

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

Hansel and Gretel

Engelbert Humperdinck

Metropolitan Opera House, New York

18 December 2014–8 January 2015

The Met's seasonal programming seems to be having exactly the intended effect, judging by the performance of *Hansel and Gretel* on New Year's Day.

The most common party consisted of one or more grandparents and one or more grandchildren. This means that the young are gently being indoctrinated, with the hope that they will become lifelong opera buffs, quite possibly as happened to those very grandparents.

In order to entice them, the Met has chosen an opera based on one of those rather gory tales from The Brothers Grimm that always seem to delight even the most timid of children.

Richard Jones's production is sung in English and has strong British connections, having originated with the Welsh National Opera, along with the Lyric Opera of Chicago.

The 2¼-hour performance starts in downbeat fashion as Hansel and Gretel, played by English mezzo Christine Rice and American soprano Heidi Stober, bemoan their hunger and reluctantly welcome home an unsympathetic mother and drunken father.

They are banished to the woods in order to pick berries. There they enter an unsettling dream world where food is served by a team of wobbling chefs who look like escapees from *It's a Knockout*, herded by a literally fishy butler.

By the interval at the end of act 2, the evening has been pleasant but feels rather like a prelude to something more dramatic.

Pleasingly, Humperdinck, Jones and co duly deliver in a delicious final three-quarters of an hour.

Now, the irrepressibly bouncy English conductor Sir Andrew Davis has something to get excited about as the music revs up to accompany the change of dramatic gear.

The children find their dream transforming into a nightmare as they enter the tasty lair of a wicked witch sung with evil vigour by tenor Robert Brubaker.

Some of the images in her kitchen are pretty terrifying, with children turned into gingerbread figures and our heroes threatened with a roasting.

All comes out well in the end, after a good number of thrills, spills and laughs, allowing the audience to enjoy a charming children's chorus, who might be seen as aspirational by some of those present (or their pushy parents/grandparents).

This version, first seen in 2007, is relatively traditional but should leave the youngsters delighted and excited at the end of the day, helped by some splendid singing, especially from Miss Stober

and Mr Brubaker.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)