

Ira Prodanov

A New Production of *The Flying Dutchman* at the 2003 Wagner Festival in Bayreuth

The ninety-second Wagner Festival, held from July 25th to August 28th, 2003, once again confirmed the importance of Bayreuth as an opera centre. In addition to the performances familiar from previous years – *The Ring of Nibelung* tetralogy with maestro Adam Fischer, *Tannhäuser* with Christian Thielemann and *Lohengrin* with Sir Andrew Davis – a completely new production of the opera *The Flying Dutchman* with conductor Marc Albrecht was presented this year. Compared to the previous Bayreuth directional techniques which, in their striving for the modern, had destroyed the magic of the old German myths of Wagner's operas, the new production of *The Flying Dutchman* was a *Gesamtkunstwerk* – a total work of art – in the full sense of the word. The man who deserves credit for this turn is Klaus Guth, German director belonging to a new, younger generation.

With his directorial debut Klaus Guth “mesmerized” the audience in Wagner's Opera House in Bayreuth by an excellent combination of elements of film art, old, classical directional symbols and contemporary effects of disco clubs. Naturally, all this would hardly be possible in any other opera by this great German master of the music stage, but in the *Flying Dutchman*, where the numerical concept is still present, as is the influence of the Italian opera school, these elements merged into an ideal medium for Guth's directional game.

In order to stage the famous legend of a Dutchman cursed to wander the seas until he finds a woman who will be prepared to sacrifice herself for his salvation, Guth needed only one spacious living room, with a circular staircase leading to the upper floors. This staircase – the eternal symbol of rises and falls – with a red curtain as a background, represented the appropriate reflection of the Dutchman's cursed fate. A thus conceived demonic space could be easily transformed, by withdrawing the red background, into an idyllic scene of a brightly lit home, where the Dutchman would meet Captain Daland's daughter, Senta, his future bride, for the first time. What lies at the foundation of such a scenic solution is an inspiration by the 1960's musicals featuring Julie Andrews; the dance scenes “à la Andrews” performed by the choir share the same origin. Such is the case with the maids' choir, which in a very interesting and above all well-synchronized cleaning dance with many comical details, presented the act of tidying the house prior to the arrival of Captain Daland. A similar directional effect was achieved by the choral-ballet scene of the Dutchman's crew who danced a marionette dance inspired by the famous scene of similar figures in the Oscar-winning musical

Chicago. Another number belonging to this group is the dance of Senta's friends who during the music performance used suggestive gesticulation to retell the fate of their friend whose life was sacrificed for the salvation of the Dutchman.

However, this is not where inspiration by film art ends. Klaus Guth used the scene between the Dutchman and Senta in which they relate their pasts to each other as a good medium for imitating the image of old, 1940's films. Namely, during the music interpretation of this scene the interior was projected to the stage as if from an old slide projector so that the entire scene exuded cinematographic antiquity. If you add to all these techniques the light effects from today's disco clubs and techno parties, you really get an extremely interesting postmodernist mixture of genres which fits in excellently with the content of one of Wagner's most famous operas.

The anticipated associations with the sea and sea coast were redundant due to this abundance of directional detail. It was enough for the director to underline the theme of the wandering sailor with paintings of seascapes on the walls of the room in which the drama took place and with short effects of waves projected from a film across the entire opera stage. What should also be mentioned in this outstanding directorial work is the silent role of a little girl who throughout the opera retold events by gesticulating in a really very simple way, using her toys and a book of fairytales, reminding the audience the whole time that this is just an old legend, a children's story.

The music realization of this year's production of *The Flying Dutchman* in Bayreuth was entrusted to a quite well-coordinated team of singers. We should first mention Jaakko Ryhänen as Daland and John Tomlinson as the Dutchman, whom the director presented as doppelgängers, which served to touch upon the psychological aspect of the father-daughter relationship, which reflects on her choice of partner, perhaps overly pretentious for a fairytale. Their precision in deep parts was impeccable, although there was a certain lack of volume. This was particularly evident in ensembles, which, as it is well known, are very rare with Wagner. Thus, in certain places Senta's part surpassed by far both singers. It seems that Adrienne Dugger in the role of Senta needed some time to "warm up". In the famous aria of Senta's introduction, Senta's ballad, which is the first larger number intended for this role, Dugger's voice "cracked" several times in the high parts, diminishing the effect of her performance. The importance of supporting roles was proven by Endrik Wottrich as Erik and Tomislav Mužek as the helmsman. Uta Priew as Mary produced a completely opposite effect with her rather feeble performance filled with unpleasant vibrato.

It seems that the most interesting and most complex part of the work this year in *The Flying Dutchman* in Bayreuth was performed by the choirs. Conductor Eberhard Friedrich, responsible for this part of the ensemble, succeeded in achieving an enviable level of interpretation with the choral parts. This was especially the case with the female choirs which at times seemed to be "out of this world". If you add to this

the exceptional stage movement which certain ensembles can but dream of, then even the fact that the choir occasionally lagged behind the orchestra can be forgiven.

Finally, you could say that conductor Marc Albrecht made a successful debut this year in Bayreuth. Leading an ensemble of instrumentalists who rally in Bayreuth from different parts of Europe only in the summer season, he conducted the work harmoniously with minimal mistakes in the control of the wind parts, striving to carefully realize all of its stage and music aspects alike.

The premiere of *The Flying Dutchman* in Wagner's Opera House in Bayreuth was above all a successful undertaking dominated by inspiration with film art. That certainly represents a positive shift in comparison with previous productions of *Tannhäuser* or *Lohengrin*, in which static quality and trivial contemporariness of scenes threatened to bore the audience. Perhaps the influences of the laws of the fourth estate are a solution for what Wagner really had in mind when he worked on the unity of drama, music and stage in his *total work of art*, the only problem being that he lived at the wrong time when there were no possibilities for its full realization.

Translated by Jelena Nikezić