
Jun Kaneko's 'Magic Flute' Is Stunningly Visual

San Francisco Opera's final production for the 2012 Summer Season, [The Magic Flute](#), rides on an ascending scale and tops out in the highest registers of digital technology. The show's designer, Jun Kaneko, is a clear witness to the Other Side; apparently, an all-seeing eye into this hallowed world of Mozart's - a ponderous and preposterous realm which thrives on order and balance along with spontaneous hurly-burly. Like, the always unexpected arrival of The Queen of the Night. Since the opera's very first production in 1791, *The Magic Flute* has been the test of fire for every producer, on a budget, daring to take it on.

For San Francisco Opera, a major goal for *The Magic Flute* is that it be the Company's first production to fully incorporate digital projection technology. The first step began in 2009 when General Director, David Gockley, commissioned renowned ceramic artist and painter Jun Kaneko to create the scenic and costume designs. Gockley had been inspired by the artist's work in two previous productions: *Madama Butterfly*, created in 2007 for Opera Omaha, and *Fidelio* which premiered in 2008 at Opera Company of Philadelphia. Says Gockley, "I am charged with shepherding the creation of productions which must be artistically stimulating but can also attract ticket buyers, donors, and co-producers who together pay the price of the creation. Finding a creative team with a fresh, compelling vision of a piece goes a long way to guaranteeing its success on all fronts."

"The key to conceptualizing a successful opera design," says Jun Kaneko, "is to have a flexible and open mind and to listen to the music without any preconceived ideas. Sometimes not knowing gives us great mental freedom and opens our imagination. It is like being in a heavy fog, knowing something great is beyond it and, as it starts clearing, patiently seeing fantastic possibilities reveal themselves. My goal is to extract a design that emerges from the essence of the music rather than to decorate its story."





SHAGIMURATOVA (The Queen of the Night)

Photos, Courtesy of SF Opera, Cory Weaver

A key member of that creative team is Christopher Maravich who has served as Lighting Director for San Francisco Opera since 2006. Last week I met with Christopher at the War Memorial Opera House prior to a performance of *The Magic Flute*. We went on a lighting walk-through and into regions where even the Phantom must step cautiously. "It's the first show for the Company that you can say is 99.9% projection," he said. "For lack of a better term, I'm in charge of everything that produces light. I started working on this production a year and a half ago. I met with Jun in Omaha. He had his idea and his sketches. My job, early on, was to say - if you're going to put a panel here, then put your projectors there. So, I figured out where the projectors go and how it's going to be plugged-in, and which servers are going to be used for which projectors and how we're going to produce Jun's vision on stage. I didn't program the show. I just helped figure out how it's going to happen."

Jun Kaneko has succeeded in creating an expression of the Totally Other that not only boggles the mind in its complexity, but says to the operatic world: The times they are a'changin'. "For me," says designer Jun Kaneko, "developing an opera design starts simply by listening to the music until a visual image begins in my mind. This process usually takes two to three months of immersing myself in the opera by listening to it 200 to 300 times."

The cheering began on Opening Night with the Overture. A simple line, in what appeared to be crayon, began inching across the front scrim. More lines in various colors followed, some rising and descending, all of them stopping at certain points, red lines suddenly angling off in another direction, orange lines forming grids with greens, yellows, and blues until the entire screen was crowded with overlapping triangles, long arcs, a residue of tiny specks, and an overlay of random and transparent blocks of color. By the final chord, the scrim had been scrawled over with a riot of colored lines and shapes and then disappeared to reveal Prince Tamino fleeing from an on-coming swarm of swirling spirals and a giant two-headed serpent.



Tamino and two-headed serpent puppet
Photo, Cory Weaver

"The show has multiple



different surfaces we project onto," Christopher explained. "The front scrim is used for the overture, a

mid-stage scrim for the transition into the finale, and six projection panels or giant gray legs - three on each side of the stage - which are fabric covered flats painted gray. Each of the legs get hit with projections from the front of the house. The projectors are cross-focused into the right and left wings of the stage."

Kaneko gave his drawings to the [Clark Creative Group](#) in Omaha, Nebraska, an advertising company that does video imagery. The company is literally across the street from Kaneko's studio. Clark Creative developed all of Kaneko's still images and then animated them - the lines all move, the tinted rings fall gently from above, patterns of dots seem to advance toward the audience, and much more. Once the images were completed, the files were sent to San Francisco Opera. Timing being everything, Jun had used as his own musical reference for The Magic Flute a broadcast recording from the Metropolitan Opera conducted by Colin Davis. Turns out, the San Francisco production, conducted by Rory McDonald, runs about fifteen minutes faster. One of the ways to get around these differences was to turn the animations into 10-second loops. For example, the image (the movie) of the falling rings is only about ten seconds long. It occurs during Tamino's Act 1 aria, "Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön", and loops repeatedly.



Side projector points to mirror above, the image projects diagonally downstage

Photo, Sean Martinfield

Backstage in the Projection Room are four servers - four computers that generate and display the

media on stage. The projectors talk to the servers, the servers talk to the control, etc., all done through fiber optics. The system is known as Pandora's Box. Don't open it!

The show has eight projectors - six in the front, two in the back. The projectors point straight up and hit a mirror. The image comes out of the projector in a 4 x 3 aspect ratio, four pixels by three pixels, hits the mirror and projects the image onto the stage. One projector lights the downstage pair, the other the upstage pair.



Pittsinger (The Speaker).
 Photo, Cory Weaver

Kristinn Sigmundsson (Sarastro), Beau Gibson (First Armored Man), Christopher Jackson (First Priest), Alek Shrader (Tamino), Heidi Stober (Pamina), Joo Won Kang (Second Priest), Jordan Bisch (Second Armored Man) and David

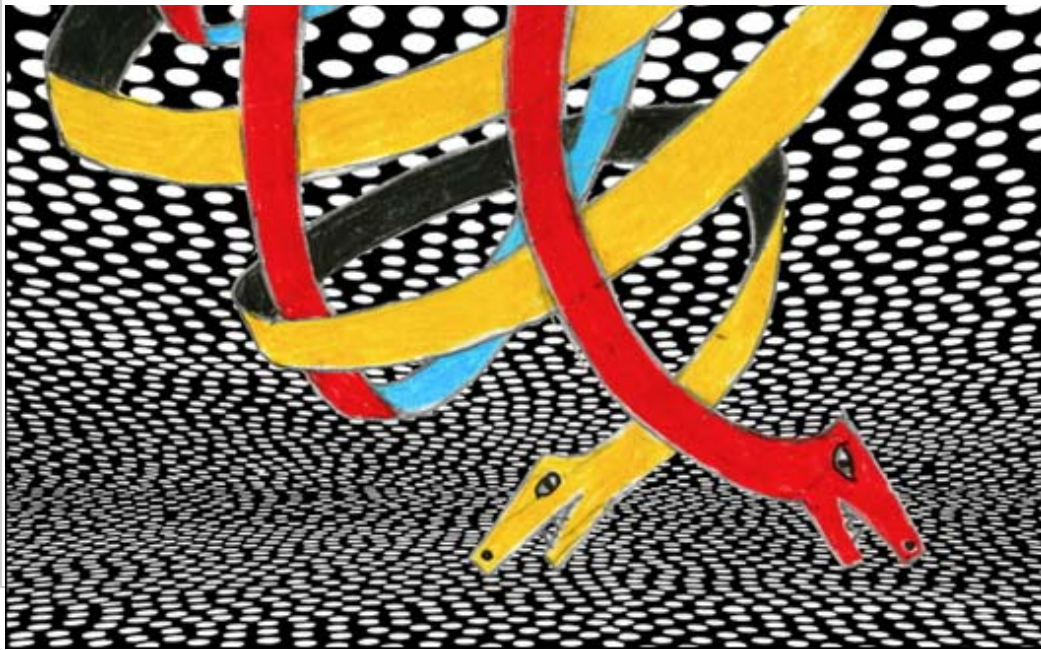


The multiple Grand MA console (left) and Media Manager (blue screen, right)
 Photo, Sean Martinfield

Russ Adamson, Lighting Systems Administrator for SF Opera, runs the console which is located

directly behind the last row of Orchestra Center. The console, Grand MA (yes, aka "Granny") originates from [MA Lighting](#). The most important thing in the whole rig is the Media Manager. All the servers located above the stage won't do anything unless this little computer tells them what to do. The Grand MA tells the Media Manager to play a clip such as the falling rings, etc., the Media Manager tells the computers backstage to play the rings clip, the computers tell the projectors to show the rings clip. Russ is responsible for manipulating the shapes, that is, any adjustments to the image and its exact fit on the screen. I asked him if there had been any hairy moments.



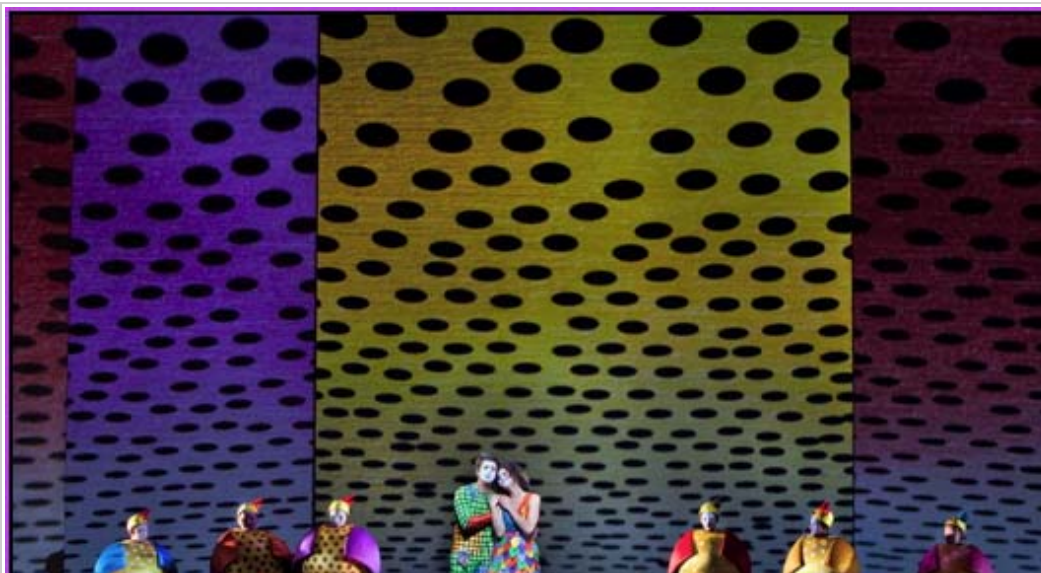


Projected images of two-headed serpent and moving dots
Photo, Cory Weaver

"We had some glitchiness with the spirals. They kind-of hitched, very brief pauses. We couldn't quite figure it out. There's not much you can do at the time.

It's a video clip that's running inside the media server. There are some clips and pieces of media that we use over and over again. For instance, a scratched-out black thing that has a charcoal look. And the dots."

"Or, the UFOs, as we call them," Christopher replied. "But every time the UFOs or the black scratchy thing comes up, it's a separate moment. For example, before Tamino's aria, we have the black scratch cube up, which is Cue 100. The next cue might be 'rings flying'. That would be Cue 101. Cue 102 would be the black scratch thing coming back, but it still is its own cued moment on stage. A lot of things that "go wrong" are things the audience would never notice. It's only when you've been staring at it for two weeks that you realize something might seem slightly off. The main reason Russ is out here is because of the panels that fly in and out during the show. They might be off by an inch when they land. That doesn't sound like a whole lot, but when you have a projector that's a hundred feet away - if it's off by one inch on the ground, the image could be off by about six or seven inches. So, Russ is out here every night, where the audience doesn't see him, and can move the image to the new line of the scenery and match it perfectly."



Nathan Gunn (Papageno) and Nadine Sierra (Papagena)
Photo, Cory Weaver

"Is there is a library of images? How long is the clip for the UFOs?"



"There is a library of probably a thousand clips in the show.

Some cues are longer than others. There are only three real moments where we see the clip as long as it's written for - meaning, it doesn't loop itself. There might be only 380 cues in the show - but each of the eight projectors has its own discreet clip. So, when we have all four panels up and the rear projectors in the background, we are actually looking at five discreet clips. The rear clip is its own movie, and each of the side wings is its own movie. That's why, with 380 cues called in the show, there are only 1,200 pieces of media that we're looking at. It boggles the imagination. Compared to *The Ring* which had three or four hundred pieces of media in the entire cycle, but it was eighteen hours of music. This is three hours."



The Test of Fire. Alek Shrader and Heidi Stober
Photo, Cory Weaver

"Russ will not do anything until Rachel Henneberry, the stage manager, tells him to. The maestro might want to hold for applause, he might want to

carry a final note a little bit longer than usual. Two performances ago, he was five whole minutes faster than he had ever been in the past. That ran into a problem. For example, the cue for the "Test of Fire" is supposed to run exactly as long as the scene. We timed it throughout all the rehearsals and knew it was going to be this length of time. But he actually went about five seconds faster. That meant the next cue wasn't quite ready to be played because the Test of Fire cue had not finished, because it had been conducted slightly faster than it had ever been in the past. Again, the average person is not going to notice. The only person that probably did notice was the Assistant Director, Garnett Bruce, because he's seen the show so many times and has been working on it for so long. This whole summer season has been all about projection."

Click here for ticket information: [MAGIC FLUTE](#)

Next on the calendar for major digital projection?
Stay tuned for: [MOBY DICK](#)

San Francisco Opera's *The Magic Flute* is a co-production with Washington National Opera, Opera Carolina, Opera Omaha, and Lyric Opera of Kansas City.
Sung in English with English supertitles