

Classical & Opera

Too flute for words

HOLLAND FESTIVAL FEVER!



Minimalist Mozart: 'Magic Flute' with a piano and bamboo too

Peter Brook takes on Mozart's 'Magic Flute' at the Holland Festival this month. **Malcolm Rock** spoke with the pianist-composer who adapted the score, **Frank Krawczyk**

Only in the mind of stage shaman Peter Brook could Mozart's 'Die Zauberflöte' ('The Magic Flute') translate into a production that uses only a solo piano and bamboo props.

The 86-year-old theatre director, legendary for his 40-year stand against superfluous *mise en scène*, has freely adapted Mozart's opera into a pared-down version requiring just seven singers, two actors, a piano and a few bamboo poles to represent the enchanted forest and title instrument. This month he brings his family- and panda-friendly production to the Holland Festival, having spurned the ornamentation of Covent Garden and the Palais Garnier in favour of the Calvinistic comforts of Amsterdam's Muziekgebouw. (Brook swore never again to direct grand opera after three years as director of productions at the Royal Opera House.)

Brook disciples should be familiar with his 'poor theatre' approach to staging, a philosophy he adopted from Polish director Jerzy Grotowski's mission to eliminate unnecessary theatrical devices from the stage and furthered in his own treatise on theatre-making, 'The Empty Space'. He recently directed Apartheid drama 'Sizwe Banzi is Dead' at the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord, his home base in Paris, with only coat racks and cardboard boxes.

Brook's 'Flute' is dressed in cream linen and performed within a panorama of bamboo poles that double as handheld staffs and weapons. He worked with pianist-composer Frank Krawczyk to adapt the three-hour pageant of Masonic ritual and ornithology into a buoyant, 90-minute flight for young singers.

Krawczyk, who studied piano in Paris and composition in Lyon, also performs in the show and has had to stand in for an orchestra. He says the streamlined arrangement, unencumbered by lavish sets and instrumentation, results in a disarming closeness between audiences, performers and their collaborators.

'The experience [of collaborating with Brook] is profoundly human,' says Krawczyk. 'We set out to work

without preconceived ideas, only wishing to surprise each other, and we did.'

Krawczyk is known to some Dutch audiences for his work with experimental dance company ICK Amsterdam. (He provided the soundtrack for

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Emio Greco and Pieter C Sholten's 'Purgatorio In Vision'.) He previously worked with Brook on 'Love Is My Sin', a dramatisation of Shakespeare's sonnets. He has come to share Brook's belief that audiences can focus better on character and drama when the stage is stripped of unnecessary elements.

'Our method forces the focus back on the accuracy of the characters,' Krawczyk says. 'The new musical relationship the singers have with the piano is closer to the *Lied* than to opera and is thus more tenuous and

demanding. The whole experience is more reminiscent of a theatre ensemble than a musical ensemble.'

Krawczyk says that the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord (where 'Une Flûte Enchantée', as his adaptation is known, was developed and had its premiere) is exceptionally well suited for opera. This is surprising given that the fading stucco proscenium, saved from atrophy but never fully restored by Brook, is more commonly used for experiments in spoken drama. Uncertainty remains whether the Muziekgebouw auditorium, with its spare architecture and adjustable ceilings that control reverberation, can successfully simulate the charm and intimacy of Brook's Parisian playhouse.

'The Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord's unique proportions make it a place where the slightest detail can be fully experienced on stage and in the audience,' Krawczyk explains. 'It has the most exceptional acoustic properties one can find in Paris.'

So long as those acoustics reverberate within 0.7s, Amsterdam will sound just fine.

'*Une Flûte Enchantée*' ('The Magic Flute') plays Thur 9 to Sat 11 June at Het Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ (holland-festival.nl).