



## MEISTERSINGER BAYREUTH 2010

This year I was fortunate enough to obtain tickets to the Bayreuth Festival. As usual, the atmosphere was tremendous, but I was disappointed with several of the productions and, in particular, *Die Meistersinger* and *Lohengrin*. The singing, orchestra and chorus were of the usual standard, but the interpretation of the *Meistersinger* was abysmal.

The *Meistersinger* is a comedy but it is not slapstick; it is not Abbott and Costello, but this production frequently degenerated into farce. The setting is a song contest, not an art competition, but with all the paint that was being sloshed around, one would have thought that it was the latter.

The characterisation was dreadful, with Hans Sachs making his initial entrance barefooted and refusing to wear the regalia of the Guild at a formal meeting. Sachs is liberal-minded, forward-thinking and open to new ideas, but he is definitely not a hippie as portrayed here. He is a conscientious and sober member of the Guild, but all he needed were a few flowers in his hair to have been quite at home in the San Francisco of the '60s and '70s.

Similarly, Beckmesser was portrayed most unsympathetically. He is pedantic and stubborn but he is a member of the Guild and must have had some redeeming qualities. Here

he is portrayed as being stern, humourless and heartless. At the end he completely changes character and this is again a severe overreaction. Now he appears in a black T-shirt with "Beck in Town" emblazoned on the front and a pair of brown checked slacks (no dress sense?). I believe this character deserves better.

To emphasise his volte face, his presentation at the contest includes the uncovering of a naked man from amid a pile of earth who then cavorts off with a naked lady. What this had to do with Wagner's intentions I am at a loss to understand. If it was intended to shock then it failed for I am now quite inured to nudity on the stage.

During the performance, walking busts of famous composers appeared and danced with each other. I recognised Wagner among them and as he walked off the stage he gave the old "one-finger" salute to the audience. Was the producer indicating Wagner's disdain for the audiences of his day, or did it indicate her own particular attitude to Bayreuth audiences? If so, she has made a fundamental error in interpreting both Wagner and the calibre of Bayreuth audiences.

The production did not follow the story line as scripted by Wagner. In the opening act a disturbance is caused by David and the apprentices but here the disturbance was centred on the Meistersingers themselves. In Act II a riot ensues when Walther

and Eva are hiding prior to elopement and David takes exception to Beckmesser serenading Magdalene who is standing in for Eva. None of this happens here, and the cause of the riot is unclear. During this scene so many things were being thrown around that I would not have been surprised if a few custard pies had not appeared.

We know that Hans Sachs was also a poet but Wagner depicted him as a cobbler. In this production he is a writer who spends his time hammering away on a typewriter. The problem is that when he should be banging on a shoe to highlight Beckmesser's mistakes when serenading Magdalene, so emulating Beckmesser's criticism of Walther's song in Act I, this irony is completely lost with the weakness of a typewriter.

At the end, Walther initially refuses to accept the prize and membership of the Guild, but is persuaded by Sachs to do so and accepts the accolade. Here Walther rejects the prize and membership and obstinately refuses to change his mind. This is a complete misreading of Wagner's intention.

Again, the award ceremony is treated like a popularity contest with a huge cheque being held up by two statuesque models and a PR rep. prancing around geeing everyone up. This cheapens the atmosphere of the contest.

—Garnet Edwards

