

# Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



## LA Opera's *The Marriage of Figaro*: A Perfect Marriage of Music and Drama

As an experienced teacher and critic of opera, I am often asked to name my favorite opera. My response is always the same - "after *Figaro*"? And "*Figaro*" is my same response to being asked to name the greatest opera ever. If queries continue, I just quote Brahms: "In my opinion each number in Mozart's *Figaro* is a miracle; it is totally beyond me how anyone could create something so perfect; nothing like it was ever done again, not even by Beethoven." Who could argue? Certainly not LA Opera's president and CEO Christopher Koelsch who takes the above accolades one step further: "*The Marriage of Figaro* isn't just one of the greatest masterpieces in all of classical music, it's a life affirming celebration of love and humanity."

And so, what is a company to do facing the daunting task of presenting such a revered work to an expectant public of both opera neophytes and seasoned aficionados? They brought to LA a crowd-pleasing co-production with the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris, created and directed by acclaimed filmmaker James Gray, with colorful costumes by renowned French designer Christian Lacroix and a clever set designed by Santo Loquasto. Originally scheduled for the spring of 2020, the much anticipated production was a sheer delight to all, as measured by the enthusiastic audience response at every turn. And with a good cast, led by the precise and nuanced conducting of music director James Conlon, they could truly savor the "miracle" of Mozart's music.



Craig Colclough as Figaro  
Photo: Cory Weaver

Part of the reason for the success of the production, which I attended on February 19th, may have been the stunning, traditional costumes designed by Christian Lacroix; those of the peasants and Figaro were reportedly inspired by Goya's early 19th century paintings, using fabric from France's markets and collections of antique clothing. Part also was certainly the attractive, traditional set, which enabled an easy flow from scene to scene capped by the final palm tree-adorned nocturnal garden. But mostly I think it was that which is the oldest and still the best definition of what opera should be and which best defined the virtue of this engaging production: "Dramma per musica," drama through music. In short, music must be integrated with the drama in a way that illuminates the characters and illuminates the drama, without losing its unique expressive power. This is exactly what happened in this performance by LA Opera.

Much of the credit must go to experienced film director James Gray, directing his first opera ever. A great director of film does not necessarily make a great director of opera. Cinema is basically visual, and the camera heads anywhere, anytime, at the filmmaker's discretion. Opera is music. But Mr. Gray, to his considerable credit, listened to the music and used his "camera" to both illuminate character and to capture and clarify the various and often complicated plot twists and stage antics. In Act III, when the lascivious Count Almaviva receives the note from Susanna setting up a supposed assignation later that evening, he pricks his finger on a pin that seals the note. Annoyed by the pinprick, he exclaims "how like a woman!" Often this line is lost completely as the gathered crowd dances the fandango,



Janai Brugger as Susanna  
Photo: Cory Weaver

at times joined by Susanna and the Count. However, Mr. Gray brings the Count forward stage left in clear view for the delivery of the telling line, while at the rear of the stage a group of four dancers dance a semi-balletic fandango (choreographed by Kitty McNamee).

Mr. Gray's shifting lens works similarly throughout the opera, as earlier in the Act following the famous sextet of recognition that exposes Figaro as the long-lost son of Marcellina and Bartolo, thus foiling the Count's plot to force Figaro to wed Marcellina. After the furious Count and his lawyer depart, the gleeful foursome (Susanna, Figaro, Bartolo and Marcellina) exit, embracing one another with a one-liner, *sotto voce*: "E schiatti il signor Conte al gusto mio!" ("And if my lord is furious, so much the better!") The line, a perfect cap to Mozart's miraculously sculpted ensemble of coinciding musical and dramatic events, brings many laughs; but sometimes it is completely lost as the four leave at the rear. Not so with Mr. Gray's placement of the group front and center before they exit. Indeed, staging details such as these drove the production, both engaging the audience at every turn, while sharpening the accumulating dramatic tension of the work.

One other important and carefully shaped exit is worthy of note. It comes later, near the opening of Act IV when Soprano Maria McLaughlin as Marcellina steps forward on a darkened stage, effectively spotlighted by lighting designer Jeremy Frank. Her single line



Janai Brugger as Susanna; Kristinn Sigmundsson as Bartolo; Marie McLaughlin as Marcellina; Craig Colclough as Figaro

Photo: Cory Weaver

of recitative, articulated with fervor, exposes a theme always there in the opera beneath the surface, the battle of women against the desires of men. Marcellina intones, "Da questi uomini ingrati a torto oppresso" ("Women are oppressed by ungrateful men.") And the audience clearly gets the message thanks to the clever staging. Marcellina's aria amplifying her statement should follow, but it was cut as is sometimes the case today. As Mr. Conlon spends some time explaining in his terrific pre-opera lecture on line, in the era of the original Vienna production of 1786 and the later performances in Paris in 1793, Marcellina was expressing an especially unsettling truth based on the original Beaumarchais text. In that time her diatribe exhorting women to defend their sex against the oppression of men was too much for the entitled higher-ups to tolerate. A paraphrase of the last verse in da Ponte's libretto reads: "But we, poor hapless womankind, / Who sacrifice our all to men, / Receive from them but perfidy / And pain that's hard to bear."



Although Ms. McLaughlin does not get to sing the aria, perhaps a stretch at this late point in her career, this distinguished Scottish soprano of some four decades of performance at the highest international level, gave extra heft to the role of Marcellina, a role she has assayed often. Indeed, in the many roles I have heard her sing in Mozart's operas (including the roles of Susanna, Despina, and Zerlina), she always seems to shine, making the stage her own. And so she did in LA, a perfect fit for Gray's cinematic production.

The same might be said of young Tunisian-Canadian mezzo Rihab Chaieb who charmed in the more playful role of Cherubino, the Count's impetuous, hormone-laden page. The trouser role was a good fit for Ms. Chaieb, especially as a young woman playing a young man who twice disguises himself in the opera as a young woman. A standout in the cast, her clarion voice, soared with grace and pathos in her breathless "Non so più" and her impassioned "Voi che sapete" to the Countess. She seems destined indeed for a career to match that of Ms. McLaughlin.



Rihab Chaieb as Cherubino  
Photo: Cory Weaver



Janai Brugger as Susanna; Craig Colclough as Figaro  
Photo: Cory Weaver

To be sure, the rest of the cast throughout the performance was engaging as well, headed by two experienced principals, bass baritone Craig Colclough as Figaro – in his 12th role at LA Opera – and soprano Janai Brugger as Susanna, who has achieved a major international career since her early training in LA Opera's Young Artists Program. Mr. Colclough's somewhat light voice nonetheless rang out with urgency, right from the start in his famous Cavatina, "Se vuol ballare." There, in the darkened bedroom assigned to Susanna and Figaro by the Count for his nefarious intentions, Figaro sets the stage for the opera – apostrophizing alone to the Count: "you, my master, may go dancing but I'll play the tune." For her part, Ms. Brugger, animated from the start in her opening duets with Figaro, soon assumes her important role in all twelve ensembles, typically taking the initiative in this ensemble-rich opera. Her one solo moment, the meditative love song in Act IV to the unsuspecting Figaro hidden in the garden, "Deh vieni non tardar" ("Oh, come,

don't be late") was particularly expressive. Time stopped amidst the complicated action and several disguises of the opera's final scene as she expressed her yearning for Figaro with beautifully sculpted vocal lines, floating pianissimos and pregnant pauses.



Lucas Meachem as Count Almaviva  
Photo: Cory Weaver



Ana Maria Martinez as the Countess  
Photo: Cory Weaver

Along with Rihab Chaieb as Cherubino, the other standout singer in the cast was baritone Lucas Meachem as the imposing Count, the object of all their angst. With his stature and stentorian voice, this Grammy Award winning artist was a force to be reckoned with as the conniving manipulator. His scena in the opening of Act III as he realizes he's being duped by Susanna and others (yet again) was impassioned and imposing. In contrast to the Count's arrogance and resonant baritone, the

warmth and elegance of soprano Ana Maria Martinez's Countess was effective. Her reflective lament in Act III, "Dove sono," sung with a silken, if somewhat restrained tone, soon after the count's aria, was heartfelt and poignant.

Through it all, conductor James Conlon skillfully used the orchestra to support the characters while leading them through Mozart's many complex ensembles as well. Nowhere was this more evident than in the final scene, the emotional climax of the opera and one of the most moving moments in all opera. In it, these two opposites, the lascivious Count and the gracious Countess are reconciled. As the bustle of the nocturnal finale melts away into silence, the Count pleads, "Contessa perdona"



Lucas Meachem as Count Almaviva; Disguised as Susanna,  
Ana Maria Martinez as the Countess      Photo: Cory Weaver

("Countess, forgive me"), and she does in a glorious arching arioso accompanied by hushed strings. As author Joseph Kerman states in his famous book *Opera as Drama*, "Music here does not merely decorate what playwright (Beaumarchais) or librettist (da Ponte) had designed; Mozart's music creates a drama that they never suspected." We the audience are held rapt, teary eyed, with the redemptive chorus that soon follows. Then, with true cinematic flair, Mr. Gray brings the chorus and all the

cast forward to the footlights for the joyous choral finale. At the curtain, the audience leapt to a standing ovation, as I presume it did at every performance.

The late, esteemed British director Sir Peter Hall once wrote: "Opera is the most potent form of theater. Human actions and words are added to the ambiguous power of music. Opera can have the greatest meaning of all." LA Opera should be proud.