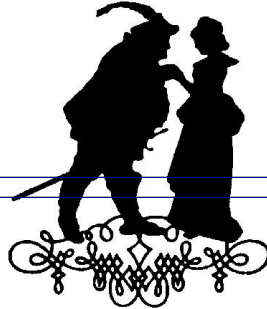


# Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



## Santa Fe Opera, 2021: A Welcome Return

### *The Marriage of Figaro and A Midsummer Night's Dream*

After a hiatus of almost two years, the venerable Santa Fe Opera returned this summer with a carefully balanced season, its sixty-fourth, that happily represented four centuries of opera. Beginning with the magnificent cap to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Mozart's evergreen *The Marriage of Figaro*, it went on to include Tchaikovsky's poignant cap to the Romantic century a hundred years later, *Eugene Onegin*, Britten's masterful mid-20th century adaptation of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and finally an enterprising lurch into our new century, John Corigliano's *The Lord of Cries*, an ambitious amalgamation of two literary sources. Even with a myriad of last minute cast changes and Covid-necessitated adjustments, the season overall was an impressive success.

It must have been especially so for the Opera's Music Director, Harry Bicket, who would lead the two operatic jewels reviewed below, *The Marriage of Figaro* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The internationally renowned conductor, longtime Artistic Director of The English Concert as well, brought not only his refined conducting to both of these works, but also a stabilizing influence to the hectic assembling of this revived season. Long familiar to Santa Fe patrons, beginning with his debut with Handel's *Agrippina* in 2004 and continuing with a plethora of diverse works yearly since then in more than just the baroque and classical music for which he is so well known, it was a joy, to say the least, to see him back on the podium for both of these works.

On the opening night of *Figaro*, which I did not attend, reports were that the audience greeted the pre-curtain words “Welcome to the Santa Fe Opera” with boisterous applause. Rightly so. At the August 3<sup>rd</sup> mid-season performance of *Figaro* (the first of the four productions I attended), what struck me first was the opening greeting posted nightly on the surtitle screen at each seat:

*Santa Fe Opera acknowledges and pays deep respect to the people, elders and ancestors – past, present, and future – of our neighboring Pueblos whose lands provide the beautiful setting for tonight’s performance.*

I found this a moving and appropriate testament, especially as one who has returned not only to attend Santa Fe Opera, but also to visit neighboring pueblos for almost forty years. Today, driving up the northern entrance to the Opera, one notices a new and attractive Tesuque Pueblo Casino that replaces a shoddy flea market; driving up from the meandering south entrance, one notices the Opera’s latest innovation: two large simulcast LED screens that stand ready to broadcast productions to “drive-in movie” patrons. With these two striking additions to the landscape, the Tesuque hills are alive with activity. And in the opera house itself the sound of live music was welcome indeed. It was good to be back.

### ***The Marriage of Figaro*: The perfect opera; an imperfect production.**

Brahms once wrote: “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 no one at Santa Fe Opera, a company that rarely

lets more than a few years go by without performing this extraordinary work, always a crowd-pleaser. My first of many *Figaro*’s at Santa Fe Opera was almost 40 years ago when just three-quarters of the audience was protected from the kind of high winds and torrential thunderstorms that preceded the August 3 performance I attended.

A fine cast, led by the precise and nuanced conducting of Maestro Bicket, made the evening a delight from a musical standpoint. Alas however, the misguided production made it difficult to truly savor the “miracle” of Mozart’s music. There are of course a myriad of approaches to staging this piece, ranging from the dark and disturbing approach of Peter Sellar’s “Trump Tower” productions of the ‘90s, to the more common approach stressing the numerous buffo antics. The concept here was in part to pay homage to Beaumarchais both as watchmaker and playwright, stressing the alternate title to his play, *The Mad Day or The Marriage of Figaro*. The set thus is a large turntable, suggesting a watch, while a selection of clocks, cogwheels, dials and the like pepper the sides. The turntable rotates, clockwise of course, in a timely fashion.



Samuel Dale Johnson, Count Almaviva

Photo: Curtis Brown

A nice idea, but it doesn't work. Too often the cumbersome shifting of rather block-like abstract set structures on the turntable interferes with the music. And too often there is much needless shifting of locations, when none is called for. This happens right from the start following the opening duet for Figaro and Susanna when the turntable shifts to another location for Marcellina's would-be intrusion into the couple's soon-to-be bedroom. Part of the problem may have been that well-known French director Laurent Pelly, who frequently works at Santa Fe, was stuck in France along with his design team, sans visas for entering the US. So sympathies indeed to Director Laurie Feldman left with the task of staging someone else's production. Judging from some of Pelly's former productions at Santa Fe (*La Traviata* in 2009, *Don Pasquale* in 2014), we might have had something more stimulating if indeed eccentric, with more dramatic momentum, and even a better balance between the comic and the serious.

At any rate, the music making was first rate, led by the two principals: former apprentice artist Nicholas Brownlee as Figaro, another last minute replacement, and soprano Ying Fang in her company debut as Figaro's fiancée Susanna. Mr. Brownlee's voice projects with potent heft, indeed with a weighty baritone ring that gives it urgency. Ms. Fang in turn was a delightful Susanna with her light, spring-water voice and pert acting. Animated from the start in her opening duets with Figaro in the supposed bedroom, she immediately stakes her claim as the true heroine of the opera. This she becomes - with a commanding part in all twelve ensembles of this ensemble-rich opera. And her one solo moment, the meditative aria "Deh vieni non tardar" in Act IV, was the highlight of the evening with her beautifully sculpted vocal lines and floating pianissimos. Here time stopped—as did the turntable



Ying Fang, Susanna

Photo: Curtis Brown

at last for the final nocturnal scene, supposedly in a garden. Unfortunately, large lopsided roman numerals, VIII and XII, distracted from the romantic mood and poignancy of this scene, with not a flower, bush or tree in sight.

Among other standouts in the talented cast, all in 50's attire, were baritone Samuel Dale Johnson making his SFO debut as the lascivious Count Almaviva and soprano Vanessa Vasquez as the Countess. Both acquitted themselves well, especially in their respective arias in Act III, an impassioned scena for him as he realizes he's being duped (yet again) and a radiant "Dove sono" for her, soon followed by an enchanting canonic "Canzonetta sull' aria" with Ms. Fang. And former apprentice mezzo Megan Marino embodied with great aplomb the myriad personas of the impetuous, love-starved Cherubino. Perhaps an inspiration for her was having the mezzo-soprano who I consider one of the best Cherubinos of all time in the cast, Susanne Mentzer, whose lush, vibrant voice graced many a trouser role, among other roles, at the Met and elsewhere for decades. How wonderful to see her on stage again as a perfectly giddy Marcellina. Now a revered voice teacher in California, her stated motto for singers is "we sing because we have

something to say, share, and have a need for emotional expression.” Such was the lesson all this fine *Figaro* cast knew well, making a far from perfect production an almost perfect night at the opera.



Susanne Mentzer, Marcellina; Ying Fang, Susanna; Nicholas Brownlee, Figaro; and Patrick Carfizzi, Bartollo  
Photo: Curtis Brown

### ***A Midsummer Night's Dream: An Inventive Balance of Light and Dark***

Posterity has generally regarded this mid-20<sup>th</sup> century work by Benjamin Britten and his librettist/partner Peter Pears as an extraordinary achievement in their success at turning a masterpiece in one medium into a work of similar caliber in another. As British reviewer David Drew wrote following the premiere in 1960:

*A corner of Shakespeare's Empire has undergone a subtle change. It has not been ruthlessly invaded. It has not even been quietly exploited. But for those who were at Aldeburgh on June 11, and for those who will follow them to Britten's new opera in the months and years to come, Shakespeare's Midsummer Night's Dream will never quite be the same again.*

Anyone who followed this work to Santa Fe Opera in August of 2021 will agree. With carefully selected scenery, costumes, and projections, innovative British director and designer Netie Jones reinforced the fact that Britten's masterful version of Shakespeare is not only one of the gems of 20<sup>th</sup> century opera but, like the play, a complex balance of light and dark. For me the production, and performance, was the hit of the season.

Just before the opening performance in Santa Fe, reviewer Mark Tiarks had published an informative interview with Ms. Jones. In it she stressed the importance of astronomy to both New Mexico and Shakespeare, which she stated “played a really big role in Shakespeare's imagination.” Ms. Jones also pointed out that the staging would harken back to Elizabethan theater with most of the action on a platform stage equipped with trapdoors, “Shakespeare's favorite stage trick,” she noted. Additionally, aspects of Freudian and Jungian psychology would underlie the production, especially with regard to the young lovers who, reported Mr. Tiarks, “begin to be governed by their unfiltered impulses” in the central act. “Shadows,” would be a key stage element, as they are in Shakespeare's text.

After the too-often rotating turntable and intrusive cogwheels of the night before, I read these comments with trepidation. Not to fear. Two small, unobtrusive telescopes peered out over the horizon at the back of the stage, one on the left and one on the right; also on the far right a silver gyroscope remained motionless throughout the performance, a fitting image for the topsy-turvy action to ensue. The raked stage meanwhile never rotated, but included small circular traps arranged in a circle from which the fairies, clad in mottled black, white and gray, emerged as did Puck occasionally. (Because of Covid restrictions, the fairy chorus was



Erin Morley, Tytania; Fairies, Members of *Wise Fool* Photo: Curtis Brown

made up of adults, not children; several actors from Santa Fe’s non-profit circus group, *Wise Fool*, took over most of the fairies’ duties.) And no frequently shifting sets cluttered the open stage; rather a large, leafy tree stood firm to the left, with a baby grand piano tilted at its base. Towards the rear on the right, a large disk was the site of varied and often stunning projections- when it wasn’t, naturally, a brilliant white moon. It was all a whimsical delight.

But what matters were not these props themselves, but how artfully Ms. Jones and her team employed them. In her interview, she had stressed

the importance of her site-specific productions. “...All of this piece takes place in nature,” she said, “and the environment here isn’t just the theater, it’s the whole outdoor setting.” Indeed nature helped on this evening; an absence of storms left the small telescopes beautifully silhouetted against a fading New Mexican sunset. Soon acrobatic actor-dancer Reed Luplan, in a stylish lime-green suit, summersaulted out of the tree’s branches: “How now spirits.” His athletic rendition of Oberon’s henchman was nothing short of fabulous. By show’s end Puck, done for the night, gives his final admonition, “If we shadow’s have offended....” and simply disappears into a vacant hole, the world of nature - the gorgeous tree, the moon-lit disk - lingering in our dreams.



Reed Luplan, Puck

Photo: Curtis Brown

Again, Britten’s complex opera, like Shakespeare’s play, is really a careful balance of dark and light. Why a piano tilted against a tree? A poignant image for a text dominated by varied references to both nature and music. Black keys and white keys might be a stretch, but not the chromatic and diatonic harmony. Britten’s score moves from



Jestyn Davies, Oberon Photo: Curtis Brown

the former to the latter - from the chromatic glissandi on muted cellos and basses of the yearning and stretching woods in Act I, to the richly varied four chord sequence framing Act II, to the diatonic opening of Act III as the lovers awaken to a new day. No surprise then that countertenor Jestyn Davies, in his dark suit and sinister ambivalence as Oberon, occasionally reflects at the piano while touching the keys tentatively. A frequent collaborator with conductor Harry Bicket in yearly Handel concerts, Davies brought out all the Jungian character and expression the production warranted. While there was certainly nothing missing in Bicket's conducting of the misconceived *Marriage of Figaro* production, he seemed more in sync with Ms. Jones' conception of a work he also knows well. The subtle sonorities he drew from the chamber-size orchestra, beginning with the mysterious, almost inaudible, opening glissandi to the ephemeral tidbits in the winds for the fairies were magical, more than even the best of grand pianos could realize!

This idea of light and dark, with varying shades of gray, indeed permeates the entire production, providing a kind of unity lacking in *Figaro*. In the opening, an inebriated shadow figure enters and collapses, prefiguring the entrance of a similarly intoxicated and darkly clad Oberon. The entrance of his alienated spouse, Tytania, dressed in

white, is similarly anticipated by a shadow double. Tytania, the brilliant soprano Erin Morley, early on vents her anger at her husband's attempts to take her changeling boy with high-flying coloratura. The four lovers, all in 60's dress, have literal shadows in Act II, as each, following Ms. Jones Jungian analysis, "begins to be governed by their unfiltered impulses." Fittingly, Santa Fe cast them with four fine, young apprentice artists: mezzo-soprano Adanya Dunn and baritone Michael J. Hawk as the feisty Hermia and law-abiding Demetrius, soprano Teresa Perrotta and tenor Duke Kim as the initially timid Helena and impressively forceful Lysander. Their animated fight scene in that act was intense, physical, and even violent. They all survived, then slept, thanks to Puck and the sonorous lullaby Maestro Bicket and the chorus weaved wondrously around them.



Teresa Perrotta, Helena; Michael J. Hawk, Demetrius; Duke Kim, Lysander; and Adanya Dunn, Hermia



Nicholas Brownlee, Bottom/Pyramus; Matthew Grills, Snout/Wall; Breton Ryan, Flute/Thisbe Photo: Curtis Brown

No review (or performance) would be complete without mention of the “rude mechanicals,” as Puck calls them. Ms. Jones instructed her cast that their Act III play, *The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe*, should be played with total earnestness: “This amateur theater troupe is the height of achievement for the working-class people in the town.” And thus in all seriousness they performed it. More directors should heed this advice. Vibrant baritone Nicholas Brownlee as Bottom led as Pyramus, fresh from his stint as Figaro the night before, and from his detour as a “translated” ass in the previous act. Other carry-overs were baritone Patrick Carfizzi as Starveling (formerly Bartolo) and tenor Breton Ryan as Flute (formerly Basilio). Ryan, assuming the cameo role that Peter Pears saved for himself in the premiere, swept onto stage, diva-like in a glamorous, shiny red ball gown, as the bereaved Thisbe – a splash of color that highlighted the intended bel canto parody, with flute obbligato, of course.

I’ve always been struck by the rather tart flavor of this captivating opera, something Britten recognized regarding his fairies, “very different from the innocent nothings that often appear in productions of Shakespeare.... Like the actual

world, incidentally, the spirit world contains bad as well as good...”- black as well as white. British director Netia Jones caught well the spikier, and sometimes darker, flavor of the respective works by her two compatriots, William Shakespeare and Benjamin Britten. And she took advantage of the glorious natural setting of the stage in its New Mexico surroundings. A night to remember.

## Postlude

As with these two operas, whatever the debatable merits or shortcomings of their respective productions, the Santa Fe Opera season as a whole jelled admirably after a myriad of Covid-related and other uncertainties. And just as the company gratefully acknowledged its debts to the Native American Pueblo lands, so too its season mirrored the creative process of Santa Fe’s famed Native American art and pottery heritage. Just up the highway from the Opera sits bucolic Nambé Pueblo, blessed too with a dramatic location in the beautiful foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Lonnie Vigil, a renowned potter from the pueblo, commented recently:

*There is collaboration between the clay and myself – the clay tells me what direction to take...You follow and cooperate with each other. I think that’s true also with scientists doing experiments...As it is with jazz musicians, who respect honest mistakes as fulcrums for new ideas.*

And so it was for Santa Fe Opera this year, which sculpted a most impressive season – indeed as worthy and as impressive an artistic achievement as of those Native American artists whose land they share.