

## A charming 'La Finta Giardiniera' in Santa Fe

by **Terry Ponick** - Aug 3, 2015

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Youthful Mozart opera not quite "Cosi fan tutte." But what composer would you rather spend a leisurely summer evening with?

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Heidi Stober as Mozart's Countess Violante in disguise. (Credit: Ken Howard, courtesy of Santa Fe Opera)

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**SANTA FE, New Mexico**, August 2, 2015 — After enjoying the Santa Fe Opera's production of Mozart's "La Finta Giardiniera," here recently, it becomes easier to understand what infuriated Antonio Salieri about his young rival.

The libretto of this still relatively unknown comic opera is painfully convoluted and its characters are two-dimensional, more or less. Even so, the 18-year-old Mozart's music seems to soar effortlessly above its preposterous trappings, just as the faux-Masonic silliness of the mature composer's marvelous "Magic Flute" was to do years later.

That said, however, while "La Finta" contains a great deal of lovely music, it lacks the kind of signature arias and duets that make later Mozart operas so memorable. But it marks a still-impressive beginning for Mozart's brilliant but sadly short career.

"La Finta" was decently received by the public, and was performed for years thereafter before falling into a long period of neglect throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. But, with the rediscovery of much of the opera's score in 1978, it began, once again, to be mounted by contemporary opera companies, albeit infrequently.

The first and only time we were able to hear a live performance of this opera was nearly twenty years ago, back in 1996, when the Washington National Opera (WNO) staged it at the Kennedy Center's Opera House. The music was lovely, the singing was admirable, but the spare, tattered, shopworn, imported production rented by WNO made this Mozartian novelty seem drab, dull and forgettable in the end.

Now, nearly twenty years later, the Santa Fe Opera (SFO) weighs in with its far more colorful and imaginative production, giving us all a chance for another look. Better yet, the director and cast generally succeed in adding precisely the kind of manic energy this opera needs.

To enjoy "La Finta," one must undertake a willing suspension of disbelief. Prior to the opening curtain we need to understand this opera's rather unpleasant backstory. The hotheaded Count Belfiore (tenor Joel Prieto) — the opera's good guy-bad guy male lead — stabs his intended, Marchesa (Countess) Violante (soprano Heidi Stober), during a lover's quarrel and apparently leaves her for dead.

Lucky for us (and the librettist) the countess survives, and, as the curtain rises, we see her working away, disguised as Sandrina, the gardener employed by Don Anchise (tenor William Burden), the Podesta (Mayor) of Lagonero. As we gradually learn, the countess has chosen her current disguise as a way of disappearing from her former tragic situation, hopefully to begin life anew without baggage while leaving her "dead" self to history.

Unfortunately, “Sandrina’s” beauty betrays her again. His Honor is quickly enamored of her, much to the annoyance of his female servant Serpetta (soprano Laura Tatulescu), who believes the Mayor might actually marry her.

Further complications ensue. Sandrina is accompanied by her cousin Roberto (baritone Joshua Hopkins), who is disguised as the Mayor’s new servant Nardo; and surprise, Nardo falls for Serpetta who returns his ardor with unremitting nastiness.

But the table continues to be set for an even bigger romantic mess. Although now regretting his apparent murder of the countess, the Count has decided to move on and is about to marry Don Anchise’s niece, the imperious, strong-willed Arminda (soprano Susanna Phillips). This, in turn, disappoints the Mayor’s friend, the dashing soldier, Ramiro (mezzo-soprano Cecelia Hall in a trouser role), who has long been in love with Arminda.

With three obviously mismatched, would-be couples playing keep-away, and with a happy ending very much in doubt, the opera proceeds toward an increasingly insane and incongruous solution — one that likely gives every stage director confronting this work many a sleepless night.

Fortunately, in Tim Albery, SFO seems to have found just the right director to keep this unwieldy vehicle on track, creating a comprehensive scenario that turns this implausible fairy tale into a kind of hallucination that leads more plausibly to a good-hearted conclusion.

His efforts are aided considerably by set designer Hildegard Bechtler, whose lovely and elegant drawing room/formal garden setting is shockingly transformed in the production’s second stanza into a dangerous, collapsing ruin as the dark, psychological underworlds of violence and romance intertwine to produce a hoped-for and happy conclusion.

**Bechtler’s highly original design is heightened by Thomas C. Hase’s atmospheric lighting and Jon Morrell’s elaborate, class-conscious costume designs.**

With the devilish problems created by this opera’s story line made at least psychologically plausible, Albery expertly directs his cast—with the exception of the very serious young countess—to exaggerate their characters to heighten and showcase “La Finta’s” comic elements and lighten the story’s sometimes forbidding implications.

The result is a production of “La Finta” that is going to be hard to top.

SFO’s talented cast of singers is able to keep up with Albery’s interesting approach while adding a tangible measure of humanity to Mozart’s sometimes two-dimensional characters.

Heidi Stober was outstanding in the difficult role of Violante/Sandrina. It's an emotionally challenging part that juggles not only two differing characterizations, but also two violently conflicting states of mind.

The role is difficult not only from the point of view of acting, but from a singing standpoint as well, involving alternating and often violent mood shifts that also alter the singer's vocal approach. But Ms. Stober is impressively in command of her character at all times, and her vocal lines are well-supported by her elegant, golden-hued soprano voice.

As the mercurial Count, Joel Prieto handles his rather unsympathetic character in the best way possible: by transforming him into a bumbling mess of contrition and contradiction, particularly when he's in the company of the bigger-than-life Armanda.

Mr. Prieto's comic touch and flexible lyric tenor voice combine to transform Mozart's would-be murderer into an ultimately hapless lover we can forgive in the end, which is a key to the story's resolution.

Susanna Phillips' Armanda is precisely the holy terror called for in the libretto. Mozart gives her character a number of swashbuckling solo turns as well that serve to burnish the initial impression. Ms. Phillips' imperious soprano voice takes full advantage of each opportunity, driving the production forward with palpable energy every time she appears on stage.

Speaking of imperious, Laura Tatulescu's sharp-tongued Serpetta gives Armanda a run for her money in the nastiness department. Serpetta's continuously snarky vocal one liners, as delivered by Ms. Tatulescu, give this production an additional comic lift, and she makes the most her brief solo opportunities.

Roberto/Nardo, as portrayed by Joshua Hopkins, provides the production with some much-needed vocal and moral grounding. Perhaps the most sympathetic character on stage, aside from the countess, Nardo provides the kind of loyal, moral grounding most of the other characters lack, an impression supported by Mr. Hopkins' elegant, expressive baritone instrument.

Mezzo-soprano Cecelia Hall also does well as the hapless Ramiro, whose pursuit of Armanda is constantly and unpleasantly frustrated, although her realization of her male character's mannerisms is sometimes hit or miss.

Finally, the glue that binds this production together is William Burden's delightfully befuddled portrayal of the Mayor. In voice and manner, he somehow manages to preside over his accidental madhouse of confused and confusing characters with at least a modicum of dignity and grace.

SFO's chief conductor Harry Bicket, and expert in the Baroque and Classical repertoire, led the SFO orchestra in a nicely nuanced performance of Mozart's score, particularly given that the current

performing version of the lost original score appears to have been somewhat augmented by a later hand.

SFO's current production of "La Finta Giardiniera" is a delightful if slightly longish evening of early Mozart that's considerably enhanced by its fine direction, excellent cast and imaginative scenery and setting.

**Rating: \*\*\*** (Three out of four stars)

Three performances of "La Finta Giardiniera" remain. For tickets and information, visit the Santa Fe Opera website.

Read more at <http://www.commdiginews.com/entertainment/a-charming-la-finta-giardiniera-in-santa-fe-46118/#VkZ6oy87Y5SYRu05.99>