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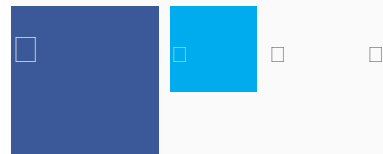
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‘Barber of Seville’ is a thriller of an opera in San Jose



8

PAT KIRK

Kirk Dougherty was a stalwart Count Almaviva, and Renee Rapier sang brilliantly as Rosina in Opera San Jose’s production of Rossini’s “The Barber of Seville.”

By **ELIJAH HO, CORRESPONDENT**
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There are strange parallels in the lives of Gioachino Rossini and Michael Jackson.

In their respective lifetimes, they were musical heroes of the masses, kings of the popular song. No other musicians – not even Beethoven – could claim their celebrity. They even premiered their masterpieces at the age of 24.

But to compare the kings of popular music: While Jackson’s “Thriller” album remained atop billboards for an impressive 37 weeks and is still the best-selling of all time, “The Barber of Seville” continues to astound in its 200th year as one of the most enduring, dependable opere buffe ever written.

Saturday at the California Theater production by Opera San Jose was no different. At the end of what had to be one of the longest, most confusing weeks for many in the Bay Area and around the country, it was not one brilliant woman, but two, who lifted our spirits, brought order to things and with their various talents, inspired us to hope.

With the strength of Layna Chianakas' direction and the resplendent singing and acting of mezzo-soprano Renée Rapier, we were astounded by the quality of this production.

Make no mistake: the men in this cast were brilliant, too.

Beginning with baritone Brian James Myer as Figaro, the title character, I have rarely seen an actor of such charisma and agility. Myer's unwavering charm and energy stole nearly every scene he was in, and with tremendous breath control, projection and clarity of diction, he navigated the octave leaps and challenges of his opening cavatina "Largo al factotum" with conviction. Never was Myer tiresome or beyond the scope of his multidimensional character.

As Almaviva, resident tenor Kirk Dougherty was dependable. Dougherty sings with his heart on his sleeve, always, and "Ecco ridente in cielo", with its vast runs and roulades, was a pleasure to hear. As Bartolo, bass-baritone Valerian Ruminski commanded respect while being the funniest character of the evening. He offered powerful lyricism amid a sea of rapid fire passages in "A un dottor della mia sorte".

But at the end of the day, it is Rapier that people should listen to. The mezzo has appeared with the San Francisco and Los Angeles opera companies, but as one knowledgeable audience member remarked, "She could sing this role on any stage in the world".

An advertisement for Stanford Health Care Advantage. The top half features a photograph of a woman with short, wavy grey hair and red-rimmed glasses. She is smiling and holding a whole orange to her mouth. The background is slightly blurred, showing a wooden lattice and a green plant. Below the photo is a dark red banner with white text. The text reads "Stay ready for what's next." in a sans-serif font. Below this is a button with the text "LEARN MORE »" and the Stanford Health Care Advantage logo, which includes the Stanford University crest and the text "Stanford HEALTH CARE ADVANTAGE".

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Rapier's seamless portrayal of Rosina's ambiguous qualities was buttressed by a unified, blistering vocal technique that students can appreciate. From "Una voce poco fa", colors and ornaments were

meticulously placed and musically satisfying. Her ravishing tone in “Contro un cor che accende amor”, traveled the ends of the hall, even throughout, and her duet with Myer, “Dunque io son”, was nothing short of resplendent.

I was impressed by the humor in Rossini’s music, how it translates seamlessly from generation to generation. The trio, “Ah, qual colpo inaspettato”, was executed marvelously, and Chianakas deserves ample praise for both her vision for such scenes and for weaving it all together.

Upon an encounter in Paris, composer Felix Mendelssohn noted, “I really know few men who can be so amusing and witty as he... intellect, animation and wit, sparkle in all his features and in every word”. In a nutshell, that was how Saturday’s performance of Rossini felt.

In Pierre Beaumarchais’ play, on which Rossini’s opera is based, the title character remarks, “I force myself to laugh at everything, for fear of having to weep”. If laughter is the best medicine in these strange times, go and see this production. There may be just enough demand from people who need an extra dose or two to push this production to 37 weeks.

Contact Elijah Ho at elijah.ho@hotmail.com.

OPERA SAN JOSE

Presents Rossini’s “The Barber of Seville”

Where: California Theatre, 345 S. First St., San Jose

When: 3 p.m. Nov. 13, 20 and 27, 8 p.m. Nov. 17 and 22

Tickets: \$10-\$176, 408-437-4450, www.operasj.org

Tags:
Opera



Elijah Ho, correspondent

OPERA VILLE

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 2016

A Truly Buggy Barber

Opera San Jose's Barber of Seville

November 12, 2016



Kirk Dougherty as Almaviva, Colin Ramsey as Basilio, Brian James Myer as Figaro and Renee Rapier as Rosina. All photos by Pat Kirk.

It would appear that the baby boomers who learned their opera from Bugs Bunny have finally taken over the opera house. When the silhouette of a carrot appeared on the curtain during the overture, the audience erupted in laughter, so much that an elderly patron complained it had "spoiled a perfectly beautiful piece of music." The overture (if you weren't aware) provided the soundtrack for Warner Brothers' iconic 1950 Rossini tribute, "Rabbit of Seville."

Carrots appeared in the production, as well, but that's about as far as it went. Under the direction of Layna Chianakas, the performance offered that delicious Marx Brothers sense of barely controlled

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ABOUT ME



 [MICHAEL J. VAUGHN](mailto:mjv@operaville.com)



Brian James Myer as Figaro.

chaos, but somehow lacked a unifying vision. (Come to think of it, why not a Marx Brothers “Barber”? The Figaro-Groucho-Bugs lineage is not so far-fetched.)

Brian James Myer is a ridiculously

talented Figaro, exhibiting notes both falsetto and basso profundo in his deft attack on the role. In his “Largo al factotum” (featured in the 1949 Bugs cartoon “Long-Haired Hare”), Myer extended the end of one line to the beginning of the next, serving to smooth out a piece that can easily fall into the herky-jerky. The general impression is of a guy on a corner, simply talking about his job, even when the patter is coming fast and furious. (And check out the wild wigs sculpted by Christina Martin.)

It could be that the odd sense of cast disunity came from the fact that no one was going to be anywhere near as smooth as Myer, although Kirk Dougherty gave it a solid run as Count Almaviva. Dougherty’s tenor was as lyric and smooth as ever, and he threw in a bonus by accompanying himself on guitar in the serenade “Se il mio nome.” He and Myer matched up well in the plot-making duet, “All’idea di quel metallo.” The two disguises he undertook to sneak into Rosina’s house were an even split: the nasal voice-teacher was hilarious, but the drunken-soldier routine fell a little flat.

Michael J. Vaughn is the author of seventeen novels, including *The Popcorn Girl* and *Billy Saddle*. His poetry has appeared in more than 100 journals, and he works as a competitions judge for *Writer's Digest*. He lives in San Jose, and plays drums for the San Francisco rock band *Exit Wonderland*.

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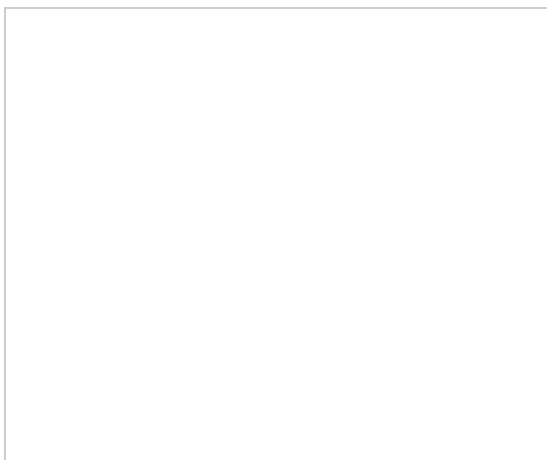


Kirk Dougherty as Almaviva, Renee Rapier as Rosina.

Vocally, our Rosina, mezzo Renée Rapier, was a fascinating trip. The opening lines of the cavatina, “Una voce poco fa,” seemed a little dark and covered, but rising into the upper reaches her tone opened up gloriously, and in the ensemble numbers of the second act she exhibited moments of great power. In the area of acting, Rapier had that unsettling look of thinking about her next move. She didn’t necessarily harm the comic interplay, but a good Rosina will break the ingenue mold and actually add to the pot.

Bass-baritone Valerian Ruminski seemed willing to make any face and suffer any humiliation to make his Dr. Bartolo more pathetic. His jealous aria, “A un dottor della mia sorte,” was masterful, and his bad singing in the music lesson scene was hilarious. As Basilio, Colin Ramsey resembled a kind of Rocky Horror English professor, constantly entering from the bathroom after a toilet flush (nitpick: an *anachronistic* toilet flush). But even this level of silliness could not hide his lush tone, notably in the song of slander, “La calunnia è un venticello.” I also enjoyed the efforts of baritone Babatunde Akinboboye as Almaviva’s lieutenant, Fiorello, and mezzo Teressa Foss the cat-accumulating maid Berta, lamenting the foolishness of May-December romances in “Il vecchiotto cerca moglie.”

Chorus master
Andrew Whitfield
took the podium to
lead the orchestra in
a suitably breezy
reading (driving
right through all
that carrot-
laughter). Kent
Dorsey provided
some effective



Satanic underlighting for Basilio's "La calunnia." Matthew Antaky's set design was fairly period-standard but meticulous, particularly the Tuscan look of the stairway walls. The lower room featured



Valerian Ruminski as Bartolo.

a portrait of late OSJ founder Irene Dalis, a touching addition. And it's always fun to listen to the recitative interplay between Veronika Agronov-Dafoe's harpsichord and the singers, which themselves seem like miniature conversations. I'm also happy that Figaro, after hours of pretend-eating, finally got to have a real bite of that carrot at the final curtain.

Through Nov. 27 at California Theatre, 345 S. First Street, San Jose. 408/437-4450, operasj.org. (Note: Matthew Hanscom will play Figaro on 11/27.)

Michael J. Vaughn is a thirty-year opera critic and author of the novels Gabriella's Voice and Operaville. His best-selling novel The Popcorn Girl may be read for free at writerville.blogspot.com

POSTED BY [MICHAEL J. VAUGHN](#) AT 12:00 PM

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