

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Figaro Delivers Sweet Singing, Drawing-Room Comedy

Stephen West · Wednesday, October 16th, 2019

San Francisco Opera just opened a handsome new production of *The Marriage of Figaro*, and it's an energetic take on Mozart's classic 1786 comedy.

The story is both simple and incredibly convoluted. Figaro, (Michael Sumuel), a footman in the household of Count Almaviva (Levente Molnar), wants to marry the beautiful servant girl Susanna (Jeanine De Bique). The Count also has his lustful eyes on Susanna, but to conquer her he must evade the scrutiny of his wife, the Countess Rosina (Nicole Heaston), who's on to his lechery.



Jeanine De Bique as Susanna, left, Michael Sumuel as Figaro, and Nicole Heaston as the Countess in Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*. Photo: Cory Weaver/San Francisco Opera.

Many complications ensue, with subplots involving a lawyer, Bartolo (James Creswell), who holds a grudge against Figaro; a frustrated older housekeeper, Marcellina (Catherine Cook), who wants to marry Figaro (or get repaid for a loan she made to him); and a young page, Cherubino, who has his own romantic subplot involving the gardener's daughter and is played in mostly male costumes by the mezzo-soprano Serena Malfi (in a so-called trouser role). Naturally, all gets resolved in the end.

It's an impressive cast, who offer not just powerful and lyric singing voices but a talent for comedy (the production is directed by Michael Cavanagh, with music conducted by Henrik Nanasi).



Michael Sumuel as Figaro in Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*. Photo: Cory Weaver/San Francisco Opera.

Sumuel, a muscular Figaro with a big bass-baritone voice, and Molnar's Count — imperious, vain, and foolish, with a rich baritone — make a fine pair of male leads. The two principal sopranos, Heaston's sad and frustrated Countess and De Bique's sweet Susanna, more than hold their own in duets with the men, though De Bique's voice is sometimes overwhelmed by the full orchestra and chorus. Among the secondary characters, Malfi's rendition of Cherubino's heartbreakingly sweet aria *Voi che sapete* brought down the house.

The physical production is impressive, featuring an elegant 18th-century manor house that's still under construction. The clever set design by Erhard Rom includes a mix of neoclassical structures and architectural drawings on flats that look like huge sheets of drafting paper with grids. It allows

the story to move quickly from a drawing room to an exterior facade to a study or lovely garden. The colorful period costumes are by Constance Hoffman.



Levente Molnar as Count Almaviva in Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*. Photo: Cory Weaver/San Francisco Opera.

The setting allegedly has been moved to the newly independent United States, though except for the brief appearance of an American flag with a circle of 13 stars, there's little to indicate we're not in the opera's original location of Seville, Spain. With two principal characters called the Count and Countess, it's a bit of a stretch to think we're watching an American story. (The company plans to produce Mozart's two other operas with librettos by Lorenzo Da Ponte, *Cosi fan tutte* and *Don Giovanni*, using the same manor house set in later historical times.)

Last Sunday's performance ran about three hours and 45 minutes, including two intermissions, and a few times — in the later part of the second act, for example — the action seems to slow to a near-standstill. Still, it's the singing that's most important here, and the cast delivers.

The Marriage of Figaro runs through November 1 at [San Francisco Opera](#), 301 Van Ness Avenue, San Francisco. The production features music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, a libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte, and is based on a play by Beaumarchais.

(Top image, from left: Catherine Cook as Marcellina, James Cresswell as Bartolo, Levente Molnar as Count Almaviva, Brenton Ryan as Curzio, and Michael Sumuel as Figaro in Mozart's The Marriage of Figaro. Photo: Cory Weaver/San Francisco Opera.)

This entry was posted on Wednesday, October 16th, 2019 at 11:48 am and is filed under [Fine Art](#), [Theatre](#), [Music](#)

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