



[OperaOnline.us](http://OperaOnline.us)

Worldwide reviews for a worldwide audience

### **Opera UCLA scores big with Mozart's 'Le Nozze di Figaro.'**



The Count (Mario Chae) threatens the Countess (Andrea Fuentes)



From Left: Susanna (Lauren Michelle), the Countess (Andrea Fuentes), Figaro (In Joon Jang) and the Count (Mario Chae). Photo courtesy of Henry Lim

**WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART  
THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO**

**OPERA UCLA**  
**FEBRUARY 6, 2009**

By: Carol Jean Delmar  
OperaOnline.us

It was raining outside, I was late, I had no plans of writing a review. I do not think that writing reviews of university productions is even appropriate. I just planned to sit with my friends obscurely in the last row of UCLA's Schoenberg Hall and watch the opening night performance of the music department's "Le Nozze di Figaro." I didn't take notes, I didn't catch all the visuals, but I did hear every note.

Yes, there were things that could be criticized. After all, this wasn't the Met, Los Angeles Opera, San Diego Opera, or even a smaller professional company like Long Beach Opera. This was a student production comprised of students and graduates -- among them, a few who have worked as pros. And the effect was bewitching, so why be critical?

The opera revolves around the issue of "le droit du seigneur" -- the right of a nobleman to sleep with his servant's bride on the eve of her wedding. Although Count Almaviva has ended this practice, he still has his eye on Susanna, which leads Susanna, the Countess and Figaro -- Susanna's fiancé -- into a scheming frenzied to deter the Count's success. Add to this a young testosterone-driven page and a postmenopausal housekeeper who is after Figaro, and you have all the makings of a Beaumarchais comedy, or in this case, an opera buffa.

Mozart's music is so glorious, so perfect, so melodious that a student production with mediocre voices could make a mockery of it. Instead, I witnessed a production where every voice had a place in the ensemble. The baritone sounds of In Joon Jang (Figaro) and Hongsuk "Mario" Chae (the Count) were richly mellow; the soprano notes of Lauren Michelle (Susanna) and Andrea Fuentes (the Countess) were warmly focused. Tracy Cox brought her well-projected mezzo to a delightfully robust Marcellina. Leslie Cook was an engaging Cherubino; Dory Schultz (Don Basilio and Don Curzio) seemed to have a hilarious action for every occasion; and Christopher Rimmel and Micaela Tobin added ample support.

These young artists are constantly learning, and their presentations of Mozart's timeless arias will no doubt become more secure with enhanced experience and under the tutelage of their fine directors, coaches and teachers. The overall feel to this "Marriage of Figaro" was really quite wonderful due to the energy and freshness that only a young cast can bring.

Neal Stulberg conducted the UCLA Philharmonia with strong conviction, thus enabling a clean clarity of sound and rhythmically well-paced orchestration that was stylistically bona fide Mozart. His firm hand gave the young artists structure and guidance.

The sets and costumes were simple, traditional and in good taste. Most opera companies believe that they have to create extravagant thrills in order to draw in new audiences. Mozart's brilliant score doesn't require such distractions. So bravo to UCLA!

And bravissimo to director Peter Kazaras who is a genius at drawing out the best qualities from his young cast members. His singers were relaxed – not self-conscious or stiff -- and he enabled them to develop their characterizations by giving them creative blocking and actions that they could rehearse and then make their own. I do have one question for Mr. Kazaras, though: Why? When Figaro was singing “Non più andrai” at the end of Act 1, describing the rigors of military life to Cherubino, Cherubino was busily facilitating a set change with the other cast members. Although the overall visual effect was creative and resourceful, it detracted from Figaro's aria and the reason Figaro was singing it. There was a great opportunity here for interaction between the two characters and for humor, yet Cherubino wasn't even paying attention.

Hard Times:

In the current economic environment, opera companies are cutting their budgets and producing fewer productions each season. Administrators think that young audiences aren't attracted to opera and that the only way to entice them is with costly, lavish productions that in turn necessitate inflated ticket prices.

Well, I don't agree. When I observed how the UCLA audience laughed when Figaro measured Susanna's skirt instead of the room in Act 1; how everyone chuckled when Figaro discovered that Marcellina and Dr. Bartolo were his parents; how amused they all were when Figaro hid behind a tree in the last act and moved it across the stage to maintain his cover – then I knew that opera certainly doesn't have to be costly for people to appreciate it. I am beginning to think that it is the people behind opera that make it so ultra-sophisticated and expensive that the average person cannot partake. I have discovered that many people don't even know what opera is. At \$20 a ticket and less for students and seniors, each one of us has the opportunity to attend a university production and discover opera. Opera is for everyone, and there is no reason that it should become a dying art.

I am sold on Opera UCLA, and I'm sure that there are other such ensembles in conservatories and universities throughout the country. Opera is alive and well! So get the word out!

Libretto: Lorenzo da Ponte  
Conductor: Neal Stulberg  
Stage Director: Peter Kazaras  
Scenic Design: Curtis Wallin  
Lighting Design: Dayna Morgan  
Costume Design: Anna Björnsdotter  
Assistant Conductor: Stephen Karr  
Music Director, UCLA Opera Studio: Rakefet Hak

This production was double cast.