

BY TAMARA VALLEJOS

Playing Well With Others

A Profile of Gary Thor Wedow



Gary Thor Wedow made his Seattle Opera debut in 2007 conducting the company's first-ever production of Handel's *Giulio Cesare*, then returned a few months later to introduce us to Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride*. Both those times, he was shaping the music for pieces many in the audience had never heard before. Now, he's back for *The Magic Flute* and an entirely different challenge: illuminating an opera everyone knows already. A staple of the repertoire, *The Magic Flute*'s music is recognizable even to those who have never seen it live. So how does one honor an old favorite, but keep it fresh at the same time? Wedow aims to find the perfect balance.

He concedes, on the one hand, that the purists have a point. "These great operas have become so iconic that they're kind of like insects frozen in amber," he says. "We get this very religious feeling about them, and because we are trying to preserve and present masterpieces, we have to be careful not to draw a mustache on the *Mona Lisa*."

But *Flute* was Mozart's final opera to premiere, and the composer died just two months after it opened in Vienna in 1791. Had he lived, perhaps he would have changed it, tweaking it for individual singers or revising its text.

"I do a lot of early opera—even earlier than *The Magic Flute*—and all the time you see these changes that were made quickly in the theater to accommodate singers or dramatic needs. These were living theater pieces that the composer and librettist changed, and there was a very fluid feeling about the music," says Wedow.

“When you stand up in front of an orchestra, the accumulated knowledge that is sitting in front of you is so much bigger than anything you’ll ever be able to accumulate,” he says. “You have to have a little humility and work with the musicians because, actually, *they’re* doing it. It’s humbling—and inspiring!”

That historic spirit of revision and improvisation has kept Wedow from a kind of Mozart he describes as inflexible. When he works with an orchestra, he tries to ensure the composer’s works spark an emotional response from the listener. He doesn’t want Mozart to sound so pristine it becomes sterile.

“I think Mozart was a bigger, deeper, more volatile, spontaneous kind of person than one that was always serene and beautiful. I like to feel that we can encourage Mozart’s music to be a lot more honest, visceral, varied, and colorful.”

Nowhere are varied colors more important than in *The Magic Flute*, with music that goes from the folksy tunes of Papageno and Papagena (“We should have a little down-country feeling when we play that,” says Wedow) to the high-flying bravura of the Queen of the Night’s arias.

But conveying those desires to the players involved can be tricky. Each person approaches a score differently, and it’s Wedow’s responsibility to make sure everyone is on the same page. While that may seem obvious to some, he says the level of musical preparation that takes place prior to opening night is one of the biggest misconceptions people tend to have about his job. “A lot of a conductor’s job is done months in advance of actually standing up in front of the orchestra and waving his arms.”

For Wedow, this work nearly always includes choosing the specific editions of the score to be used. And, obviously, he also needs to know that score inside and out. In the case of *The Magic Flute*, he’s devoted hundreds of hours over the years to preparing a series of carefully marked parts for the orchestra, so that minimal explanation is needed once rehearsals begin. “That’s partially because rehearsals are crushingly expensive, so you don’t want to waste a lot of time,” Wedow explains. “It’s also because instrumentalists are doers. They’re interested in the intellectual aspects of a piece, but they want to learn by actually playing it.”

Working with singers requires a different approach. What’s more, a singer’s voice is a limited resource. So instead of simply *doing*, Wedow says he likes to spend more time discussing both the meaning and the grammar

of the text. That preserves the voice, while also helping a singer develop the intellectual and emotional background they need to portray a character. “Their *métier* is words, so they tend to think in that way, too,” he says.

And while it’s his job to take the reins and lead the group of performers in front of him, he’s careful to note that the collaborative aspect of conducting is the part of his work that fascinates him the most. Wedow is far from the stereotype of the tyrannical maestro. “When you stand up in front of an orchestra, the accumulated knowledge that is sitting in front of you is so much bigger than anything you’ll ever be able to accumulate,” he says. “You have to have a little humility and work with the musicians because, actually, *they’re* doing it. It’s humbling—and inspiring!”

Considering how passionate he is about conducting, it’s surprising to discover that Wedow happened upon that path somewhat accidentally. The LaPorte, Indiana, native grew up playing the piano and while he did dabble in conducting early on in high school, he considered himself an instrumentalist. It wasn’t until his time at the University of Indiana that the puzzle pieces began coming together. There he was studying with famed pianist Jorge Bolet when, one day, his instructor happened to be in the audience while Wedow accompanied a singer in recital. After the concert wrapped up, Bolet headed backstage to speak to his student.

“He was built like a linebacker,” Wedow recalls, “and he picked me up and shook me and said, ‘Why don’t you play the piano like that when you play for me?’”

In that moment, it was as if a light bulb had finally turned on above the young musician’s head.

“I realized then that I loved making music with *other people*,” he says. “And that’s what I feel as a conductor—I feel like I’m a collaborator and my job is to get everyone to play together and to make the best music we can possibly make.”

From then on, Wedow’s career began to shift toward conducting, with stints as a chorus-master at the Santa Fe Opera, Canadian Opera Company, and New York City Opera along the way. Currently, he’s a faculty member at The Juilliard School—he makes his home in Queens, New York—and he’s been engaged by the Merola Program at San Francisco Opera, Florida Grand Opera, and New York City Opera, among several others. A lifelong fan of theater, Wedow discovered that opera had all the elements

to satisfy his natural curiosities and passions. “I don’t see any difference between *Finian’s Rainbow* or *The Wiz* and *The Magic Flute* or *The Marriage of Figaro*. They’re all a part of this wonderful tradition,” he says. “I love theater—and opera is probably the biggest kind of theater you can imagine.”

Wedow believes *The Magic Flute* features an evening not unlike an episode of *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Where Sullivan could have easily had a single show featuring the Beatles followed by the Bolshoi Ballet followed by the Bulgarian Women’s Chorus, backstage at a *Flute* performance you find children standing next to a chorus of quasi-Masonic priests standing next to people in fantastical animal costumes standing next to Monostatos.

The over-the-top nature of Mozart’s masterpiece has Wedow excited to return to Seattle. A cinema buff, he says his favorite genre is screwball comedy, and that *Flute* features a few similar elements he enjoys sharing with audiences.

“If you want tragedy, all you have to do is look at the front page of the newspaper or turn on the news,” he says. “But I love looking at the world upside down. *The Magic Flute* is this wonderful fairy tale, and much of it is completely nonsensical, whimsical, and fantastical.” ■

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