

Die Zaubermelodika premieres at the Komische Oper Berlin

Iiro Rantala is in great demand for opera at the moment. Die Zaubermelodika, a family opera commissioned by the Komische Oper Berlin, will be premiered on 24 October, and an English version of Sanatorio Express (Pikaparantola) is planned for Australia. A pianist and composer with a keen sense of humour, Rantala seems right now to be riding the crest of the comic-opera wave. What inspired him to write Die Zaubermelodika, and what connections does it have with Mozart's Die Zauberflöte (The Magic Flute)?

It all began with an idea put to the Finnish National Opera by Iiro Rantala and librettist-writer-journalist **Minna Lindgren** for a hilarious opera, *Sanatorio Express*, addressing topics very much in the news: dieting, social media, and mindfulness. The Komische Oper Berlin (KOB) sent a team over to Finland to hear the opera in 2018 and were very taken with its humour, its plot, and the fact that it was melodious. They had been thinking of commissioning a family opera anyway, and according to Rantala, made a spot decision there and then. "We took the KOB guys out for a reindeer burger and I think that clinched it," he jokes.

From football to melodica

"While we were talking, we also lobbied for an opera on a football theme Minna and I had been working on. In this opera, the members of a Finnish women's football team challenge an Italian male team to a match. The KOB was, however, more taken with the idea of *Die Zaubermelodika* we'd been hatching with stage director **Ville Saukkonen**."

The KOB has strong ties with Mozart's *Magic Flute*. The production of stage director **Barrie Kosky** making brilliant use of animation has toured the world and been a great hit, but a sequel to *The Magic Flute*? Whatever next! But it's one of the few operas in which no one dies, Minna Lindgren chips in – so it's possible and fun to invent what happens to the characters later. *The Magic Flute* is also one of the few operas suitable for a young audience.



Iiro Rantala and Minna Lindgren

Minna Lindgren's libretto for *Die Zaubermelodika* cleverly juggles with the familiar cast while neatly exploiting the *Magic Flute* plot. Papageno and Papagena have been blessed with a horde of offspring that make up the Papa Kids choir. The venerable Sarastro needed replacing. He is suffering from memory loss and sings: "Help, help, I've forgotten who I am." Monostatos becomes a hero in the leading role. Three gnomes represent the three little boys. The Queen of the Night is past her soprano prime and can't quite fire off her staccatos in the way she used to. She is now the Queen of the Drag Night and sung by a baritone able to soar to countertenor heights. The three ordeals have been given a Finnish spice at the commissioning Opera's request,

so they are now a sauna contest, swimming through a hole in a frozen lake, and sitting on an anthill.

A real musical romp

Rantala's opera is a real musical romp. The magic melodica theme is present throughout, and the march theme of the gnomes' first entry is varied all along the line. Mozart, Bernstein, musicals and night-club jazz all flit through the score, and the music is as an eclectic mixture that at no point seems contrived. It proceeds in long sweeps and broad arias in a fresh take on the modern opera concept.

The opera is scored for a sinfonietta-sized orchestra, and Rantala plays the piano and melodica. "A corny melodica was my first instrument! Before I got a piano, someone

bought me a Hohner melodica that almost put me off music altogether," he chuckles.

Originally written in English, the opera is to be performed in German, in a translation by the KOB's head dramaturge **Ulrich Lenz**. The stage director is **Nicole Weber** and the conductor **Koen Schoots**. The soloists include **Alma Sadé**, **Johannes Dunz**, **Philipp Meierhöfer**, **Christoph Späth**, **Stefan Sevenich** and **Nikita Voronkova**. After the premiere in Berlin on 24 October 2021, the opera will be on the KOB programme until February 2022.

Plans are also being made for an English version of *Sanatorio Express*. People at the Australian Contemporary Opera Company saw it on Opera Vision, decided they liked it and asked for an English translation. This was duly provided by Minna Lindgren with Rantala's collaboration to adjust the music to the new text. So Australia will be premiering an almost new version.

A man of many talents who never seems to tire, Iiro Rantala is always ready to try his hand at something new, exciting and unpredictable. He began his career over 30 years ago as a jazz pianist but is nowadays increasingly oriented towards classical music. But one thing he refuses to ditch is humour. "Whatever I'm doing, my aim is to entertain, whether it's a jazz piano gig, an opera, whatever. Anyone can be serious; it's much more difficult to be amusing and make people laugh."

Henna Salmela