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The Flying Dutchman

Music and libretto by Richard Wagner

Lyric Opera of Chicago

Ardis Krainik Theater

23 September–7 October 2023

As the press notes for Lyric Opera of Chicago's current production of Richard Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* noted, this tale of the faithful woman who finally let the eternal wanderer of the sea rest was Wagner's first famous opera. There'd been other operas before, but as a friend of mine once noted, lesser-known Chekhov plays are "lesser known for a reason." And I have to admit that past productions of this work might have tempted me to say the same for *Dutchman*.

The opera as opera can be a bit thin dramatically at times—just a little too much partying surrounding a wedding that turns out to be fatally doomed and a few too many sailor's choruses. The premise is a bit much too—that the faithful love of a woman is plenty enough to save a doomed soul so long as she doesn't stray herself. In that libretto, she manages to do so (in Wagner's original version) by throwing herself over a bluff into the ocean that has kept the Dutchman only able to return to land every seven years. In this version, Christopher Alden has her force her lover to shoot her, ensuring she will be faithful until death.

Well. There it is. Opera, as feminist critics have pointed out before, is hard on women. If they don't end up happily married in comedies (with some operatic comedies exploring a not so Happy Ever After, such as *The Marriage of Figaro*, they either lose their true love to another man, or end up dead. It's a hard burden to carry.

But while the opera itself can be thin material (when I've seen it before, I remember being vastly underwhelmed), this particular production has the voices needed to make it work musically. Listening to the score as conducted by Enrique Mazzola in his first ever Wagner makes its listeners very glad to be there. It's one of those moments that I have often experienced at Lyric Opera when you turn to your opera-going companions years and years later and say, "remember when? Remember that?" Seeing Bryn Terfel tear the skies apart in *Rheingold* as a very young singer calling the wind and storm to him, seeing Catherine Malfitano singing the prelude to Berg's *Lulu* upside down while hanging from a curtain made of steel rings, seeing Cecilia Bartoli singing bel canto in a way that shows exactly why everyone fought for tickets to those sometimes awful plots, this is opera at its best.

In this case, Lyric has pulled together a great cast—from its chorus which is stellar to all six principal roles: all were great with two Lyric premièrès (Melody Wilson's Mary and Robert Watson's Erik) to Ryan Capozzo's Steersman. Capozzo is a member of the Ryan Center for the Arts, part of Lyric's educational efforts. The three are all young singers well worth watching and listening to, no doubt for years to come.

Captain Daland (sung very effectively by Mika Kares) was a steady hand and listeners knew that even if a wind kept his sailors from port, he would get them safely home. But the Dutchman? It's a

role that needs a big, big voice. Tomasz Konieczny has that voice but also the acting needed to portray a man who doomed himself with a single careless sentence, swearing that he would "succeed [rounding the Cape of Good Hope] even if he had to sail until Judgment Day" as described in National Public Radio's synopsis of the opera. Terribly, the Devil overheard him (one of the many intersections between the real, material world of the mainland and the unknown, magical world of the ocean) and took it as a vow, even a curse, unless the Dutchman finds true love.

And he does. Tamara Wilson is costumed to be, well, a bit of a frump, really. Wilson is herself quite beautiful but made to look very ordinary, a working woman paired with the handsome huntsman Erik, who, it turns out, doesn't have a chance. Once Senta begins dreaming of the Dutchman, Fate takes over.

But that voice: it's huge but marked by an amazing ease. At top volume, it more than fills the auditorium but with no hint of a shout or vocal pressure at all. And when it's soft, her instrument still fills the house but with a warmth that made the audience listen, that forced us all to pay attention.

Truly, this *Flying Dutchman* will remain with its audience forever.

Reviewer: [Keith Dorwick](#)