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The Adventures of Pinocchio (review)

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Notes, Volume 66, Number 3, March 2010, pp. 629-630 (Review)

Published by Music Library Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/not.0.0314>

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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.

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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

creates a vivid sound world, complimented on stage by the sets and costumes by Francis O'Connor.

Pinocchio, commissioned by Opera North with Sadler's Wells Theatre and Chemnitz Opera, had its world premiere on 21 December 2007 at the Grand Theatre and Opera House, Leeds. The resultant DVDs were recorded by Opus Arte at Sadler's Wells Theatre in London on 29 February and 1 March 2008. Overseen by recording director Thomas Grimm, the recording is a pleasure both visually and aurally, with few flaws. While the close camera work throughout was useful in capturing the subtleties of the singers' expressions, certain scenes (such as the marionette scene) would have benefited from a wider camera angle. And, in the finale, the drum set

seemed overly loud in comparison to the rest of the orchestra. Still, these are minor issues. The entire cast (with mezzo-soprano Victoria Simmonds in the title role) gives a consistently fine performance, and their voices are well-balanced with the orchestra.

The extra features of this two-disc set include a synopsis, cast gallery, and enlightening interviews with the composer, librettist, stage director, and conductor. A useful booklet is also included. The high production values of this recording are all the more impressive given how quickly it was produced, and this opera, a welcome addition to the repertoire, is bound to please viewers of all ages.

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The City. DVD. Angel Gil-Ordóñez / Post-Classical Ensemble. Music by Aaron Copland. Directed by Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke. Canada: Naxos 2.110231, 2009. \$17.99.

To Aaron Copland, writing music for Hollywood films represented an opportunity to reach a much wider audience than was typically possible for composers of concert music. Hollywood film scoring was, however, according to George Antheil, "a closed corporation" (*Modern Music* 15, no. 1 [November-December 1937]). Hollywood studios were reluctant to hire composers without previous film experience; Copland would therefore need a film credit, and documentary films were a viable path to the requisite credentials.

The City, made for the 1939 World's Fair in New York, was one of several Depression-era documentary films with a quasi-socialist message. There is no dialogue or plot; the rhetorical technique involves only visual imagery, music, and a narrator. The filmmakers advocate a new approach to urban planning by contrasting the conditions of an industrial mining town (shot in Pittsburgh) and the interior of a large city (shot in New York) with a new type of planned community (shot in Greenbelt, Maryland) that is "organized to make cooperation possible between machines and men – and nature," according to the narrator.

Copland's score features contrasting musical styles to support the on-screen images and rhetoric. Idyllic rural and suburban life

is represented by pastoral, consonant music, while urban conditions are shown to dissonant, rhythmically jarring portions of the score. Additionally, there is often a strong physical correlation between specific images and musical figures, such as the clarinet triplet passage that plays while the viewer is shown a water wheel.

The new recording of the score surpasses the original in many respects. There is greater dynamic range, more detail of orchestral color, and in general, the score works better as abstract music in the hands of the Post-Classical Ensemble. Yet one is also drawn to the charms of the original, also included on this DVD: period authenticity, nostalgia, and more seamless integration with the visual aspects of the film.

The DVD has numerous extras aside from the original version of the film, such as a seven-page booklet with liner notes by Joseph Horowitz, the artistic director of the Post-Classical Ensemble, photographs, and artist biographies. There is also an interview by Horowitz of filmmaker and documentary film historian George Stoney on topics ranging from Copland's career as a film composer to the visual rhetoric of *The City*, and a film made in 2000 for the Greenbelt Museum entitled *Which Playground for Your Child: Greenbelt or Gutter?* The