

OPERAVILLE

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Opera San Jose's The Marriage of Figaro



Matthew Hanscom as the Count, Karin Mushegain as Cherubino.

All photos by Pat Kirk.

Opera San Jose
Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*
November 15, 2015

Stage director Lillian Groag and her opening-night cast left no gag unturned in possibly the funniest *Figaro* I've ever seen. It was one of those nights where the diaphragm muscles in the audience got as much exercise as the ones onstage.

A mysterious walk-through mirror. A lonely hunter wandering onstage to offer his ducks to passing nobles. A veritable offensive line of servants tumbling through an opened door. A hat magically held aloft by an excited appendage. And feathers falling from the freaking flies. The barely controlled chaos resembled nothing more than a Marx

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ABOUT ME



 MICHAEL J. VAUGHN

Michael J. Vaughn is the author of six

Bros. movie.

Credit the cast with squeezing some beautiful singing into this wacky choreography. It helps that they were perfectly cast; to a Figaro aficionado, it was as if OSJ scoured the world over for perfect archetypes.

The most reassuring sound was the first line of bed measurements from bass Ben Wager – solid tone, easy delivery - because if you've got a good Figaro, you're halfway home. Wager had a terrific, sadistic time toying with Cherubino in "Non piu andrai" and enthusiastically ripping up the female gender in "Aprite un po quegl'occhi."

Taking on the thankless job of playing the Count (who fails and fails for three hours straight), baritone Matthew Hanscom did beautifully, thanks largely to a fit of flying arms and legs you might call the Dammit Dance. He also lent real menace to the Count's pledge of vengeance, "Vedro, mentre io sospiro" (helped by Sean A Russell's spooky lighting).



Ben Wager as Figaro

Mezzo Karin Mushegain comes to Cherubino with the dual advantages of height challenge (okay, she's short) and a fantastically expressive stageface. She plays the slapstick with aplomb, at one point crawling across the room under a blanket like some kind of alien worm. My only complaint was that her "Voi che sapete" seemed to be constantly pushing upward, losing a little quality in the treble.

Isabella Ivy simply *is* The Countess, height advantaged (okay, tall), with a soprano that continues to grow in its richness. The only flaw came in the opening "Porgi, Amor," where she had a couple of hiccups along her passagio, but her "Dove sono" was gorgeous, played with a defeated melancholy even sadder than the usual Countess. Her final forgiveness of the Count was elegant and heartbreaking.

novels, including *Frosted Glass* (Dead End Street, Seattle) and *Rhyming Pittsburgh* (LBF Books, Pittsburgh). His poetry has appeared in more than fifty journals, including *Skidrow Penthouse* and *The Chaffin Journal*, and he works as a judge for several *Writer's Digest* competitions. He lives in San Jose, and plays drums for the San Francisco rock band *Exit Wonderland*.

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Matthew Hanscom as the Count, Isabella Ivy as The Countess.

Soprano Amina Edris brings a genuine *ohmagawd* teenage quality to the expected Susanna sauciness, hurling cohorts here and there as she wades through the non-stop fiascos. Her voice came to the fore in the chill-inducing Letter Duet with Ivy, “Che soave zeffiretto,” and then “Deh vieni, non

tardar,” sung to a faux lover for the purpose of torturing her eavesdropping husband. Her vocal lines in the latter were sensual and divinely shaped, delivered with a wonderful sense of dynamic play.

Being a good-looking dude, tenor Michael Dailey plays a lot of ingenues, but I’m beginning to think his future lies in comedy. His Don Basilio, a busybody goof, is the operatic incarnation of Jerry Lewis. Having offended his boss, the Count, he breaks into a high-speed jitter worthy of a meth-head in a Vibra-bed, and his hugely loud stamping of the Count’s official papers is a brilliant bit.

Groag’s direction brings in some noteworthy innovations. She completely halts the score for extended gags: skinflint Bartolo (Silas Elash), for instance, taking an eternity to fish a single coin from his purse. She brings in some extra-curricular characters: Arlecchino (Harlequin, played by Ryan Sammonds), inserting himself in scenes as the commedia dell’arte prototype for Figaro, and carrying on a musical argument with harpsichordist Veronika Agronov-Dafoe over the proper march for his entrance. Another theme was the constant presence of eavesdropping servants, which accentuated the idea that all behaviors in a noble house have political ramifications.



Amina Edris as Susanna, Michael Dailey as Don Basilio.

Conductor Andrew Bisantz seemed to be having an enormous amount of fun. A particularly stunning effect was the string subito pianos in Figaro's "Se vuol ballare." Bisantz and baritone Silas Elash had a bit of a tempo disagreement in Bartolo's "La vendetta." Steven Kemp's set designs seem a little worn, but do possess some nice touches. The Spanish doors in the Countess's apartment go well with the California Theatre ceiling, and the blooming wisteria of the garden scene took me straight to Villa Montalvo in May. The costume prize goes to the Count's gorgeous purple paisley coat in Act I.

Through Nov. 29, California Theatre, 345 S. First Street, San Jose.
\$51-\$151. operasj.org, 408/437-4450.

A side note: Much as I loved Groag's direction, her program notes make a convoluted, bizarre claim that Beaumarchais' play, one of the most censored works in history, was *not* anti-aristocracy. Much of her argument hinges on the Count's final apology to the Countess. And if you believed *that* apology, I've got a bridge in San Francisco I can sell ya.

Michael J. Vaughn is an opera critic, poet and author of the opera novels [Gabiella's Voice](#) and [Operaville](#).

POSTED BY MICHAEL J. VAUGHN AT 4:41 PM

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