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A Charming *Hansel and Gretel* Film for the Pandemic Era

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm were archivists, promoters of democracy, and pioneers in how we think about language (especially with the *Dictionary* and “Grimm’s Law” of Jacob Grimm). Most famously, they are the collaborators and authors of the fairy tales which have enthralled children and adults for two centuries. Simply speaking, the Brothers Grimm are the most widely read German writers in the world.

“Hänsel und Gretel” is one of the most famous of the folktales collected by the Brothers Grimm. The story has appeared in many forms, including the 1893 opera by Engelbert Humperdinck. While the work is presumed to be fare for children, it has been noted that opera conventions and a complex two-hour-long Wagner-influenced orchestration present a barrier to children’s enjoyment of the work. Bel Cantanti Opera has thus produced and recorded an abridged version of this famous work which happily removes some of these obstacles. Directed by Catrin Davies, the production runs forty-five minutes. This beautiful English-language production is performed by Ashley Kay Armstrong (Hansel) and Kelly Curtin (Gretel) who perform with youthful zest and exuberance. The show contains special effects of magic and fire, and intersperses puppets with live performers. English-language captions are also available to help the audiences follow the words.

The opera is set out of doors in the woods of Maryland’s Seneca Creek State Park, providing a greater sense of realism than is usually possible with the artificial scenery available on the stage of an opera house. Most delightful of all are scenes in the witch’s house, which is in fact the culturally significant Grusendorf Log House! Erected by a German-American named Jakob Snyder in 1855, it was the oldest surviving building in Germantown, Maryland, and was

relocated to the park in the 1980's. The German stylistics of the cabin and the woods setting make it a picturesque setting for this filmed production of Hansel and Gretel.

Bel Cantanti founder and musical director Katerina Souvorova's has also spent time and effort editing and performing the music. Rather than using a full orchestra, only keyboard, flute, and harp are used in order to enhance the folk musical elements of the score, which are often obscured in conventional symphonic productions. This is especially effective in a pair of scenes: one in which Gretel teaches her brother Hansel the "Brüderchen, komm tanz mit mir" ("Brother, Come Dance with Me, or the Two Principals Dance), performed with clapping and excellent voice by Kelly Curtin, and in the *Knupserwalzer* dance, played towards the end of the show.

In fact, Bel Cantanti's production cause one to notice the German folk music elements of the Humperdinck opera almost for the first time. The flute effectively evokes nature sounds, especially to the exclamation "Cuckoo!" Similarly, as Gretel sings that "birds are singing their song with greeting," the flute trills wonderfully in suggestion of a birdsong. The harp likewise conveys artfully the coming of night and the appearance of the stars.

Bel Cantanti spent much time in postproduction, and the final result bears witness to this, in fading from a model house to the Grusendorf log house, for instance. The montage of scenes with translucent dancers of the Olney Ballet as well as separate scenes with the father and the Dew Fairy (played by Daniel Neer and Evelyn Tsen, both in fine voice) seem completely natural and believable, in spite of the social distancing required in the making of the production. Traditional folk as well as fantasy costumes by Ksenya Litvak (who also made the puppets) deserve high praise as well.

"Hansel and Gretel" is here performed in English, though with outstanding use of traditional German cultural elements in terms of music, costuming, and even set architecture. The production will be available for viewing at 8 p.m. E.S.T. on Saturday, 6 February. See www.belcantanti.com for further details.

-Mark Dreisonstok