

OPERA TODAY

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HOME
COMMENTARY
FEATURED OPERAS
NEWS
REPERTOIRE
REVIEWS
ABOUT
CONTACT
LINKS
SEARCH SITE

★ RECENTLY IN PERFORMANCES

Rusalka, AZ Opera

On November 20, 2016, Arizona Opera completed its run of Antonin Dvořák's fairy Tale opera, *Rusalka*. Loosely based on Hand Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, Joshua Borths staged it with common objects such as dining room chairs that could be found in the home of a child watching the story unfold.

First new Ring Cycle in 40 Years, Leipzig

Consistently overshadowed by the neighboring Bayreuth, the far less stuffy Oper Leipzig (Wagner's birthplace) programmed after forty years their first complete Ring Cycle.

San Jose's Beta-Carotene Rich Barber

You didn't have to know the Bugs Bunny *oeuvre* to appreciate Opera San Jose's enchanting *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, but it sure enhanced your experience if you did.

Manon Lescaut at Covent Garden

If there was ever any doubt that Puccini's *Manon* is on a road to nowhere, then the closing image of Jonathan Kent's 2014 production of *Manon Lescaut* (revived here for the first time, by Paul Higgins) leaves no uncertainty.

Fierce in War, dazzling in Peace: Joyce DiDonato at the Concertgebouw

Many opera singers are careful to maintain an air of political neutrality. Not so mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato, who is outspoken about causes she holds dear. Her latest project, a very personal response to the 2015 terror attacks in Paris, puts her audience through the emotional wringer, but also showers them with musical rewards.

Simplicius Simplicissimus

I wonder if Karl Amadeus Hartmann saw something of himself in the young Simplicius Simplicissimus, the eponymous protagonist of his three-scene chamber opera of 1936. Simplicius is in a sort of 'Holy Fool' who manages to survive the violence and civil strife of the Thirty Years War (1618-48), largely through dumb chance, and whose truthful pronouncements fall upon the ears of the deluded and oppressive.

Lucia di Lammermoor at Lyric Opera of Chicago

For its second opera of the 2016-17 season Lyric Opera of Chicago has staged Gaetano Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* in a production seen at the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino and the Grand Théâtre de Genève.

Akhnatn Offers L A Operagoers Both Ear and Eye Candy

Akhnatn is the third in composer Philip Glass's trilogy of operas about people who have made important contributions to society: Albert Einstein in science, Mahatma Gandhi in politics, and *Akhnatn* in religion. Glass's three operas are: *Einstein on the Beach*, *Satyagraha*, and *Akhnatn*.

Shakespeare in the Late Baroque - Bampton Classical Opera

Shakespeare re-imagined for the very Late Baroque, with Bampton Classical Opera at St John's Smith Square. "Shakespeare, Shakespeare, Shakespeare.... the God of Our Idolatory". So wrote David Garrick in his Ode to Shakespeare (1759) through which the actor and showman marketed Shakespeare to new audiences, fanning the flames

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25 Nov 2016

San Jose's Beta-Carotene Rich Barber

You didn't have to know the Bugs Bunny *oeuvre* to appreciate Opera San Jose's enchanting *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, but it sure enhanced your experience if you did.

Inventive stage director Layna Chianakas cleverly started the homage to *The Rabbit of Seville* early on and carried the hijinks throughout the performance. As the orchestra launched into the jaunty up-tempo repeated chords of the overture, suddenly a silhouette of an enormous carrot appeared as a projection on the grand curtain, traveled across the front of it, and disappeared. Before you wondered if you could believe your eyes, another one appeared from the opposite side and did the same.

By then, we got it. The laughter and applause as we recognized the reference nearly drowned out the merry music-making in the pit (a taut, idiomatic reading led by Andrew Whitfield). The overture was "staged" with carrots dancing, parading and moving into positions suggesting the crossed swords of a family crest. With this cheeky beginning, the tone was set for a no holds barred romp.

San Jose's Beta-Carotene Rich Barber

A review by James Sohre

Above: From left, Kirk Dougherty (Almaviva), Colin Ramsey (Basilio), Brian James Myer (Figaro), Renée Rapier (Rosina)

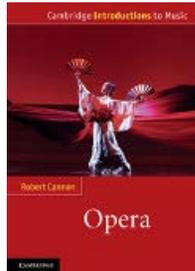
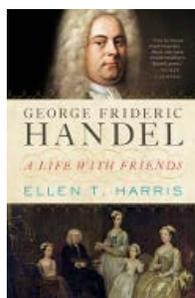
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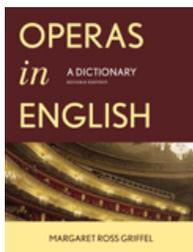
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of "Bardolatory". All Europe was soon caught up in the frenzy.

Madama Butterfly in San Francisco

A Butterfly for the ages in a *Butterfly* marred by casting ineptness and lugubrious conducting.

Kiss Me, Kate: Welsh National Opera at the Birmingham Hippodrome

In 1964, 400 years after the birth of the Bard, the writer Anthony Burgess saw Cole Porter's musical comedy *Kiss Me, Kate*, a romping variation on *The Taming of the Shrew*. Shakespeare's comedy, Burgess said, had a 'good playhouse reek about it', adding 'the Bard might be regarded as closer to Cole Porter and Broadway razzmatazz' than to the scholars who were 'picking him raw'.

Beat Furrer FAMA - Hörtheater reaches London

Beat Furrer's FAMA came to London at last, with the London Sinfonietta. The piece was hailed as "a miracle" at its premiere at Donaueschingen in 2005 by Die Zeit: State of the Art New Music, recognized by mainstream media, which proves that there is a market for contemporary music lies with lively audiences

Franz Schreker : Die Gezeichneten (Les Stigmatisés). Lyon

Franz Schreker *Die Gezeichneten* from the Opéra de Lyon last year, now on arte.tv and Opera Platform. The translation, "The stigmatized", doesn't convey the impact of the original title, which is closer to "The Cursed".

The Anatomy of Melancholy

Semper Dowland, semper dolens (Always Dowland, always doleful) was the title chosen by John Dowland's for one of his consort pieces and the motto that he took for himself. Twice rejected for the position of musician at the court of Queen Elizabeth, he is reputed to have been a difficult, embittered man. Melancholy songs were the fashion of the day, but Dowland clearly knew dark days of depression first hand.

Aida in San Francisco

An exquisite pit, a Busby Berkeley stage, ingenue performers. Populist opera in San Francisco — in November eleven performances of *Aida* (alternating with ten of *Madama Butterfly*).

Oreste at Wilton's Music Hall

Handel's pasticcio, *Oreste*, with its mythological core and Roman source libretto, is a Classical beast: it pits barbarous human cruelty versus man's potential for grace and gentility. Director Gerard Jones' production at Wilton's Music Hall, for the Royal Opera house, dispenses with ethical dilemmas - and questions of love and loyalty - and gives us a comic-strip bloodbath which is less a blend of mythological dysfunctionality and moral consolation, and more a mal-functional cross-breed of Tarantino, Hammer House of Horror and the Rocky Horror Show.

Heresy, Electronic Opera in Dublin About Giordano Bruno

Travellers to Rome may have noticed that in the



The Count and Rosina

Babatunde Akinboboye put his polished baritone on ample display as a winning Fiorello, serving immediate notice that the standard of the afternoon's singing would match the ingenuity of the staging, and then some. Maestro Whitfield is also the Chorus Master and the men's ensemble belied their disparate and ragtag look by offering meticulous harmonizing. We are all waiting Figaro's signature entrance, of course, to experience one of the most familiar arias in all of operadom.

Brian James Myer delivered a true star turn in the title role. *Factotum* is too puny a word to describe Mr. Myer's (dare I say 'definitive'?) performance. I cannot recall encountering anyone in my many years of seeing this piece who exhibited anywhere near such a total command of the role, the style, the joyous abandon. His arsenal included an effortless stage demeanor, a thoroughly considered subtext, flawless comic timing, and a tirelessly wiry presence.

Brian's evenly produced, appealing baritone may not be in the burly Milnes or Mattei vein, but it has plenty of ping and sass, with a warmly ingratiating tone that fills the house. Figaro is Brian James Myer's first role assumption as a Resident Artist, and Opera San Jose can be very proud of their superlative choice in adding such a fine young talent to their roster. Nor was he alone in his accomplishments.



Kirk Dougherty (Almaviva) flirts with Renée Rapiere (Rosina) in the Lesson Scene

The OSJ talent roster has a deep bench and the remarkably versatile tenor

middle of the vegetable market, the Campo Dei Fiori, there is a statue in memory of the Dominican friar, philosopher, scientist and poet, Giordano Bruno, who was tried as a heretic in 1593 and burned at the stake in 1600.

A New *Das Rheingold* at Lyric Opera of Chicago
With the premiere of *Das Rheingold* on opening night of the 2016-17 season Lyric Opera of Chicago has initiated a new Ring Cycle to be staged over multiple seasons. Both cast and vision for this production of the first of the four Ring operas make a strong, individual impression. The scenic division of *Das Rheingold* into four parts is realized with inventive, seamless coherence, a signal for the totality of this unfolding Cycle.

Bare Opera Proves Opera is as Relevant as Ever in a Fresh-Faced *La Cambiale di Matrimonio*
"Opera is so old-fashioned!" Thus was the mantra adopted by the Bare Opera cast following a funny, awkward pre-show announcement by Executive Producer Kirsten Scott.

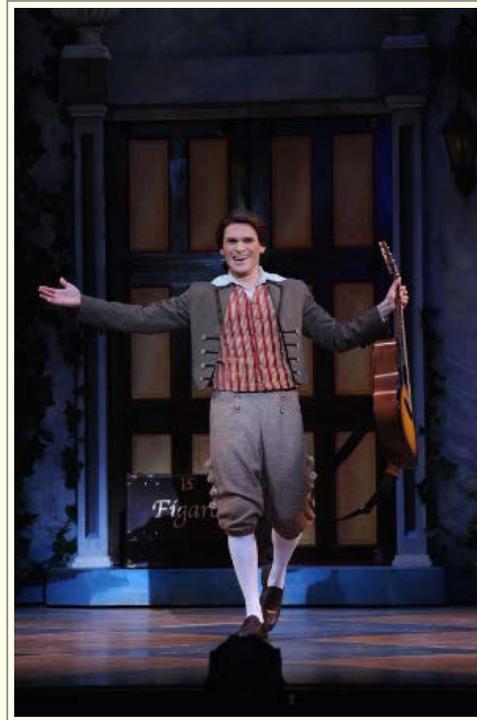
Wexford Festival Opera 2016
This year's Wexford Festival was all about the women. Deluded, dangerous, depressed, deranged, they stood centre-stage and commanded the emotional territory.

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Kirk Dougherty turned in another treasurable performance as Count Almaviva. Mr. Dougherty once again regales us with a honeyed voice that is pliable, beautifully produced, and consistently responsive. His forays into the upper reaches of the role are as comfortably negotiated as the characterful melismas.

The Count has several comic guises in this piece to be sure, and Kirk keeps his tone freely produced even as he colors it to suggest less aristocratic denizens of Seville. His beautifully delivered serenade benefitted from his skill at providing his own guitar accompaniment, a singular feat. Like his titular costar, he established his comic credentials early on, and the expository Figaro-Almaviva duet crackled with witty Rossinian interplay.

The radiant mezzo Renée Rapier immediately engaged our ears with a plush, ripe tonal beauty that announced her as a major discovery. In short order, she also captured our hearts with an especially assured *Una voce poco fa*. Her fresh, spontaneous reading of this thrice-familiar piece immediately established her credentials as a first tier Rosina. Ms. Rapier's rich lower register was wedded to a solid middle and brilliant top, giving off coloratura sparks as demanded, and coy romantic heat when appropriate.



Brian James Myer as Opera San Jose's dynamic Barber of Seville

She, too, proved to be a well-rounded, richly complicated personality, and she found a variety of meaningful expression in her impersonation. Her comic sensibilities were a formidable component in the day's success, and she clearly relished interacting and conspiring with her Figaro and Lindoro. Even though I knew it was coming, her spot on revelation that she has already written the love note that Figaro is prompting her to compose was so "right" that I barked a surprised laugh out loud. This cast was

treating the audience to *Barbiere* as if for the first time, and we relished their sense of discovery.

The oily Music Master Basilio was well-served by the wonderfully suave basso voice of another Young Artist, Colin Ramsey. Allowing him to be honestly, unabashedly youthful was an inspired choice, and no comedy was lost by showcasing Mr. Ramsey's gorgeously rolling tones, with their vibrant young sheen. A solidly delivered *La calunnia* has rarely been as pleasingly voiced, yet with all the necessary sinuous underpinnings.

Considering that Valerian Ruminski was undertaking the challenging part of Bartolo for the first time, he revealed much in his depiction of the devious curmudgeon. Mr. Ruminski has a smooth, orotund baritone, perhaps a bit too smooth for this volatile character. His was not (yet?) in the tradition of bloviating, blustering practitioners, but is a little (too?) smooth around the edges. His difficult rapid-fire patter was not always as precise as it may become. Still, his persona and physical stature are ideal for the role and he

proved a competent player in the twisting plot. His outlandishly comic, brazenly mis-tuned aria in the Lesson Scene was alone worth the price of admission.

It would be hard to imagine a more committed and scene-stealing Berta than that embodied by the vivacious Teresa Foss. Too often this can be a throw-away part, but Ms. Foss played a deliciously willing accomplice in Rosina's detention, with an apparent girly fixation on carrying stuffed animals, which increased in obsessive number as the show progressed. Teresa is also possessed of a laser-focused whiz-bang of a soprano voice, and her effortless flights above the staff were as admirable as they were totally unexpected. In the small role of the Sergeant, Sidney Ragland made every phrase count with a secure delivery



Valerian Ruminski's role debut as Bartolo

The physical production was all that could be wished. Matthew Antaky designed an unfussy, practical, attractive set that afforded plenty of opportunities for varied blocking, effective levels, and even a few surprises. The colorful exterior for the opening was wonderfully dressed with palm trees, profusions of flowers, Mediterranean tiles and a fountain. That gave way to a two-level interior with enough doors for a decent Feydeau farce.

Alyssa Oania is credited as being costume coordinator, which may mean she

carefully selected the good-looking attire from stock. But Rosina's well-styled burgundy dress and Spanish shawl seemed far too fetching not to have been created specifically for her, and Basilio's accessories (including eyewear resembling designer goggles, prissy white hanky, fuschia jabot and matching striped socks) were brilliant touches. And were brilliantly copied for Almaviva's phony teacher in Act Two.

A highly effective wig and make-up design complemented the dress, with Christina Martin providing excellent support. The gag of having Figaro distractedly tease Bartolo's wig, not having realized the good Doctor has vacated it, was a memorable visual. And Basilio's heavily made up doe eyes and high cheekbones made him look eerily like Lily Tomlin in drag. The bobbling, wobbling mustache for Almaviva's drunken soldier was also a comic plus.

Kent Dorsey achieved a good deal with his diverse lighting design. In addition to even area washes and atmospheric gobos, Mr. Dorsey programmed a number of specialty spots that were helpful in creating a rhythm to the look and flow of the show. He alternated blackouts with spotlighting Figaro during his entrance aria, contributing to the cartoon-like sensibility that permeated the concept. Only the colored disco light effect at the end seemed slightly out of sync.

Teresa Foss's Berta loves animals



With all the key casting and technical positions filled with consummate professionals, it was arguably Maestro Whitfield and Director Chianakas who were the icing on the cake. Or the maple glaze on the carrots. Whitfield helmed a talented collective of solid strings, colorful winds, and punctuating brass that unified into an effective Rossinian arc. And Ms. Chianakas drew out richly detailed interplay onstage that was chockfull of revelatory ideas.

The uninhibited clowning by the choristers at the top,

including some balletic goofs, was infectious and conveyed an expectation of what would follow. This included a dizzy moment with the Count and the Barber freezing as “statues” in the fountain to avoid detection by Bartolo, who is exiting his house. The removal of the ladder by some unseen force in the climactic scene was perfectly timed. I am not sure that Mr. Myer’s masterful Figaro needed help putting across his aria by the addition of three chorus girls extras sporting huge wigs studded with salon accouterments, but I appreciate the thought.

A far better thought was turning the storm into a psychological tempest, in which a dreaming Rosina presents a love letter to each of the other principals, then thinks better of it and tears the missives up one by one before returning to her sleep on the settee. A well-considered, serious moment in all the jollity.

But it was not long before those danged carrots were back with us, as a running gag that paid good dividends. Whether being played as musical instruments, tossed about the stage, or God knows what else, those orange veggies always brought us back to the source of this production’s comic inspiration.

So, what’s up Doc? A witty, slapstick celebration of an in-joke that was always characterized by well-calculated physical and intellectual humor, and married to an admirably first tier musical execution. In short, another solid achievement by the resourceful Opera San Jose.

James Sohre

Cast and production information:

Fiorello: Babatunde Akinboboye; Almaviva: Kirk Dougherty; Figaro: Brian James Myer; Bartolo: Valerian Ruminski; Rosina: Renée Rapier; Berta: Teresa Foss; Basilio: Colin Ramsey; Sergeant Sidney Ragland; Conductor/Chorus Master: Andrew Whitfield; Director: Layna Chianakas; Set Design: Matthew Antaky; Costume Coordinator: Alyssa Oania; Lighting Design: Kent Dorsey; Wig and Make-up Design: Christina Martin

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