

# Whimsical *Tempest* takes Budapest by storm

*By Alexandra Ivanoff, 24 May 2016*

The word “tempest” becomes whimsical word-play in the Hungarian State Opera’s new production of Thomas Adès’ *The Tempest* which enjoyed its Hungarian première on 21 May. Directed by Ludger Engels and employing Meredith Oakes’ fine textual retooling of Shakespeare’s play, the production contains clever visual and musical metaphors that refer to the titular storm. That, and a cast of superb singers who were up to the daunting task of mastering Adès’ challenging score, made an evening to remember for its magical ingenuity.



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On the floor of Prospero’s island, property is a veritable tempest of trash. Vestiges of the storm that brought Prospero to the island, the broken ribs of his ship, form an onstage seawall that is a constant reminder of the tempest that blew him there. The production’s modern-dress costumes and trash-strewn *mise-en-scène* (set design by Ric Schachtebeck) could easily have implied a kinship to the Eurotrash stylistic preferences of recent decades, but it’s quite the opposite: it’s a psychological portrait of the protagonist’s mental chaos. Only once do the piles of paper appear to have been mysteriously organized – at a point in Act III where Prospero has finally arrived at a satisfactory rapprochement of heart, soul and mind.

Ariel, the mischievous sprite at Prospero’s beck and call, is a *tour de force* role that calls for supersonic hissy-fits above high C – the sonic embodiment of a musical tempest. During the overture, she begins the opera in pantomime, encouraging a

rowdy crowd on their enchanted isle to toss around confetti and other detritus as their first act of tempest-in-a-teapot.

Soprano [Laure Meloy](#) is astounding in her performance as Ariel, a role that's a brilliant stroke from Adès' pen. He has created a serious competitor for Mozart's Queen of the Night. In this production, Ariel is an airborne theremin, a fireball of fioritura and a squeaky Scarbo flitting about on pulleys and wires. Needless to say, she's a scene stealer and on this particular evening, the object of fascination by a bevy of equally squeaky teenaged girls in the audience.



Franco Pomponi as Prospero

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As Prospero, Franco Pomponi was an excellent choice to portray all the complicated layers of this enigmatic character. Pomponi's radiant baritone expressed and emoted as much tenderness as brash egotism of a man who was both magical and monstrous.

In the role of the deformed creature Caliban, István Horváth's sturdy high tenor served him well throughout his finely wrought characterization of a slave who is abused by his master Prospero, desecrated by an angry populace, and heartlessly spurned by Prospero's young daughter Miranda. Andrea Szántó played Miranda effectively as an energetic teenager, albeit with the plummy sound of a mature woman.

Ably conducted by Péter Halász, Adès' score gives the singers plenty of athleticism within its unusual compositional style which, in Act I, uses a pointillistic technique where each syllable of each word is a held moment with its own orchestral chord supporting it. In Act II and III we heard more connected phrases even though the notes they contained were often far apart. Adès also took inspiration from J.S. Bach by constructing chorale-like sequences that harkened harmonically and stylistically

back to 1700, especially “Bless This Isle” sung by the chorus, and the underlay of Gonzalo’s aria “If I were King of this island”.



István Horváth as Caliban, centre stage

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His orchestral writing is strikingly descriptive: a furious flurry of Fagotts accompanied the moment when Miranda callously tells Caliban “You have no future”; bombastic horror music underscores one of Ariel’s more villainous entrances; and a series of muted trumpet triads lurk mysteriously behind several sung phrases in Act I.

Only one aspect that needed further tweaking was the singers’ English pronunciation, which suffered from a few misguided vowels. Fortunately the surtitles in both English and Hungarian provided very accurate service throughout. Adès, whose words are quoted in the printed programme notes, says he deliberately didn’t use typical instruments like the glockenspiel or celesta to signify “old-fashioned magical sounds” when dealing with supernatural subjects or people with magic powers like Prospero and Ariel. Instead, Adès imbues the score with unearthly, unexpected sounds that emanate from the characters’ desires: Ariel’s voice drops uncharacteristically into her low register when she sings “Were I human” into Prospero’s ear. Despite the score’s lack of tunes that one can whistle, Adès’ musical language makes intuitive sense. By the third act, all ears in the house had been retuned to it, and the sold-out audience of all ages gave this *Tempest* a vociferous storm of approval.