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The Minotaur (review)

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tration. The choreography reveals a uniquely intimate understanding of the music.

The last feature on this DVD is the documentary "Soulscapes." This short film provides insight into the life and career of the choreographer and features interviews, studio scenes, and production highlights in-

cluding Bruckner's Symphony No. 8 and Haydn's *Creation*.

This is an excellent DVD. The artistic content is superior and the camera and sound work is good.

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Harrison Birtwistle. *The Minotaur*. DVD. Antonio Pappano / The Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, The Royal Opera Chorus. Recorded live at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden 25 and 30 April and 3 May 2008. With John Tomlinson, Johan Reuter, Christine Rice, Andrew Watts, Philip Langridge. [England]: Opus Arte, 2008. OA 1000 D. \$45.98.

A bull's head. A long horizontal strip of sand. Waves undulating on a full stage-size screen. Ariadne sifting sand. A blue line signifies the horizon. A black-sailed ship. Theseus arrives with the Innocents. Below: a labyrinth, a bullring with jeering crowd and Innocents, the Minotaur, the Keres. These are the images of this production. The opera begins with the orchestra playing dark, deep, dissonant sustained sounds with occasional interjections from a single instrument or from the percussion section while images of Ariadne or Theseus or the Minotaur fade in and out of the projected ocean waves.

The main characters are Ariadne, the Minotaur, and Theseus. An alto saxophone accompanies Ariadne's vocal lines by quietly continuing them, interspersing its own line between her phrases. Even when she is not on stage Ariadne is vocally present in all but the last scene. Her opening line, "The moon's an eye that cannot blink," reveals a young woman who accepts her role as keeper of her half-brother, the Minotaur, but who also wants to leave this island and her fate there. At times she appears fearful, other times devious in order to achieve her desired departure. Her vocal lines are often high repeated notes which end with a huge descending leap symbolizing despair.

The Minotaur is half-man, half-beast who is imprisoned in the labyrinth; who slaughters the Innocents sent over from Athens every seven years to fulfill the curse's bargain, and who dreams while transformed as a human with questions and desires,

singing with words—no longer inarticulate grunts. In his dreams the Minotaur sees images of Ariadne and someone he does not recognize: Theseus who will later slay him. He also sees his reflection: a speaking Minotaur 2 who forecasts the future. To represent the half bull visually, a wire bull's head with horns, eyes on the side and large nose reveal the man inside. When the Minotaur is confronted with Theseus, he exclaims "It . . . was . . . you" (in my dreams). "Now I can speak . . . now I am almost human; now is the right time to die."

Theseus is upright, resolute: "I choose myself." He arrives with the Innocents to kill the Minotaur. Ariadne, seeing a way off the island with Theseus, first stalls him with a game of chance; later she consults the Oracle to help Theseus find his way back from the labyrinth after killing the Minotaur. He rejects Ariadne until she promises to find a way for him to return from the labyrinth. Theseus' vocal lines are often doubled by horn, English horn, or clarinet; the changing color implies inconstancy.

The opera is in two parts: part one ends with the death of the Innocents in the labyrinth; part two ends with the death of the Minotaur (named Asterios). Other characters appear in part two when Ariadne consults the Oracle, sacrifices a dove, waits for Hierus to interpret the utterances of the Snake Priestess, a countertenor raised high above the stage wearing a long flowing skirt, an outlandish corset, and inflatable breasts. Hierus is clothed in a more conventional skullcap and robe. Theseus' descent into the

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.

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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-