

REVIEW

THE AGE

18 February 2025

OPERA

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg ★★★★★

Royal Exhibition Building, until February 22

In 1867, German composer Richard Wagner distracted himself from his massive *Ring Cycle* by penning this strange, bloated opera about a local singing competition; at over six hours including intervals, clearly some of the expansiveness and sheer heft of that larger work seeped through. It's a kind of genius, then, that Melbourne Opera are staging it in the Royal Exhibition Building, where the size and grandeur are already built in.

Director Suzanne Chaundy brings clarity and cohesion to the telling, while drawing out the comedy in the conceit. The townsfolk of Nuremberg take their comp extremely seriously, and the local artisans and merchants who run it follow strict rules about eligibility and structure. The prize is a local bride, Eva (Lee Abrahmsen), who is willing to give herself to the winner largely because she already knows who it will be, handsome outsider Walther (James Egglestone). Town clerk Beckmesser (Christopher Hillier) has other plans, and it all gets sorted out by wise cobbler Hans Sachs (Warwick Fyfe).

There's an odd ambivalence at the heart of *Meistersinger*, which marries a sonically luxurious score with a fairly homely plot – the sort of thing Mozart would have popped out in under three hours. Wagner's tendency towards transcendence has nowhere to go, so he channels it into an impassioned but rather academic treatise on German art and the value (and limitation) of tradition. It has nothing to do with what came later, but it reeks of the sort of nationalism that birthed the Nazi party. Chaundy sidesteps the political implications entirely, and the result is joyous and uncomplicated.

Musically, the production is close to flawless. The building's acoustics are surprisingly effective, the singers soaring over the orchestra with confidence. Anthony Negus conducts with great suppleness and control, and the musicians bring fluidity and texture to the score. Fyfe is a powerhouse, pensive in repose and searingly authoritative in action. Abrahmsen and Deborah Humble (as Eva's nurse, Magdalena) are vivid and funny, and Hillier triumphs as the Malvolio-like villain. Egglestone's clarion tenor is suitably exalted, though he tends to run out of steam in the final act.

Meistersinger mightn't be a great entry point to opera – it's too long, and the story is slightly recondite – but it's full of sublime music. Chaundy's lightness of touch, the building's awesome scale and the world-class performances in

and out of the pit make it an aficionado's dream.

Reviewed by Tim Byrne