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Opera Review/THE FLYING DUTCHMAN



Andrew Costello as The Dutchman

By Francisco Pérez-Abreu

A familiar truth made itself evident last Tuesday evening (November 11th) in a performance of Richard Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* at the Bechstein Piano Center in New York City. Although that truth is often clouded over in this day of monumental rotating stages and computer-generated backdrops, we do well to remember that an operatic performance stands or falls not on the technological extravagance of the production but rather on the genius of the composer and the talent and dedication of the artists presenting the work. By the latter criteria the performance at the Bechstein venue was a resounding success. Admittedly, Wagner's tale of a sea captain doomed to sail the oceans for eternity unless he finds true love does lend itself to visual razzle-dazzle.

But Tuesday night's performance proved that special effects are not the essence of the piece. That essence is the musical expression of despair and hope, of betrayal and redemption. Such expression requires talent of the first order; it also, when done in this country in the original language, calls for some way of keeping a mostly non-German-speaking audience aware of the story as it unfolds.

Regarding musical talent, this performance filled the bill handsomely. Bass-baritone Andrew Costello's portrayal of the title role was outstanding in its dramatic intensity, abetted by dark, rich sound and a towering physical presence. It was overall one of the most striking portrayals of the role in recent memory. In the role of Senta, the young girl whose love ultimately lifts the Dutchman's curse, soprano Pamela Lloyd was riveting in every respect, showing a voice of excellent power and stamina as well as the ability to project both the character's obsessiveness and her occasional lapses into normal behavior. The more mundane characters, Erik (Senta's sweetheart before the Dutchman's arrival) and the Steersman (the pilot of a nearby merchant vessel), were equally well presented. As Erik, tenor Kevin Hanek sang eloquently, easily managing the role's demanding declamation as well as its more tender passages. John Wasiniak as the Steersman supplied a welcome comic earthiness in the midst of the tragic goings-on. He did so with a good-sized lyric tenor that did not flinch at the role's high tessitura. The evening's sterling vocalism was matched by pianist Craig Ketter. Playing on one of the superb instruments at the Bechstein Piano Center, he continuously added to the performance's musical excellence, displaying both technical virtuosity and dramatic eloquence.

As to the language problem when doing the work in its original German, the company solved it by means of an occasional English narration, presented either by itself or supported by some of the opera's instrumental portions. That the narration blended so well with the rest of the presentation was due largely to the dramatic flair and rich speaking voice of Paul Malamphy, who was also credited with the minimal but highly effective staging.

All in all, a most satisfying rendition of Wagner's work.

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NEWS VIA EMAIL

