



PROJECT MUSE®

Doctor Atomic (review)

Alicia M. Doyle

Notes, Volume 66, Number 3, March 2010, pp. 628-629 (Review)

Published by Music Library Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/not.0.0308>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/376362>

labyrinth is portrayed with an orange line which traces the maze-like path he takes to find the Minotaur.

The use of a black background allows for easy fades in and out on the stage. At times a moon, or both a moon and a sun illuminate the stage. The set represents the island, the place where the ship docks, and the temporary appearance of the ladder at the entrance to the labyrinth. The Innocents make their descent down to the Minotaur on several ladders visible against the black background. In Part 2, the Snake Priestess rises up from midstage to tower over the Hieres and Ariadne.

The stage is also transformed into a bull-ring or an arena with bleachers for the blue-masked jeering crowd. The bull's head is still visible on stage. One can easily see symbolism of Christian martyrs (the Innocents), and the crowd (here accompanied by timpani). The Innocents enter from two sides. As the Minotaur attacks them, they disappear for a moment and return with a packet of fake blood to smear on their gar-

ments. This staging was not convincing. Later Keres, in black attire with one arm winged and smudged face, arrives to fetch and eat the Innocents' hearts.

The singing was powerful, with very difficult lines to perform. Some vowels were altered to make them easier to sing in certain registers. Leaps and large ranges did not seem to present the singers with any difficulty. Rice states in the documentary that it took time to become familiar with the language and fabric of the piece. The orchestra provided interesting sound commentary and support.

The DVD includes "Myth is Universal," a documentary with Birtwistle, David Harsent (librettist), stage director Stephen Langridge, and Christine Rice and is recommended for those studying contemporary opera, Birtwistle, opera production, or various dramatizations of Greek tragedy.

JOAN O'CONNOR
University of Houston

John Adams. *Doctor Atomic*. DVD (Blu-ray). Lawrence Renes / Nederlands Philharmonisch Orkest; Koor van De Nederlands Opera. Directed by Peter Sellars. With Gerald Finley, Jessica Rivera, Eric Owens. Waldron, Heathfield, East Sussex, UK: Opus Arte, 2009, 2007. OABD7020D. \$39.99.

This live recording of John Adams's *Doctor Atomic* as performed at Het Muziektheater, Amsterdam in June of 2007, is available from Opus Arte (2009) in Blu-ray (1080i High Definition 16:9 BD50, with 2.0 and 5.1 Dolby Digital audio). Recorded in high definition video and true surround sound, the advanced technology allows the director the capability of making one of the largest moral dilemmas in United States history feel personal on every level.

Visually, Peter Sellars optimizes the potential for extreme realism through advanced technology by incorporating many camera angles, some of which are quite daring. Musically, every sonic nuance of Adams's score is clearly audible. Combined, the high definition video and audio quality result in many instances where the viewer is virtually brought into the room with the characters, witnessing the moral tension from beginning to end as if we

were truly there. For example, during Oppenheimer's aria in Act I, Scene 3, "Feelings of heat and cold, pleasure and pain," the camera allows the viewer to feel like a guest in a salon, and the aria takes on the tone of a lied. During Wilson's humanitarian plea to warn the Japanese before bombing during his aria, "No. Before the bomb is used Japan must have some warning," has the effect of convincing us into believing he is actually speaking our behalf. Another amazing moment only made possible by the filming is in Act II, Scene 1 when in Kitty's aria at the words "Night of the soul, our dreams in the arms of dreams dissolving into eyes that look upon us," Jessica Rivera turns to "us," and with the fourth wall missing, she seems to actually dissolve into our omnipresent (voyeuristic?) eyes.

Periodically the very thing that makes this recording great—the quality of the picture—causes distraction. In high defini-

tion you can see everything: makeup, an unruly eyebrow, the perspiration of a dancer after a particularly vigorous scene, a dangling earpiece, Oppenheimer's electronic cigarette (no ash!), and various other characteristics of face and body that are not typically seen in such great detail. The precision of the image forces attention to certain cosmetic details like Gerald Finley's blue contact lenses. (Oppenheimer was known for his blue eyes, and Finley's, apparently, are not blue.) Product placement also was a small distraction in the final scene where several nervous eaters were walking about with large Hershey chocolate bars, calling to mind John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, but perhaps that was intended.

The historical accuracy of the sets and James F. Ingalls's lighting are absolutely stunning. Peter Sellars's research shows that his sets imitated certain aspects of the site exactly including the tent around the bomb, down to the drawn curtain. The acting, singing and instrumental performance are remarkable, and because of the HD, quite exposed! Despite a few moments that

are awkward film-wise—the scene before Groves's diet diary aria when Oppenheimer and Groves cross the stage is lumbering, and the orchestral interlude: "Lightning in the Sangre de Cristos" in Act II after Kitty goes to sleep seem too drawn out on film—the staged version translates nicely to film.

The extra features (illustrated synopsis, cast gallery, mini documentaries about the opera, cast, composer, and director) and the interview with Peter Sellars are also a fascinating watch. Of particular interest in the mini documentaries is a behind the scenes glimpse of the amazing and complex camera set up which is extraordinary. Sung in English, subtitles are available in English, French, German, Spanish, Italian and Dutch.

So the question is this: Does Blu-ray make it better? The answer is yes . . . and no. The sound and image quality are off the charts, but once in a while (for the image in particular), this can be too much of a good thing.

ALICIA M. DOYLE

California State University, Long Beach

Jonathan Dove. *The Adventures of Pinocchio*. DVD. David Parry / Orchestra and Chorus of Opera North. With Victoria Simmonds, Jonathan Summers, Mary Plazas, Rebecca Bottone, Graeme Broadbent. Heathfield, East Sussex: Opus Arte, 2009. OA 1005 D. \$39.99.

Fairy tales and fables tend to combine magical fantasy with doses of moral-heavy medicine that are at times disturbing. While Walt Disney's 1940 animated film *Pinocchio* is a sugary adaptation of the familiar tale of a wooden puppet who learns life's lessons the hard way, British composer Jonathan Dove's two-act opera *The Adventures of Pinocchio* skillfully mixes both the fantastic and the sinister in his adaptation of Italian author Carlo Lorenzini's (better known as Carlo Collodi) beloved 1881 children's story.

Dove and librettist Alasdair Middleton streamlined Collodi's original thirty-six chapters into twenty scenes that flow smoothly into each other, and the opera teems with a colorful assortment of animals, spirits, and people that cross Pinocchio's path. Pinocchio's boyish tendency toward trouble and adventure lead

him into predicaments that make for some of the darker moments in the story; over the course of the opera he is burned, beaten, hanged, ridiculed, eaten, and turned into a donkey. These scenes quickly give way, however, to lighter fare.

Middleton's libretto skips along at a brisk but playful pace, and Dove's diverse compositional style draws from a wealth of sources. Echoes of Britten emerge in the sinuous countertenor-tenor vocal lines of Fox and Cat, leitmotifs are accorded to Pinocchio, his devoted father Geppetto, and the helpful but enigmatic Blue Fairy, and at times one can hear hints of Minimalism, musical theater, and jazz. The result is a colorful score whose extended tonality is accessible to a wide range of listeners. Visually, the production by director Martin Duncan is a feast for the eyes. Under the baton of David Parry, the orchestra