dunn says, "Thomas [Hase] was scratching his head, and he's normally very calm. I said, 'Are you all right?'" He said, 'I can't light those trees onstage'—and it was because he was trying to light my projections. At one point, I didn't even recognize where the set ended, and the projection began." The task was harder than it looks: "I had to bring in versions in different colors and intensities" to match the set under a variety of lighting looks, and to ensure a perfect blend of design elements. Also, she says, "There's a series of lateral set moves, and my images have to move as well."

One major challenge, Dunn notes, involved "moments where I needed to replicate an effect that I was producing onstage on the virtual set on the BP. The most obvious of these were a whirlpool effect, a lighting strobe, and, of course, the fire." The latter effect covers the stage during the burning-piano sequence in the Wolf's Glen sequence.

"For this, I had to have a fair idea of how it would read, and it was a good test of my storyboarding and previz methods. I choose previz methods according to the project; for this, I opted for my basic version of mocking everything up in After Effects, using virtual lights, 3D planes, and transfer modes. For the effects described above, I would create the effect for the stage, then place it on my virtual set in After Effects, adjust the virtual lighting, set the transfer modes, then render two versions—one with the set in the picture and one without. Then the timing offset and scaling would happen in programming, to ensure the effect looked like it was going from downstage to far—virtual—upstage."

Fortunately, Dunn adds, "Gary is very collaborative; he knew instinctively what materials would and wouldn't take my projections. We were also quite lucky because Vienna State Opera has upgraded its projection equipment. We have two 30K Christie projectors, and, because of the set's forced perspective, the upstage screen is quite small. We only had the two units to do the whole thing." Delivering the images is a QLab media server. "Last time I worked there, they had a proprietary media server they had created themselves," Dunn says, adding, with amusement, "They heard me moaning about it, and allowed me to use QLab. It's a simple server but it let me have a direct



The opera's villagers have been transformed into an onstage audience of faded Viennese gentry.

access to my palette. Color is very important to me, and I refine it until the cows come home. My dad is color-blind, and they say that if you have a color-blind parent, there's the chance that you are hyper-color-sensitive." Here, here attention to color made for a remarkably unified look.



Above and opposite: Hase's lighting employs both icy white washes and deeply saturated reds.

Dunn says she worked closely with Hase to coordinate their effects: "I spent most of my time responding in a very detailed way to his lighting. Sometimes if the tea break was called at the wrong time or the working light came on while I was balancing a series of cues, I was forced to go back to the start of the scene to allow my eyes to adjust to what I was doing again and restart the process."

Lighting

Hase's lighting works a variety of looks from icy white washes to deeply saturated reds, that carve the singers out of the darkness, aided by starkly dimensional sidelight. He notes that he worked to make the house lighting rig work with the complicated combination of scenery and projections. Gear chosen for this production includes eight 4K HMI ARRI Fresnels fitted with dimmers and scrollers, two GAM Inno Four followspots fitted out with ETC Source Fours, two floor-mounted Claypak Alpha Spot 800s, 12 Chroma-Q Color One 100 LED PARs, eight LDDE NanoPix Slim FR1440 stripights, and two PAR 64s.

The house lighting bridges include, for this production, five Philips Vari-Lite 1000AS units, four Alpha Spot 800s, four High End Systems SolaFrame 2000s, twelve 5kW Fresnels with color changers on motor yokes, and twenty-

four 575W HMI moving wash lights. The latter units, Hase says, are in-house gear that he describes as "versatile, with the ability to do spots, floods, and change colors."

As mentioned, sidelight is a key element: "We have 4K HMIs in each window, placed fairly far back because they move back and forth, and each has an entrance and exit bay. We also fly in the repertory lighting bridges, which don't really line up with the slits in the set, to get back-lighting and specials. The sidelight hanging positions including 10 VL3500s, 14 SolaFrame 200s, five Alpha Spot 800s, and five Martin by Harman MAC III Performances. The opera house has a patented bar system, with four or five bars that can raise and lower. You can move them up and downstage and they can go to any height. With this arrangement, I have seven SolaFrames and five VL3500s on each of the bars, so I was able to put a SolaFrame and VL3500 in each window and a SolaFrame in each entrance bay. This allowed me to get both entrance sidelight and window sidelight; this is in addition to the sidelight rig with the HMIs on stands." Additional front-of-house gear includes two Niethammer HPZ followspots; two Inno Four units; 20 Niethammer Enizoom Zoom Profile Spots, 12 with color scrollers; and ten Alpha Spots.

For the startling moment when Samiel appears hanging

OPERA

from the ceiling, Hase says, "I have two followspots that track onstage and off. They look like specials. I use the front-of-house followspots for low accent light or to pull people out from backgrounds. Because of the opera's 'theatrical' presentation, there are two instances when we go with bright, hard-edged spot effects. One is the announcement of the contest and the other comes near the end, when Max is supposed to take his shot."

Echoing McCann, the lighting designer says, "The scenic concept is like a holodeck, a place that can be constantly transformed. We go from theatre seats to trees that come in and out; the seats are very worn, and the trees



McCann's model shows many of the key elements in place.

grow up through them. The costuming suggests the faded citizens of Vienna society. We went through the show, doing transformations for each scene, with Nina adding her projection magic. She is an amazing collaborator. For example, in the Wolf's Glen scene, when we went into the fire effects, I took the LDUJ strips, which served as down-stage footlights, to a very low level and let the real fire and the projections take over."

Hase adds that one of the biggest challenges was the production process at Vienna State Opera. "We arrived at the theatre on Monday morning at eight, watching the changeover with a planned focus at noon; the whole team was there, waiting to start cueing. After a fast, two-hour focus, we set up the moving lights. Cueing started first at 4pm and went to 10pm. The next day, I started at eight and cued until five—and then they had a performance [of another opera] that evening. And that was my lighting time. After that, they do onstage rehearsals without lighting. I asked for a dispensation because we weren't done, so we got three rehearsals, during which we could run



The climax of the Wolf's Glen scene features real fire and fiery imagery, with Samiel hanging upside-down from the set.

lighting, but without cueing, and two 4-hour blocks of correction time. Then there was the piano dress, orchestra dress, and final dress for additional cueing and corrections, and that's all we got, on a set as complicated as this, that was also being done for television."

McCann concurs, noting, "The problem we, or anybody has, is there is no stage time. Vienna State Opera is like a machine, with performances 361 days a year and a different show every night. There are three teams of crews, working 24 hours a day. It's a never-ending round of pro-

duction. Building an ambitious new production in this context is hard, and you're competing with other productions. It was rare that we had a full day onstage."

However, Dunn adds, "I found Thomas to be a great collaborator in creative terms; the whole team shared this dynamic. We had more time offstage to discuss than onstage, being a rep rehearsal schedule and we made

sure we used this well, doing paper tech sessions and looking at previz videos. The team at WSO commented that they had never seen a team so in synch before and such a united stage picture, unless it had been a single production designer; they respected our process—even granting us more time to light across orchestral rehearsals, for example—as they could see the results it produced." ■

Left image: Courtesy of Gary McCann