

A baffling rave in a wonderful pavilion

OPERA

THE MAGIC FLUTE

GARSINGTON OPERA AT WORMSLEY

THERE is a new candidate for the accolade of Most Beautiful Opera House in the World. Previously accommodated in the grounds of an Elizabethan manor near Oxford, Garsington Opera has moved this year to a ravishing landscape garden on Mark Getty's lordly estate deep in the Chilterns. Here the architect Robin Snell (who worked on the rebuilding of Glyndebourne) has designed a seasonal pavilion in the "floating" Japanese manner.

Gracefully functional and airily elegant, sheltered from

the elements yet offering views of the gardens and woodland, it immediately won all hearts: the auditorium is reasonably comfortable, and the stage a large open wingless platform, projecting a brightly vibrant acoustic. Access is easy, parking is a breeze, the facilities are excellent and, miraculously, the entire unit can be collapsed and removed in a few weeks, leaving no trace of its presence.

At a cost of £3.5 million, the project seems to me a snip. What a wonderful achievement in these dark times.

Pity about the opera. Well, that's not quite fair – it isn't that bad – but this *Magic Flute* (in Jeremy Sams's translation) does not

represent Garsington at its considerable best. Martin André's conducting was scrappy, and of the cast only the robust Tamino of Robert Murray and the impassioned Pamina of Sophie Bevan made much impression vocally.

Olivia Fuchs's production baffled me: I can't imagine what she was driving at. On a bare set consisting of a wooden wall marked only by three doors and a large flat circle, Tamino flees exhausted from some druggy all-night rave to be hit on by a Lady Gaga-ish Queen of the Night (Kim Sheehan) and ladies in leather dominatrix gear.

Sarastro (Evan Boyer) leads a Californian Maharishi cult, whose spokesman (Benjamin Bevan) is a prep-school

master in cords and tweedy jacket. A kilted, unshaven Papageno (a charmlessly streetwise William Berger) sports a Mohican quiff: his magic bells emanate from a Roberts radio.

It's not boring. There are some nice incidental effects – notably the two armed men in flaming helmets – and the energy level is generally high. But I increasingly felt that Fuchs was expending too much effort trying to be groovily contemporary and different for its own sake. The result wasn't funny, beautiful or sublime, it was just miscellaneous – and a bit of a mess.

Ⓞ RATING ★★★★★ Pavilion

Ⓞ RATING ★★★☆☆ Magic Flute

Rupert Christiansen