

Review: Houston Grand Opera's 'Sound of Music' is a must-see family experience

The classic musical comes alive on the stage of the Wortham thanks to a strong cast featuring Grammy winner Isabel Leonard.

By Doni Wilson, Correspondent
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When the dog bites, when the bee stings or when your country is being invaded by Nazis, it is hard not to think about Rodgers and Hammerstein's classic musical "The Sound of Music," which is already the bestselling production in the history of the Houston Grand Opera (a truly excellent venue for this show).

Inspired by Maria Augusta Trapp's 1949 memoir, "The Trapp Family Singers," and further popularized by the 1965 movie with Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer, even those who have never seen the musical onstage have heard some of the production's iconic songs, from the stirring "Edelweiss" and "Do Re Mi" to the most famous song of all: "The Hills are Alive."

And, boy, are they ever in this entertaining version that has impressive sets (Peter J. Davison), whether the nunnery in the Austrian countryside or the lavish home of Captain von Trapp and his brood of seven adorable children.

Running through May 12 at The Wortham Center, this co-production of the Houston Grand Opera and the Glimmertrain Festival is riveting from beginning to end, from the nuns who sing in the aisles at the opening as they make their way to the stage, to the wonderful singing of the seven children (with Tori Tedeschi Adams a standout at Leisl), to the romance between beautiful Maria and the stern Captain von Trapp.

Even if we are oh-so-familiar with the story and the songs, it is an engaging and delightful show. Just looking around, everyone of all ages seemed happily transfixed.

Yes, the cast is stellar, but the shining star in this constellation is Grammy winner Isabel Leonard, a mezzo-soprano whose singing is so emotive and gorgeous it can bring you to tears.

She can't help it: Not only is she a superlative vocalist, but she also has Kate Middleton beauty and is a wonderful actress. She could act in any play you could possibly think of, but how delicious that she has a role that allows us to experience the way she makes memorable songs her own, all in ways that are much better than previous versions you may have experienced.

Additional wonderful moments included Katie Van Kooten's soaring notes as the Mother Abbess; a surprising musical moment from son Friedrich (a precocious Peter Theurer); and anytime the children did a number. They were cute but not cloying, and those kids can sing.

Alexander Birch Elliott's portrayal of Captain von Trapp was convincing, and it was interesting to watch his heart soften as he falls in love with Maria. He is all about "discipline," but he doesn't seem to understand anything about children. Maybe the song should ask, "What are you going to do with a problem like Georg?" Thankfully, Maria comes back so those kids can have a life.

The only quibble with this production is Baroness Elsa von Schraeder (Megan Marino). Isn't this character supposed to be cool, sophisticated and from old money? Yes, she provides some sassy comic moments, but the role seems like a parody of this character instead of the potential next Mrs. von Trapp who would turn the lives of the von Trapp children into either a total bore or a one-way ticket to boarding school. Maybe this is a way to spice up a very traditional interpretation of this musical, but it was puzzling.

Otherwise, this delightful performance will have you humming about "raindrops on roses" and "warm woolen mittens," and wishing you could belt out these lines like Leonard. Just think of her performance from this engaging production, and I promise: Then you won't feel so bad. You might even want to see it again.

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