

Philippe Boesmans – Pinocchio (2018)



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Le directeur de la troupe / premier escroc / deuxième meurtrier / le directeur de cirque - Stéphane Degout (baritone) Le père / troisième meurtrier / le maître d'école - Vincent Le Texier (baritone) Le pantin - Chloé Briot (soprano) Deuxième escroc / le directeur de cabaret / le juge / premier meurtrier / le marchand d'ânes - Yann Beuron (tenor) La chanteuse de cabaret / le mauvais élève - Julie Boulianne (mezzo-soprano) La fée - Marie-Eve Munger (soprano) Figurantes - Jilan Al Hassan, Charlène Girin, Camille Lucas, Garance Rivoal, Claudine Sarzier Orchestre Symphonique De La Monnaie Conductor – Patrick Davin

On these discs we have Philippe Boesmans' eighth opera *Pinocchio*, based on the famous tale by Carlo Collodi which was immortalised on celluloid by Walt Disney. It was chosen to open the restored Brussels opera house La Monnaie in late 2017; by all accounts it was a triumph. Over the years Cypres have lavished a great deal of attention upon Boesmans' music; most of his operas and much of his instrumental music can be found on the label. Now in his 82nd year, this package also includes a DVD portrait of Boesmans who could justifiably be described as Belgium's greatest living composer.

Looking at the images from the première reproduced in the booklet suggests that the production was a visual tour-de-force, involving ludicrously elongating noses and oversized fairies among other things. However I'm pleased to say the opera sounds superb on disc. It consists of an overture, a prologue, 23 scenes and an epilogue; the episodes are short and the pace is quick. It adopts a play-within-a-play structure, the events are connected by the linking narrative commentary provided by the director of a rag-tag theatrical troupe which is energetically spoken

and sung by the baritone Stéphane Degout. His contribution to the success of the whole enterprise is enormous – apart from this hugely demanding role (this director is never absent from the action for too long) he adds three others. To be fair the depth of characterisation involved is not excessive – it's simply not that kind of opera. But Degout has a lot to do over the two hours – he has a superb voice – his spoken narration is as vivid and multi-faceted as his singing.

It is hard to find fault with any of the main protagonists who sing with great commitment but the two sopranos are especially fine. Marie-Eve Munger is a Québécoise singer whose high coloratura has a bell-like clarity; her high-intensity vocal display as the Fairy steals every scene she's in. On stage she totters about in an extraordinary giant dress which makes her performance even more impressive. Yet I was even more taken with Chloé Briot's turn as the eponymous puppet. The title role at least carries a degree of complexity in its characterisation; Ms Briot's Pinocchio is by turn irritating, charming, frustrating and moving. She superbly captures the transformation from wood to flesh, from anti-hero to hero.

Boesmans' music is fluent and delightful. The nineteen piece ensemble in the pit is augmented by an onstage trio of saxophone, accordion and violin who form part of the troupe. Given these limited forces the composer clearly has an extensive musical vocabulary and seamlessly deploys techniques both vernacular and highbrow, and incorporating virtually everything in between. If the opening overture has a kind of neo-classical Stravinskian hue to it Boesmans has a taste for judiciously applied tuned percussion and piano textures which quickly confounds that impression. He maximises the colouristic opportunities afforded by his ensemble like a master; there are dark, ambiguous Bergian harmonies, jaunty episodes that evoke thoughts of Poulenc or Martinu. The on-stage trio produce sounds that owe something to gypsy music, the Hot Club de Paris, even early Rock'n'Roll. I'm sure there are an abundance of more literal allusions to operas from the past here which have thus far passed me by. As the puppet's nose increases in size, we hear the upward glissandi of sirens seemingly abstracted from Varèse's *Amériques*. Boesmans' genius here is in combining all of these shards from musical history into a cogent, compelling and deeply entertaining whole. The grand (and long) ovation at Pinocchio's conclusion is heartfelt.

This collaboration between composer and librettist exploits the moral ambiguities of Collodi's story in a timely and provocative way which taps deeply into the current political and social zeitgeist. In a world where at times it seems impossible to distinguish between fact and fiction, Gepeto's boy has found his moment. As Joel Pommerat says in the booklet "He is a construction, a pure fabrication like an artistic creation. He is himself a fiction, alive and artificial at the same time. Pinocchio is an utopia that aspires to become a reality" Remind you of any one? I do have one major beef about this otherwise eminently recommendable project; once more we have an example of lavish packaging which seems to omit essentials. I am not so

pompous that I view English as the universal language but in a fast-moving work effectively consisting of 26 scenes I would argue that a synopsis in English at least is essential. There is no synopsis full stop. Moreover, why not take a leaf out of the Naxos or Brilliant Classics copybook and at least provide online access to an English translation of the full libretto on the Cyprès website? My French is inadequate for the purpose of completely unravelling the dialogue and repeated exposure to the Disney movie in childhood did not help (where's Jiminy Cricket when you need him?) Many websites are charging upwards of 40 Euros for this set; I imagine some collectors who take a punt will feel somewhat short-changed.

Although none of that should take the shine off what is a truly enjoyable and absorbing new opera. Although it was recorded live the sound is vivid, detailed and clear. Time for me, I think, to try more of Boesmans' work for the stage. ---Richard Hanlon, musicweb-international.com

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