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Music Review | 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'

Britten's 'Dream,' Tweaked With an Otherworldly Pungency

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Published: June 21, 2009 PRINCETON, N.J. — The Princeton Festival, which started in 2005, offers a wide range of performances and productions in the performing arts. In recent years the offerings have had an overall theme, and this summer it is “Midsummer Magic, Dreams and Deceptions.” The major offering, an obvious choice, is Britten’s “Midsummer Night’s Dream.” An imaginative production of this opera, directed by Steven LaCosse, opened Saturday night at the Matthews Theater in the McCarter Theater Center on the Princeton University campus.

The orchestra of freelance professional players from the region, conducted by Richard Tang Yuk, did well by Britten’s wondrously varied score, which moves from ethereal colorings that convey the fairy realm to flourishes of clattering percussion to accompany the impish Puck. The appealing cast offered rising younger singers, including artists who have made their debuts with the Metropolitan Opera.

Mr. LaCosse’s production, with Jayme Mellema’s sets, Marie Miller’s costumes and Norman Coates’s lighting, demonstrated what can be achieved on a limited budget. Video images of lush woods and starry nighttime skies were projected onto simple scrims and drops.

The libretto for this opera, first performed in 1960, was adapted from the Shakespeare play by Britten and his companion, the tenor Peter Pears. For all its enchantment, the play is a profound and disturbing work. The story turns on a dispute between Oberon, the manipulative king of the fairies, and Tytania, his willful wife, over the guardianship of a changeling boy. Oberon badly wants that boy as his henchman. But Tytania, who has seen the brutal way her husband sometimes bullies Puck, does not want him near the child and has refused to sleep with Oberon until he gives up his claim. It is partly to restore the skewered natural order that Oberon becomes involved in the romantic quarrels of two Athenian couples passing through the forest.

Britten captured the murky erotic underpinnings of the play in his deceptively charming music. The opera begins with the orchestra depicting the sounds of sleeping. Instruments rise and

fall with weird glissandos and wheezing colorings. The effect is amusing, yet ominous, because the phrases keep ending on unexpected harmonies.

Even when Britten evokes older styles, he charges the music with ambiguity. There is the riveting moment when Oberon orders Puck to find the herbal leaves that contain drops of a magic love potion. The neo-Baroque passage is inspired by

Purcell, but the harmonies are tweaked with chromatic pungency, and the eerie melody has an otherworldly cast.

Daniel Bubeck, the countertenor who sang Oberon, looked fantastical in his sci-fi costume with punkish hair, and his voice, while small-size, was alluring. Jennifer Zetlan brought her agile coloratura soprano voice to the role of the determined Tytania. **The bass Curtis Streetman was an endearing ruffian as Bottom, the weaver and hammy amateur actor. He and the other rustics were a wonderfully hapless troupe in the scene when they enact “Pyramus and Thisby” at the court of the duke.**



Bottom (Curtis Streetman, bass), transformed into an Ass, is seduced by Tytania (Jennifer Zetlan, soprano).

Daniel Barry for The New York Times

As the young Athenians, costumed in Gay Nineties outfits, Brian Stucki (Lysander), Abigail Nims (Hermia), Caroline Worra (Helena) and especially Tyler Duncan (a robust-voiced Demetrius) gave dramatically nuanced and vocally solid performances. Puck, a spoken role, is typically played by a young man or boy. This production had a hardy adult, the acrobatic, wild-eyed, if somewhat too frenetic Dean Anthony.

It can not have been easy for Mr. Yuk to coordinate the orchestra with the sometimes tentative boy sopranos brought together here as the Princeton Festival Children’s Chorus. But his penchant for being careful led to some sluggish passages. Even the most ethereal moments of this miraculous score should have rhythmic tension.

The final performance of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” is Sunday at the Matthews Theater, Princeton, N.J., (609) 537-0071, princetonfestival.org