



# 'Figaro' Is Delightfully Bawdy, Yet Still Refined

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**FIGARO! FIGARO!** Matthew Hanscom as Count Almaviva and Karin Mushegain as Cherubino are both excellent in San Jose Opera's production of *The Marriage of Figaro*.

When endeavoring to describe opera, some begin combing through a thesaurus in search of highfalutin adjectives and impassioned verbs. But in Opera San Jose's production of Mozart's classic—and bawdy—*The Marriage of Figaro*, many of the usual operatic tropes are delightfully subverted, satirized and outright mocked.

Set in a Spanish castle, the story occurs in a single, emotionally explosive day. Centered on Count Almaviva and his servant, Figaro, the plot involves the romantic liaisons of both characters, and the count's court—all of whom seem to be conjuring up

schemes against each other. Moreover, while Figaro is the Opera's namesake, the main character is really the Count, who, after suffering romantic embarrassments and shame, is forced to confront his own weaknesses. Ultimately, the Count has to face his court and his wife, whom he begs for forgiveness.

The opera originally premiered in September 1783 (after heavy scrutiny and censorship by King Louis XVI), and is the middle part of Pierre Beaumarchais' Figaro trilogy, which includes *The Barber of Seville* and *The Guilty Mother*. Beaumarchais, who is also known as an early supporter of the American Revolution, used Figaro to poke fun at the aristocracy, both on a broad-scale and personally.

The shaky early history of the opera (Mozart was harassed by paid hecklers throughout the first performance) is important in understanding the radical nature of the plot. The show's playful crassness and subversion of the establishment engenders some actual belly laughs, making it hard to imagine the same story being performed for a petulant King. But this radical chronology



in many ways mirrors the plot, which emphasizes the lives and concerns of the servants, instead of the elite.

All of the characters are brought to life in this Opera San Jose adaptation, with the lead actors shining equally with the bit players. The wily but astute servant Figaro is played in a mischievous Bugs Bunny-like fashion by Ben Wager. The countess' maid and Figaro's wife-to-be, Susanna, played by Amina Edris, has a powerful voice and performs with sprightly strength.

The countess, played by Isabella Ivy, delivers the standout vocal performance of the opera—effortlessly transitioning between near-dialogue and glass-shattering high notes. There is a purity to her voice that is hard to accomplish in operatic singing.

Count Almaviva, played by Matthew Hanscom, is the most gullible, incompetent, yet multi-dimensional character. The actor's tittering portrayal of a mixture of anger and befuddlement is fantastic, and is important in centering the silly static of many of the other characters.

Karin Mushegain provides the standout acting performance as Cherubino. Both hyperbolic and nuanced in portraying this immature romantic, Mushegain carries much of the show through her exuberant comicality. Other notable performances include Silas Elash as Bartolo, Michael Dailey as Don Basilio and Teressa Foss as Marcellina—all of whom are respectively hilarious and instrumental in the continuation of the plot's ludicrous love schemes.

The actors' physical comedy is a constant source of amusement. Far in the background of big scenes, the characters are constantly providing little bits of levity. These comedic details are supported by the trim and elegant set design, which frames the physical action nicely.

As for The Marriage of Figaro's musicality, the choruses and refrains are some of the most recognizable pieces of music in history. Employing unconventional lulls and spontaneous harmonies, the power of Mozart's music is driven home by a careful synthesis between words and sound, where the repetition of musical phrases affirms important pieces of dialogue at a harmonious level.

Operas run on hyperbole, sometimes to their detriment. In Figaro's case, the opposite is true. The overabundance of whimsy and physical comedy propels the opera through its complicated love triangles and schemes without any drag. Like a refined irreverence, or a elegant brashness, the opera hits both high and low humor with equally charming effect.

It can be difficult to take an already funny and classic story and keep it fresh, but Opera San Jose breathes mischievous new life into an old masterpiece.

## The Marriage of Figaro

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