



Regional Reviews: Philadelphia

The Marriage of Figaro

Opera Philadelphia

Review by Cameron Kelsall

I remember, as a burgeoning opera fan, being told by an older and more knowledgeable acquaintance that Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* was nearly impossible to screw up. Over the course of a couple decades and a few dozen productions, this observation has mostly proven true. The 1786 masterpiece—the first of three legendary collaborations between Mozart and librettist Lorenzo da Ponte—is just so well crafted that it can regularly withstand subpar singing, listless conducting, and egregious directorial malfeasance. Yes, *Figaro* is foolproof—but few companies succeed with it as thoroughly as Opera Philadelphia does with its smartly staged and ideally performed new production, which comes to the Academy of Music in a co-production shared with Lyric Opera of Kansas City, San Diego Opera, and Palm Beach Opera.



Brandon Cedel and Ying Fang

Photo by Kelly & Massa

Director Stephen Lawless has provided a production that is refreshingly traditional without feeling stuffy. The imposing marble sets (by Leslie Travers, who also designed the stylish costumes), like the opera itself, are both austere and cheeky. They provide the perfect playground for Mozart's tale of betrayal and redemption. **Thomas Hase's evocative lighting becomes an integral part of the production, often suggesting the inner machinations of the characters as they are singing. From top to bottom, the *mise-en-scène* embodies all the virtues to which every opera company should strive when performing a work as familiar and beloved as *Figaro*.**

Such is the quality of the music-making, however, that were Opera Philadelphia presenting the performance on a bare stage with the singers in street clothes, it probably would be just as enthralling. Even judging by this company's usually high standard, the cast of mostly young singers assembled here is an extraordinary gift to Mozart. The women are first among equals, with Ying Fang perhaps the loveliest Susanna I have seen and heard. The Chinese-born, New York-based soprano exudes confidence and rock-solid vocal control, which never waver throughout her performance of one of the longest and most unforgiving roles in the operatic repertoire. At the end of

the long evening, she delivers a performance of "Deh vieni non tardar, oh gioia bella" ("Come, do not delay, by beautiful joy")—one of the most beautiful moments in all of opera—that could stand shoulder to shoulder with great Susannas of the past like Lucia Popp and Kathleen Battle.

Canadian soprano Layla Claire brings a silken soprano and genuinely noble bearing to the long-suffering Countess Almaviva. Her Countess is smarter and more sympathetic than many previous interpretations I have seen; throughout the turmoil of the plot, she also genuinely appears to still love her philandering husband (sung here by John Chest). This detail makes her ultimate redemption of him a genuinely moving experience. Claire is a Mozartean to the manner born, with exquisite breath control and crisp Italian diction. The Countess's act three aria "Dovo sono i bei momenti" ("Where are the lovely moments") usually brings the house down, but rarely has the ovation felt more earned than in Claire's capable hands.

The men of the production are no slouches, though—and I am including mezzo-soprano Cecelia Hall, singing the hormone-ravaged pageboy Cherubino, in this category. Hall was announced as indisposed at the opening night performance, but perhaps only her slightly diminished volume betrayed lingering illness. Otherwise, she offers a rich and supple voice and an appealing stage manner that communicates her character's youthful energy. John Chest avoids playing Count Almaviva as an unforgivable scoundrel, and his warm lyric baritone further aids this endearing interpretation. And in the title role, the sumptuous bass-baritone Brandon Cedel finds all of Figaro's humor without characterizing him as a simpleton. Cedel and Fang are an ideally paired Figaro and Susanna, their voices blending as smoothly as coffee and milk and filling every corner of the Academy of Music.

Opera Philadelphia did not skimp on the supporting roles, either—thankfully, it should be said. The escapades of Dr. Bartolo, Marcellina, and Don Basilio can easily slow down the proceedings when poorly cast and broadly directed. No danger of that with artists as vocally resplendent as Patrick Carfizzi, Lucy Schauer, and Jason Ferrante. Lawless keeps their comic elements moving at a steady clip, and the buffo subplot feels fully integrated within the larger world of the opera.

Music Director Corrado Rovaris conducts a mostly solid reading from the pit, although he seems more reliant on the score than I would have expected for such a familiar work. The legendary overture unspools at a more leisurely pace than is customary (and, it should be mentioned, written), but I did not feel that the languorous tempo added anything musically. Throughout much of the opera, though, Rovaris is in tune with his singers, providing the necessary support.

Opera Philadelphia has become known in recent years for their commitment to new works (this season's extraordinary *Breaking the Waves* and the Pulitzer Prize winning *Silent Night* among them), and for their terrific productions of opera by Rossini, which have become Maestro Rovaris' specialty. The company is perhaps not as well known for their exquisite Mozart assumptions, but they should be, as this *Figaro* proves. I am now even more excited for their forthcoming production of *The Magic Flute*, which will open the highly anticipated O17 Festival in September. That is still a ways off, but *Figaro* can—and should—be enjoyed until May 7.

Opera Philadelphia's production of *The Marriage of Figaro* continues through Sunday, May 7, 2017, at the Academy of Music, 240 S. Broad Street, Philadelphia. Tickets (\$19-269) can be purchased online at www.operaphila.org or by calling 215-732-8400.