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Review: Opera San Jose's 'Figaro' a resplendent evening of love, laughter and gorgeous music

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On Opera San Jose's Saturday night opening performance of Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro," French police stormed the Boulevard Beaumarchais of the 11th arrondissement in Paris, where but a few feet away, the Bataclan theater had become the site of unspeakable horrors. The boulevard, which leads directly to the Place de la Bastille, is named for the playwright on whose revolutionary work Mozart's opera is based, one which prefigured the most famous storming in history.

Saturday evening at the California Theater, Opera San Jose delivered a resounding performance of the celebrated 1786 opera based on Pierre-Augustin Beaumarchais' "La folle journée, ou Le mariage de Figaro," considered a powerful artistic harbinger of the French Revolution.

Merola alumnus Ben Wager, singing the title role, displayed a seamless adaptability to the musical demands of his versatile character in the "Non piu andrai" and "Se vuol ballare" arias. But it was his resonant performance of "Aprite un po' quegli occhi" that was utterly unforgettable, given with penetrating tone from top to bottom and remaining in mind long after the applause died.

San Francisco Conservatory of Music student Amina Edris, as Figaro's fiancée, Susanna, sang so vivaciously she received the loudest ovations of the evening. Her chemistry with



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Wager was heartfelt, and the soprano's uncommon performance of "Deh, vieni, non tardar" was laced with well-placed expressivity and colors.

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In his Opera San Jose debut, conductor Andrew Bisantz revealed the emotions behind Mozart's incredible technique. The composer's favorite number, the Act III sextet, was a revelatory experience. Bisantz evoked lines interwoven beautifully with the vocals, with textures crystal clear, giving the mastery of Mozart's counterpoint its resplendent shine.

Matthew Hanscom amply displayed the flexibility required of Count Almaviva, juggling both the fury and the many nuances of humor with consistency. His transformation at "Contessa perdono" was utterly convincing and saved an otherwise precarious final scene.

Isabella Ivy's performance as the Countess Rosina Almaviva left a feeling of ambivalence. As the introspective, forsaken woman, she was believable and resplendent in "Porgi amor." "Dove sono i bei momenti" also impressed musically, with Ivy's gorgeous, even tone tinged with the melancholy inherent in her character. But the warmth and more exalted qualities of her personality, which have led generations to admire Mozart's characterization, were sorely missing; the lack of convincing emotional development in her portrayal seemed to render the transcendent final scene inorganic, anticlimactic.

Standout mezzo-soprano Karin Mushegain, in the crowd-pleasing trouser role of Cherubino, delivered stupendously; her canzona "Voi, che sapete" was convincing and beautifully supported by the woodwinds. Her contorted facial expressions were a delight, and her comedic timing brilliant. The supporting cast, led by Michael Dailey as Basilio and Jennifer Mitchell as Barbarina, consistently impressed, and set designer Steven Kemp provided sensitive detailing for director Lillian Groag's brilliantly measured production.

In November 1963, Leonard Bernstein famously remarked after the assassination of President Kennedy: "This will be our reply to violence: to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before." Saturday evening at California Theater, the cast and crew of Opera San Jose realized the heart of those sentiments, and for a few hours, offered respite to hundreds in these uneasy times, reveling in the human expressions of love and laughter.

opera san jose

Presents Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro" When: 8 p.m. Nov. 19 and 24, 3 p.m. Nov. 22 and 29

Where: California Theatre, 345 South 1st St., San Jose

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