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Hänsel und Gretel (review)

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Notes, Volume 66, Number 3, March 2010, pp. 625-626 (Review)

Published by Music Library Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/not.0.0285>



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comique, grand opéra, and Wagnerism. The singing attains levels appropriate for the first stage of France, with Fleming delivering top renderings of "Adieu, notre petite table" (Act II) and "Je marche sur tous les chemins" (Act III, tableau 1), and Jean-Luc Chaignaud nailing the one highlight after the other with his piqué interpretation of Lescaut. Álvarez' performance is disappointing, though, for while the Argentinean tenor is blessed with a physiognomy akin to Des Grieux' creator, Talazon, his vocal qualities lag far behind, for example, Rolando Villazón's (on Virgin and DG).

Singing *Manon* is one matter, staging it proves another. The mixture of frivolous spectacle and heart-throbbing drama in Meilhac and Gille's libretto calls for a dizzying alternation of lavish tableaux (the "Hôtellerie," "Promenade de Cours-la-Reine," and "Hôtel Transsylvanie"), and solitary scenes (the "Appartement de Des Grieux," "Saint-Sulpice" church, and "Route au Havre"). Deflo and Orlandi appear to have elaborated on this utter discrepancy by combining dark, abstract architectures with brightly colored historic costumes, early dancing, and such anecdotal details as acrobats, *commedia dell'arte*

characters, and Baroque dancers. Little in Orlandi's minimal galleries reminds us of the luxurious salons dear to the Belle Époque, but neither are we saddled with the unified background so endemic to contemporary production budgets. Quite the contrary: the continuous vacillations of Orlandi's sets—do we really need to see the stage shift every ten or so minutes?—can make one long for more unified, less gimmicky backgrounds. All the more odd, and contrasting in this respect, is the static frontality of the singers' direction, as if Deflo intended to read *Manon* back into its historical milieu, the Regency. *Manon*, for instance, is staged as an eighteenth-century prima donna, courting the Parisian "home crowd" with a showy performance that lacks the fourth-wall sophistication of, for example, Vincent Patterson's recent staging for the Los Angeles Opera. In short, the Arthaus *Manon* will no doubt provide meat and drink to the home video spectator, but die-hard Massenet fans may wish to complement this version with an alternative that hinges more on drama.

BRUNO FORMENT
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Englebert Humperdinck. *Hänsel und Gretel*. DVD (Widescreen ed.). Markus L. Frank / Anhaltische Philharmonie Dessau. Directed for television and video by Brooks Riley. With Ludmil Kuntschew, Alexandra Petersamer, Sabine Noack, Cornelia Marschall, Viktorija Kaminskaite. [United States]: Arthaus Musik, 2008, 2007. 101321. \$25.99.

Performances of Englebert Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel* have generally followed traditional staging and setting; Act I finding the children at home, Act II in the woods, and Act III at the witch's house. Johannes Felsenstein's Dessau production breaks with tradition, choosing to focus on the abject poverty and domestic abuse inherent in the original fairytale. In Felsenstein's version, Hansel and Gretel never leave their home. Hiding under their beds, they bear witness to their mother's wretchedness, their father's drunken abusiveness, and both parents' naïve superstition of things that go bump in the woods. The second act finds the children still under their beds. Leaving the children at home emphasizes their fear of domestic vi-

olence and deprivation. The severity of their situation is underscored in Gretel's text; she sings fearfully, "We cannot just linger here." Her words are all the more tragic because the children aren't in the woods trying to get home; they are *home* trying to get away. The children fall asleep in their own beds and dream of fourteen angels and a loving mother and father. In the third act, Hansel and Gretel awake on a Christmas Eve scene. The confrontation with the witch becomes a game played with their adoring father. The act ends with the "adoption" of the fourteen angels (children representing various nations) from the second act. They gather around a table, now big enough for all of them, as Father sings of placing trust in God.

There are various ways to interpret this production. Each act begins with archive film footage from World Wars I and II and Vietnam with focus placed on orphaned or abandoned children. This suggests a socio-critical reading, wherein "the realism in the first act, where child labour is another ingredient, is striking and stands in sharp relief from the following scenes, which should be seen more as the children's dream visions" (Göran Forsling, review of *Hänsel und Gretel* [DVD]. MusicWeb International, http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2009/Feb09/Humperdinck_Hansel_101321.htm [accessed 18 November 2009]). It is a dream, however, from which, the children never awaken. This suggests a darker reading of Felsenstein's production, one in which Hansel and Gretel die at the end of the second act, and the angels they sing of actually arrive to take them to heaven. They are next revealed in a child's paradise (i.e., Christmas) with kind and loving parents, games and dolls

and gingerbread; they never return to the home they were so desperate to get away from.

Admirers of the Fassbaender/Gruberova movie or the Schäfer/Coote Met production may be disappointed. Cornelia Marschall shines as Gretel, with light and flexible tone, but Sabine Noack (Hansel) and Alexandra Petersamer (Mother) sound at times labored and shrill. Ludmil Kuntschew (Father/Witch) has the weakest voice but makes up for it in energy and expression. The production quality is excellent, capturing the rich, warm sound of the Anhaltische Philharmonie Dessau. Sets and staging are both haunting and vibrant; relationships between the characters are natural and believable. The production is self-contained and coherent; easily enjoyable and relevant for children and adults.

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Igor Stravinsky. *Le sacre du printemps*. DVD. Henrik Schaefer / Gewandhausorchester Leipzig and Leipziger Ballet. Choreographed by Uwe Scholtz. Stuttgart: Medici Arts, 2008, 2003. 2055728. \$28.98.

When Uwe Scholtz died in 2004 at the age of forty-six, he left behind over 100 choreographies. Labeled a *Wunderkind* by German critics, Scholtz assumed the role of artistic director and chief choreographer of the Zurich ballet at the age of twenty-six and, four years later, went to Leipzig where he quickly earned international fame reinterpreting classics like *Coppélia* and choreographing such musical masterpieces as Mozart's "Great Mass," Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, and Bruckner's Symphony No. 8. Among his greatest accomplishments is his choreography of Stravinsky's *Le sacre du printemps*, one of many of his ballets now available on DVD.

Le sacre du printemps is a triple feature DVD. It includes two versions of the ballet and a documentary. The first version for piano four-hands, composed by Stravinsky himself, and danced by solo male Giovanni Di Palma, is, at the least, riveting. Scholtz was responsible for the lighting, costuming, stage and set design as well as the choreography. The backdrop of the stage is used for projecting film. A few shots of a young

boy practicing his steps and a few from *Swan Lake* make it clear that this interpretation of *Le sacre* is Scholtz's autobiography. The film shots "interact" with the dancer on the stage in scenes that move from contemplative to disturbing. The viewer may or may not like the imagery some of which is graphic, but it is guaranteed to compel the mind and impress the senses. For me, the best part of this performance was not the dancing but the music. I had the intimate sense that I was hearing it the same way Stravinsky himself, who composed at the piano, might have heard his own music.

The second ballet on the DVD is the orchestral version of *Le sacre*. This performance is more traditional but no less impressive. Scholtz's habit of setting each musical gesture to a sympathetic movement in his dancers turns out to be surprisingly neoclassic, reminiscent of Nijinsky's use of eurythmics in the 1913 premiere by the Ballets russes. Scholtz employs a large number of dancers. The body movements and orientation of the dancers mirror the polyphonic lines and inner voices in the orches-