

Pulling strings

Think puppets are just for kids? Think again. The Amsterdams Marionetten Theater features sophisticated opera on a small scale, finds *Malcolm Rock*

There are directors that would admit to wishing their actors were operated by strings, but Hendrik Bonneur made this fantasy a reality when, in 1985, he founded the Amsterdams Marionetten Theater. Bonneur, 69, whose career as an opera director can be traced back to the glittering stage of La Scala, says that puppetry has shadowed him throughout his life.

'When I was directing productions of Nabucco and Lohengrin for provincial opera houses in Germany, critics wrote that they looked more like puppet shows,' recalls Bonneur. 'At first I took offence, but because the articles were enthusiastic about what they saw, not at all demeaning, I came to see value in the observation.'

At the request of Dutch theatre impresario Jan van Waveren, Bonneur set about gathering a team of craftsmen and puppeteers to stage a straggled version of Mozart's juvenile opera 'Bastien and Bastienne'. (The composer wrote it at the age of 12.)

Since he'd had an apprenticeship as a child at the Salzburg Marionette Theatre, Bonneur took quickly to his miniaturised props and performers, and the new hobby that was intended to occupy him during his sabbatical year lasted more than 25 years.

'What happens on the marionette stage is a miracle,' he says, with enthusiasm. 'These clumsy wooden things, these dolls on strings, become imbued with a sort of super realism. It can make you feel unsatisfied with other styles of performance, even if it's smaller in scale.'

Certainly there are some who would consider a four-metre proscenium a step down from the grand stages on which the director previously worked. Bonneur gained early experience as a costumier at Covent Garden where he dressed Luciano Pavarotti. 'He looked ridiculous, like an elephant in silk and velvet, but his voice transformed him into a hero on the stage,' he recalls.

Bonneur went on to join the Netherlands Opera as the assistant to director Filippo Sanjust, who was in turn the assistant and stage designer for Milanese aristocrat and opera royalty Luchino Visconti.

'Italian noble opera is a world unto itself,' he says. 'It's lavish and excessive and wonderful, and knowledge is passed directly between master and pupil. I was fortunate to learn from Filippo and took from him the knowledge of generations.'

Inevitably, Bonneur brings some of the La Scala gilding to the shrunken stage that he has erected inside a



Master puppeteer: Mephistopheles approaches Dr. Faust

former ship parts factory around the corner from Nieuwmarkt. He notes that puppets and the *opéra comique* form are designed to please every taste. 'Children, adults, the erudite, the simple, the fresh-minded and antiquated: marionettes are magical and tickle the naivety in everyone.'

The principal characters in his current *opéra comique*, 'The Amazing Journey of Doctor Faust', are draped with red and green sateen, fur cuffs, ruffs and silver hemming.

Puppeteer Frederieke Cannegieter says that working with marionettes has allowed her to live an unusual dream. 'I always wanted to be an actor, but hated the idea of being in the spotlight. As a puppeteer, there's an instrument between

me and my audience, which means I'm able to play anything, even the handsome prince.'

The production is populated by dogs, sheep, back-flipping house mice and demon birds in stilettos, all crafted by a team of four sculptor-carpenters and operated by 12 puppeteers who alternate in shifts of six.

'The craftsmen own the theatre by day,' says Bonneur. 'The puppeteers take over at night.'

Amsterdams Marionetten Theater Nieuwe Jonkerstraat 8

(620 8027/xs4all.nl/~amtinfo). 'The Amazing Journey of Doctor Faust' is performed this month on Sunday 6 at 15.00 (€16 adults/€7.50 kids) and with lunch on Sunday 13 at 12.30 (€29.50). Shows run until 28 May.

Classical & Opera

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Tuesday 1

Christianne Stotijn & Julius Drake Concertgebouw (recital hall), 20.15, €44. The Dutch mezzo soprano and acclaimed pianist have developed a strong music relationship, already releasing two CDs together. The duo present a beautiful and melancholy programme of Russian composers: Tchaikovsky, Shostakovich and Rachmaninoff.

Wednesday 2

De Nederlandse Opera presents 'Legende' Het Muziektheater, 20.00, €15-€110. Askó | Schönberg chief conductor Reinbert de Leeuw leads the Radio Philharmonic Orchestra in the Dutch composer Peter-Jan Wagemans' opera in three acts, 'Legende'. Based on the story from a 19th-century graphic novel by Swiss cartoonist Rodolphe Töpffer, Wagemans' libretto weaves together tales of Dr. Festus and sister Ursula as they hunt for butterflies and meet up with the fantasy characters Pontus, Nell and the despotic Zamar to go exploring. Marcel Sijm serves as director for the project, with De Nederlandse Opera Chorus being led by Martin Wright. *In Dutch, with English surtitles.*

Thursday 3

CREA Orkest Concertgebouw (main hall), 20.15, €17.50/€14.90. The orchestra performs Mahler's 'Symphony No 3 in D Minor', joined by the Student Choir Amsterdam, Kinderkoor de Kickers and soloist Carina Vinke. See feature, page 83.

Friday 4

Liza Ferschtman Concertgebouw (recital hall), 20.15, €36. The radiant young Dutch violinist treats with a colourful solo concert consisting of Biber's 'Passacaglia', a Bartók sonata, 'Sequenza VIII' by Berio and Bach's 'Partita No 2 in D'.

Saturday 5

Nederlands Philharmonisch Orkest Concertgebouw (main hall), 20.15, €22.50-€43. Marc Albrecht conducts Mahler's 'Blumine' (Flower Piece), Berg's 'Violin Concerto: to the memory of an angel' and Brahms' 'Symphony No 1 in C'. With violinist Daniel Hope as guest soloist. See feature, page 84.

CRITIC'S PICK TRIO Luscina Noorderkerk, 14.00, €15. Consisting of soprano Stefanie True, mezzo-soprano Michaela Riener and fortepianist Constanze Lee, the trio met while attending the Royal Conservatory in Den Haag, despite hailing from Canada, Austria and Hong Kong. The diverse ensemble will perform works from both Robert and Clara Schumann, the latter of which has often been overlooked despite her reportedly great talent for both piano performance and composition.