

experience take on visual and sonic form. Jungian dreams are enacted. Jenifer, in flight from Mark's embrace, finds herself at the foot of a staircase leading to heaven, and, as if it were the most natural thing in the world for her to do, she ascends it and passes out of our sight. Gates leading deep into the warm, pulsing earth open to receive Mark. The San Francisco production, directed by John Copley and designed by Robin Don, is the fourth I have seen, and it is the most successful, for it proceeds with utter naturalness, passing effortlessly between 'real life' and scenic metaphor. Solos, choral scenes, and dances are blended in a single, spellbinding adventure.

The imagined 'temple' in the woods is an Ozymandian shattered visage, and the gates into the earth are represented by an enormous plaster hand, two of whose fingers swivel upwards to admit entrance. The feeling of a dappled glade where enchantments may happen, one whose aspect can suddenly change, is skillfully created by shapes in perforated metal, exquisitely colored, and very skillfully lit (by Thomas Munn). Terry Gilbert's choreography is fearless, beautiful, sensuous, and sensitive to all Tippett's intended imagery. The dancers are good, and Strephon, their leader, played by Jamie Cohen, is outstanding. The chorus — a regular glory of the San Francisco company — is superb. (Dancers and chorus become principals in this opera). The orchestra, enjoying some of the loveliest nature music ever written, plays with great eloquence. The work, the company's press release says, 'was given more than the routine number of rehearsals,' and one can well believe it.

The expert individual contributions came together in a single, inspired presentation of Tippett's inspiring opera. I've never admired Mr. Copley's work more. I hope the New York, Chicago, Houston, Dallas companies are clamouring to borrow the production.

Scott Beach
in the *San Francisco Examiner*

Magic 'Midsummer Marriage'

The superstars of the San Francisco Opera's American premiere production of Michael Tippett's 'The Midsummer Marriage' which opened on Saturday, are the settings and the lighting. Not that there isn't some fine singing, dancing and playing in this remarkable offering — but Robin Don, in his American debut, has created a design of astonishing power, which is magically enhanced by the lighting and projections by Thomas Munn.

The opera, with words and music by Sir Michael Tippett, is an opulent fantasy in the tradition of Shakespeare's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' and Mozart's 'The Magic Flute'. We see a young couple, Mark and Jenifer, involved in the ancient struggle to harmonize the spiritual with the physical; the worldly with the heavenly. In the process, we hear some great music, and we have one of the most refreshing theatrical

experiences imaginable.

The audience fairly gasped as the centerpiece of Don's design was first revealed. It's a huge stone carving of a head, like something found in temple ruins. It so dominates the action as to be almost hypnotic. A soaring spiral staircase leads up into the very brain on that idol, symbolizing the ascent to the spiritual and paradisaic. Below, a gigantic stone hand guards the gateway to the earthly and profane. Munn's use of lighting over that stunning image is masterful.

As I see it, 'The Midsummer Marriage' is what opera is all about . . . or should be. It looks into basic and powerful forces and currents in human experience, and it takes full advantage of the magic of theatrical expression. This is the kind of lyric theater that should last, and be a vital part of our heritage.

Robert Commanday
in the *San Francisco 'Chronicle'*

S. F. Premiere is an eyeful. *Amazing 'Marriage' at the Opera*

The San Francisco Opera — the only major American company to introduce a modern work this year — went all out in its American premiere of Sir Michael Tippett's 'The Midsummer Marriage' Saturday.

In wonder-filled settings by Robin Don, the drama moved smoothly among its three worlds — of the mythic supernatural, of the psyche and of the mundane. The genius of the opera and the success of this production lay exactly in the blending of the layers or facets to each other.

Uniquely in opera here, interpretive dance played a major role as the spirit — really sprite — world reached out to the earthlings in Terry Gilbert's choreography. The dance was beguiling, though overdone at the end with gushing abandon as Tippett seems to have required.

The fanciful visual production, including beautiful lighting and projections, is necessary because the music does not win on its own. The score is immediate, however, and far richer for the voice, than for the orchestra. The choral writing is brilliant, more elaborate and polyphonic than in any previous opera here.

The 1955 opera is an early modern British or post-Vaughan Williams style in which the harmonic vocabulary and effects are not dissonant enough to frighten your maiden great-aunt. Without much sustained tension developing or wide-ranging contrasts in the music, the totality of the experience as theater was all the more crucial.

That's all right. Operas may transport by any and all means, and this one did, conveying under a colorful cloud cover of ambiguity its symbollic-metaphoric-allegorical burden with a certain measure of delight.

The wedding of Mark and Jenifer, to take place in the early morning of a midsummer day, at a magic forest place, and to be witnessed by a great chorus of their friends, is deferred by journeys of self-discovery for them both.

Rejecting his physical love, Jenifer (Mary Jane Johnson) must ascend ('heavenwards') to find her spiritual self. In rage, Mark descends to the Dionysian underworld.

The symbolism of all this is at once and forever apparent in the magic of the fascinating 'place' with its strange temple. An enormous sculpted head, perhaps 50 feet high, minus one eye and cheek and next to it a great hand, its fingers reaching forward, dominate the stage. The fourth and fifth fingers, raised and lowered, control the cave entrance to the underworld.

The ground, a bank and foliage screens are made of heavy perforated metal sheets painted green. A surrounding wall of mirroring plastic sheeting reflects the greenery and woodland projections and adds a shimmering tone.

King Fisher, while trying to trick the Ancients, is confronted by the clairvoyante Sosostriis, rising like Earth Mother from the depths, the scene turned magically sinister and resplendent, with the darkness speckled with bright light. Sheila Nadler, in fantastic witch get-up sings a long dire tale, her mezzo soprano amplified deep and big.

A lotus emerges from the earth, opens and there, dressed as Shiva and Parvati in their pose of 'perpetual copulation' sit Jenifer and Mark. Too much, but more's to come. Challenging the supernatural with his pistol, King Fisher dies of a stroke. Then, with the choristers singing and coupling as ardently as they can, the woodland faeries perform a ritual fire dance and 'celebrate carnal love' until Strephon, completely spent, is fed into the lotus, sacrificed a victim at last.

There is a serene and radiant epilogue at dawn. Now in white wedding garb, Jenifer and Mark return and plight their troth, the orchestra and offstage chorus celebrating.

Well, it's an allegory and, as brilliantly produced by the British director, John Copley, and the company, an experience for the audience to marvel.

From the Designer,
Robin Don

'The Midsummer Marriage' is one of the most complicated operas to design as Sir Michael Tippett makes so many extraordinary demands from the visual elements. In an instant we have to be able to leap from a realistic situation to one of dreams and metaphor.

18 months before it wasn't without a little apprehension that we approached the design of this production for the American premiere knowing that previous productions of the opera had been received with certain reservations.

We knew we had to 'clarify' the piece to be acceptable at first viewing as the story portrayed is not one which can be easily interpreted by a first time audience. One has to somehow encourage them (the audience) from curtain up, that the evening is to develop into an adventure of their own innermost thoughts.

The Opera House in San Francisco is certainly the largest I've designed for. The stage area puts our Royal Opera House to shame.