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Los Angeles Opera scores a hit with its well-received ‘Le Nozze Di Figaro.’

**WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART
LE NOZZE DI FIGARO
LOS ANGELES OPERA
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By: Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

“Le Nozze Di Figaro” is thought by many to be Mozart’s finest opera, the glorious music approaching perfection. On Saturday night, March 25, Los Angeles Opera had the opportunity to present its own version of the musical masterpiece, and it was well-received. The overture set the pitch and pace of the frenetic onstage day to follow, and opening night adrenaline held the singers’ energy levels high. As soon as Russian bass Ildar Abdrazakov uttered his first bars as the quick-witted Figaro on the stage of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, it was evident that Los Angeles Opera had scored a hit. A Figaro with such a deep, mellow, full-sounding timbre could only mean more awe-inspiring sounds to follow.

Based on Beaumarchais’ play “Le Mariage de Figaro,” the second in a trilogy which commenced with “Le Barbier de Séville,” Mozart’s opera was first performed in Vienna on May 1, 1786 after composer Giovanni Paisiello had successfully produced his opera “Il Barbiere di Siviglia” in 1782.

Performances of Beaumarchais’ “Le Mariage de Figaro” had been banned in Vienna due to the play’s controversial subject matter -- the class struggle between servants and nobility during the time just prior to the French Revolution. But Lorenzo da Ponte, the librettist of Mozart’s opera, convinced the emperor to allow its premiere.

Crucial to the plot of Mozart’s “Figaro” is the issue of “le droit du seigneur,” the right of each noble master to sleep with the servant brides in his domain on their wedding nights. Even though Count Almaviva has put an end to this practice in “Figaro,” he still intends

to flirt his way into his maid Susanna's bed on the eve of her wedding to Figaro. But Susanna and her betrothed have every intention of deterring him with the aide of the Countess, who fears that her husband's roving eye means that his love for her is waning. Add to this Cherubino, a young page who dreams of having his way with everyone; and Marcellina, the elderly woman who intends to collect on the debt Figaro owes her or legally bind him to matrimonial bliss, then discovers that he is actually her long-lost son - and you have utter chaos in the Almaviva residence, where the characters exchange clothes and trick and cajole until they are all reunited with their rightful partners.

In this Ian Judge revival production first performed by LA Opera in 2004, the sets, props and costumes fail to hold true to the period which is essential to the story line. Mozart and Da Ponte set the action of the opera in Count Almaviva's chateau near Seville in the 18th century.

In a 1997 article in The Washington Times, Marta Domingo commented about the production of "La Traviata" she was directing for the Washington National Opera: "In an opera like 'Bohème,' you can set it at any time; there are always bohemians, hippies, beatniks. In New York, now, they even have a modern musical based on 'Bohème,'" she is quoted as saying. "But 'Traviata' is a period piece. You can only believe it with the morals, the class structure in place at that time that prevents a young couple from following their love. A decent boy shouldn't have a steady relationship with a courtesan in 1850."

Although these comments were in no way indicative of Ms. Domingo's views regarding Mozart's "Le Nozze di Figaro," one might conclude that given the mores of the time before the French Revolution, a similar response might be applicable, at least in the opinion of this reviewer.

A sexual romp in a play or opera that takes place in the 1950s means something very different when compared to what occurs in Mozart's opera buffa which is set in the censorship era before the French Revolution. When modernized to the 1950s or thereabouts, the opera loses its "raison d'être." With the score's harpsichord accompaniments and recitatives, the ornamental music seems to cry out for props, costumes and sets in the 18th century.

In Act I, the curtain opens to a very red and black backdrop. Figaro is painting the room blood red. "Cinque, dieci, venti, trenta" – here he is traditionally only measuring the room, not painting it. He is wearing breeches, which was customary in the late 1700s, but he isn't wearing stockings and buckled pumps; he doesn't have a tie wig on his head; and his shirt with suspenders isn't covered with a waistcoat, thus making it impossible to discern in what period the costume really belongs. When Marcellina enters with Dr. Bartolo, she looks a bit like Hermione Gingold in the film "Gigi." She has bright red hair with a straw hat, tight-fitting clothes around a rounded frame, and she looks more like a caricature than an actual person. Bartolo wears shoes that resemble rubber galoshes; he's carrying an alligator purse or attaché case, yet he's wearing breeches. Cherubino looks more like a gum-chewing high school dropout/gang member than a page, though when in

uniform, one might place his attire in the era of Franco's Spain. The Count wears breeches and boots under a long modern 20th century dressing gown, and so the inconsistencies in sets and costumes move from act to act, thus giving the audience a feeling of the '50s with only a hint of the 1700s, since some of the furniture looks somewhat antique and could fit into any era.

Yet in spite of the confusion, when the Act IV garden scene commences, it suddenly doesn't seem to matter anymore that the sets and costumes fail to fit into a particular niche. Tall juniper trees are dropped in. Four huge chandeliers hover from the sky above with the chateau seen in the background. The characters hold flashlights like microphones to spotlight themselves. Susanna and the Countess wear scrumptious steel blue silk taffeta evening gowns. The stars are glistening, there are fireworks, and the vision is stunning. None of it makes any sense. Yet if the essence of true art is indeed creativity, then Ian Judge's production (with lighting design by Nigel Levings, sets by Tim Goodchild and costumes by Deirdre Clancy) does succeed. However, one cannot help but wonder what Mozart would think on this the 250th anniversary of his birth.

THE ARTISTS

Ildar Abdrazakov's performance was flawless. He sang his "Se vuol ballare, Signor Contino" with zest, fire and determination to outwit the Count. His convincing "Non più andrai" intimidated Cherubino to the nth degree, and his impassioned "Aprite un po' quegl'occhi" on the heartlessness and infidelity of women was sheer perfection.

David Pittsinger's voice also warmed the soul. He didn't reach the true breadth of the Count's character until his aria in Act III, however. His demeanor lacked the regal quality of the Count in Act I -- he could have almost been Figaro -- but when he sang "Vedrò, mentr'io sospiro" in Act III, his resolve to avenge Figaro was evident in his stance and voice, thus capturing the essence of the role.

Renowned soprano Barbara Bonney was a delightful Susanna. A Strauss and Mozart specialist, Bonney's agile soprano moved flawlessly through every nuance of the role. Her character's dilemmas were taken a little too seriously though at times. A few more laughs and smiles would have enhanced her onstage presence and the Figaro-Susanna chemistry. Her "Deh, vieni, non tardar" was indeed lovely and enabled the audience to appreciate her artistry.

As the Countess, Adrienne Pieczonka's voice was magnificent, perfectly placed, supported and full, yet at times she seemed more like Floria Tosca than Countess Almaviva. A slower paced, more heartfelt "Porgi, amor" and "Dove sono" would have added a new dimension to her performance.

And what can be said about Lucy Schauer's Cherubino? She obviously followed through with the director's stage directions and literally "became" the energetic sex-craving character she portrayed. A little shocking and a jolt to the system -- one might wonder what Schauer will do with the role of Hansel in Humperdinck's "Hansel and Gretel" next season.

Michael Gallup's Dr. Bartola was engaging. His "La vendetta" was robust and full of fury. Anna Steiger as Marcellina projected the caricature aspects of her role, thus diminishing the focus on her vocal presence. Greg Fedderly as Don Basilio, Gregorio González as Antonio, and Peter Nathan Foltz as Don Curzio shined as actors and rounded out the exceptional cast. But we just couldn't get enough of soprano Jessica Swink's Barbarina. A second year resident artist with L.A. Opera, Swink's voice displayed clear vocal quality and Mozartian warmth, and her portrayal of Barbarina was enchanting. She is a big talent, and we will no doubt hear more from her in the future.

In conclusion: Under the baton of Kent Nagano, the Los Angeles Opera Orchestra was evenly paced and lended supportive accompaniment to the wonderful ensemble cast and chorus. With this production of "Le Nozze di Figaro," Maestro Nagano ends his term as LA Opera's principal conductor and music director. His association with the company began in 1989 when he conducted Kurt Weill's "Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny." In 2001, he became Los Angeles Opera's principal conductor, then became music director in 2003. He leaves the company to serve as music director of the Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal and the Bayerische Staatsoper in Munich.

Saturday night with LA Opera was definitely an invigorating experience which posed many unanswerable questions and provided much food for thought.

Conductor, Kent Nagano
Director, Ian Judge
Set Designer, Tim Goodchild
Costume Designer, Deirdre Clancy
Lighting Designer, Nigel Levings



Ildar Abdrazakov as Figaro and Barbara Bonney as Susanna
Photo: Robert Millard