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Los Angeles Opera's 'Barbieri' – Good Music, Good Singing and Fun



Photo: Robert Millard

**GIOACHINO ROSSINI
IL BARBIERE DI SIVIGLIA
LOS ANGELES OPERA
DECEMBER 19, 2009**

By: Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

There was a lot of schtick in Los Angeles Opera's "Il Barbiere di Siviglia," but the sets and some costumes were stylized, and the singing was lush. This tug of war between two opposing landscapes was what kept the show in balance so that the slapstick enabled us

to realize that we were seeing childlike characters that made us feel like kids again.

Much like *Commedia dell'arte*, we could see the Pierrot-Pierret relationship when Count Almaviva serenaded his Rosina. Both were in black-and-white costumes reflective of the genre. This “Barbiere” was reminiscent of “The Tales of Hoffmann,” “Pagliacci” and “L’Elisir d’Amore.” When Figaro introduced us to his ice-cream truck of gizmos, I wasn’t quite sure if he was the barber, Dr. Dulcamara, Harold Hill (“The Music Man”), Starbuck (“The Rainmaker”) or Danilo (“Die lustige Witwe”). I had pangs for customary period costumes. What can I say? I am a traditionalist. I loved the look of Salvatore Baccaloni’s Dr. Bartolo and the antics of Enzo Dara in the 1989 Met production with the wonderfully full-voiced Ferruccio Furlanetto hamming it up as Don Basilio. Kathleen Battle’s soprano Rosina was charming then, but Joyce DiDonato’s mezzo Rosina is equally endearing today. So I guess I’d better snap out of it and begin living in the present because there was absolutely nothing to be critical about in this last performance of LA Opera’s “Barbiere.”

Juan Diego Flórez was superb as the young Almaviva. His lyric tenor has coloratura agility second to none. His narrowly focused tones glided up and down the steps of his vocal staircase with precision and ease just as his body glissaded across the stage with a dancer’s flexibility and style.

Joyce DiDonato’s Rosina was a breath of fresh air – a revelation for those of us in LA who had never seen her. She created a character whose voice and demeanor exuded an innocent childlike reaction to being imprisoned by a funny old basso buffo while at the same time experiencing the once in a lifetime exuberance of first love. She was wide-eyed, animated, high-spirited and effervescent with a rich, secure and specific mezzo one moment and fluid clean runs, trills and ornamentation the next.

The jack-of-all-trades barber, Nathan Gunn, helped facilitate Rosina’s escape from her guardian into the arms of her true love, the Count. But the Count was not the suave one. It was Figaro who was the ladies’ man dressed in an updated ice-cream suit that matched Rosina’s white dress with black polka dots. This Figaro seemed somehow out of place. Gunn has been marketed as a baritone hunk, so does that mean that his Figaro has to be a hunk, too?

Gunn has a solid dependable voice and secure stage presence. Although well-sung, his “Largo al factotum” wasn’t the showstopper it could have been, partially because the director had so much action occurring on stage that we were unable to focus on the main event. Also, I rarely like to mention enunciation and attention to diction because singers often color vowels to aide in vocal production; however, in the case of Figaro’s cavatina, even if we don’t understand the language, we want to hear and see the singer move his lips so that every “Figaro qua, Figaro là, Figaro su, Figaro giù” is crisp and accounted for. Robert Merrill was a master at this. One of his televised performances is on YouTube.

Similarly, the same thing has to happen when Dr. Bartolo sings “A un dottor della mia sorte.” I want to feel breathless at the end of the aria and utterly amused. Enzo Dara did

that for me, and in this production, Bruno Praticó did it in part. His Dr. Bartolo had robust tone throughout but moved less. His humor didn't come across as much because it stemmed from some gimmicky stage directions. When he marched on stage with a minuscule dog on a leash, we were in stitches. Here was this massive figure in a horizontally striped black-and-white vest, plaid jacket and trilby, and he was walking a miniature dog that was shaking off what appeared to be water. It was utterly hysterical, but I still would have liked to have seen more humor emanating from the character.

Andrea Silvestrelli's booming bass was perfect for Don Basilio's "La calunnia." What a joy to hear his voice bellowing throughout the hall – a rarity in the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. And Kerri Marcinko's Berta was executed with precision, not to mention good cheer.

Fiorello is a character we usually barely notice. Not this time. José Adán Pérez made the most of this role with a full-bodied baritonal sound. A member of the Domingo-Thornton Young Artist Program, he is an accomplished singer-actor or actor-singer, whichever way you slice it. His freedom of movement, comic style and timing are his own, which is the first thing that you notice about him. Then when you hear his voice, you think "Ah!"

This black-and-white production was reminiscent of Emilio Sagi's "Luisa Fernanda." Also from the Teatro Real Madrid, much of the attractive scenery was rolled in and out by stagehands. The costumes complemented the sets although the period in question was uncertain since Count Almaviva was dressed in period attire while Dr. Bartolo looked like a retiree from Florida. The most joyous moments occurred in the final scene when the hues became colorful pinks, reds, yellows and blues.

Unfortunately, the orchestra was not as uplifting. Michele Mariotti failed to conduct with James Conlon's flair, and the orchestra just sounded ordinary without enough attention to rhythm and crispness.

Much of the success of this "Barbiere" was due to the creative directing and staging by Sagi and Javier Ulacia, which was carried out by a gifted cast. This production will no doubt be enjoyed at different venues in the future.

Libretto: Cesare Sterbini after a play by Beaumarchais
Conductor: Michele Mariotti
Production: Emilio Sagi
Director: Javier Ulacia
Scenery Design: Llorenç Corbella
Costume Designer: Renata Schussheim
Lighting Designer: Eduardo Bravo
Choreographer: Nuria Castejón