

Chicago Tribune

'Figaro' set in Miami has steam, sass, dream cast

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By John von Rhein
Tribune music critic

Surely there must be some sort of mistake in the program.

If this is Mozart's "Nozze di Figaro" ("Marriage of Figaro"), what are we doing at a gaudy mansion in Miami, sometime in the 1990s? The manservant's got a Dolphins poster hanging in his closet. The countess pops pills. Her errant hubby gets messages on his cell phone promising a torrid tryst under the palm trees, where party guests are vogueing the night away.

Relax. It's our old friend "Figaro," all right, done up in the authentic musical style and delicious theatricality that have marked Chicago Opera Theater's four previous collaborations by conductor Jane Glover and director Diane Paulus.

It's rare in Mozart to find young singers who look exactly right for their parts, bring fresh, well-schooled voices to their characters and interact briskly, without missing a trill.

The inviting intimacy of the 1,452-seat Harris Theater made a good fit with Glover's sparkling treatment of the music at Wednesday's opening. The conductor knows and loves Mozart's masterpiece inside and out and infuses her fine orchestra with her deep knowledge and affection through her brisk pacing and sensitive shaping of the arias and recitatives.

Moving the action from 18th-Century Seville to Clinton-era Florida, Paulus reminds us how contemporary Mozart's serious comedy of Eros really is. As with her witty "Cosi Fan Tutte" for COT in 2002, the director has two couples facing some painful emotional truths and learning that trust, honesty and fidelity never come cheap.

Amid a uniformly strong ensemble, the household servants, Christian Van Horn as Figaro and Jane Archibald as Susanna, were finely balanced with the maritally challenged Almavivas, portrayed by Alexander Tall and Krisztina Szabo.

The women meshed voices meltingly and so resembled each other physically that for once the nocturnal masquerade, during which the maid and her mistress donned each other's clothing to trick the philandering count, really worked.

It's unusual to hear a mezzo-soprano Countess, but the many colors in Szabo's dark-velvet voice were put to affecting use in the spurned but loving wife's two great arias, which few higher-voiced singers have rendered so beautifully.

The staging put more than the usual emphasis on the Countess' attraction to the page boy, Cherubino, sung and played to perfection by the lustrous mezzo-soprano Sandra Piques Eddy as a callow teen at the mercy of his raging hormones. COT really must invite Eddy back soon.

The leggy Archibald's bright, buoyant soprano was an ideal match for her lively portrayal of Susanna, whose peaches-and-creamy "Deh vieni" was well worth holding up the action for.

Bass-baritone Van Horn, one of the outstanding first-year members of the Lyric Opera Center ensemble, made a strong but never overplayed Figaro, handsomely sung. This Figaro reverted

to his former occupation, barbering, lathering up Almaviva while vocally packing Cherubino off to the military.

Paulus stripped away all vestiges of aristocratic charm in Almaviva, leaving Tall to play him as a cruel, lecherous tyrant who treated family and servants with equal contempt and pursued the maid Susanna with unbridled vulgarity.

In the smaller parts of Bartolo, Marcellina and Basilio, Fredrik Zetterstrom, Amanda Ingram and Steven Goldstein supplied telling comic relief without resorting to the usual tired shtick. Erika Buchholz made an unusually perky Barbarina.

Robert Brill's minimalist stage design relied more on keeping the lights low and the costumes hot than on scenery, save for a large, moveable box that doubled as the Countess' closet and an observation deck.

Even if you've seen "Figaro" scores of times, COT's dream cast and a delightful production make this a wedding you simply must attend.

COT's "Nozze di Figaro" plays at 7:30 p.m. Friday, Thursday and May 14, and at 3 p.m. Sunday, in the Harris Theater for Music and Dance, 205 E. Randolph St.; phone 312-704-8414, 312-334-7777.

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