

## Cincinnati

CINCINNATI OPERA'S repertoire formula of two popular works, a lesser-known one and a 'push the envelope' opera was successfully filled by *Le nozze di Figaro*, *Carmen*, *Don Carlos* and Osvaldo Golijov's *Ainadamar*, comprising a 'Spanish Season'. MUSIC HALL is a huge theatre, but *Carmen* sold out, and even *Ainadamar* filled three quarters of the house.

*Figaro* (which opened on June 11) augured well for an extraordinary season. The big excitement was Roger Norrington conducting his first complete staged opera in the

States. Norrington's touch was clearly audible: strings with no vibrato, brisk, consistent tempos, no rubato, a solid bass line, rhythmic vitality, and a good amount of ornamentation in the vocal lines. Curiously, there was occasionally a lack of communication between conductor and singers. The Almavivas were the opera's stars. Nicole Cabell sang the Countess with much vocal richness, delicately delineating the long lines of her two arias. Teddy Tahu Rhodes's Count was an exuberant, sexy philanderer with a golden voice full of textural insight.

Susanna (Sarah Tynan) was a real charmer, delicate as a porcelain doll with a radiant, silver voice. Jonathan Lemalu was unusual, singing Figaro with a lovely baritone sound but handicapped by much reserved singing and acting. Marie Lenormand made Cherubino into a 'real' teenage boy, bouncing about the stage while singing impeccably. A merry band of veteran comedians was on hand to brighten up the comedy: Judith Christin (Marcellina), Bruno Practicò (Bartolo), Thomas Hammons (Antonio) and Steven Cole (Basilio). The gigantic stage pretty well engulfed the small-scale sets by Susan Benson (from Banff), causing some highly visible entrances from the cast, but James Alexander's direction was a refined combination of restraint and comedy, carefully attuned to the text.

Spectacle, intense drama and big-voiced singing were the order of the evening as *Don Carlos* (in Italian, in four acts with minor cuts) lumbered onto the stage with crushing power. Angela Brown's regal Elisabeth stopped the show with a sumptuously warm, emotion-laden 'Tu che le vanità'. The second verse of Eboli's Veil Song was cut, but Michelle DeYoung had no difficulties anywhere as she boomed out with heroic temperament. Elizabeth Pojanowski held her own against the big-voiced nobility with a Tebaldo that was both perky and elegant. But none could outsing the male contingent. Even David Lawrence Michael as the Monk nailed the audience to the walls. Frank Porretta's Don Carlos was awkwardly acted, but vocally he was heroic with lots of heft and exciting aural appeal. Mario Caria's noble Posa was stunning in his laser-like projection and elegance. The Grand Inquisitor's scene, a battle of epic proportions between James Morris (Philip II) and Morris Robinson (Inquisitor), was the highlight of the season. Richard Buckley's conducting fully supported the vocal power on stage, emphasizing lush, romantic tone and escalating power. Peter Dean Beck's massive sets showcased the stately processions and massed choral scenes put together by the producer Sandra Bernhard.

The new production of *Ainadamar* was without sets *per se*, with only an upstage-filling cyclorama and a high platform behind the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, seated on stage. Thomas C. Hase's imaginative lighting was evocative of time, place and mood, adding much to the drama. José María Condemi used the apron of the stage for most of the action, but also wove his singers through the orchestra, and used the rear platform to create a 'living backdrop' with the eight ladies of the vocal ensemble. Three members of the original cast recreated their roles: Dawn Upshaw (Margarita Xirgu), Kelly O'Connor (Federico García Lorca) and Jessica Rivera (Nuria). Upshaw's emotional depth was staggering. O'Connor's incredible lower register and convincing acting caused several people in my vicinity to ask, 'Is that a man?'. Rivera added her own depths of emotion to the drama, with lovely singing.

In addition, Jesus Montoya enthralled the audience with his wildly wailed cantillations as the brutal Ramon Ruiz Alonso. Miguel Harth-Bedoya kept full control of his augmented forces, eliciting the most delicate of hues and the most violent of outbursts. The composer



■ Nicole Cabell as Mozart's Countess in Cincinnati

Prakash (Frasquita), Elizabeth Pojanowski (Mercédès), Steven Cole (Remendado) and Richard Furman (Dancaïre). All had appeared earlier with great effect, and as a team they were unstoppable. Ruxandra Donose's Carmen, however, was oddly restrained: musically astute, beautifully sung, but much too elegant. William Burden's Don José was one of the most beautifully sung I have heard, and he is a powerful actor. Dwayne Croft has the notes for Escamillo, but his acting was sometimes awkward, with little personality. Sandra Lopez's Micaëla was a model of vocal beauty and sympathetic acting. There was little on offer from Ljubomir Puskaric (Moralès) and Earle Patriarco (Zuniga). The actor Brian Isaac Phillips, artistic director of the Cincinnati Shakespeare Company, was Lillas Pastia, and was greeted with murmurs of delight as he briskly went about his duties with personality and flair, which were just what was missing from the conducting of Andreas Delfs: ricochet-fast and *largo morto* alternated, with the emphasis on *morto*.

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requested that the entire production be amplified. It was mostly well balanced, but is a bad omen of things to come.

*Carmen* was plagued by an unusual production and performance. The spoken dialogue was deemed in need of amplification, but it was a disaster here, causing the voices to be heard from the side speakers while the singers were mid-stage. Control of the sound-system was sloppy, with musical passages creeping into the amplification then suddenly disappearing. Don José's offstage 'Dragon d'Alcala' sounded as if it were issuing from Lillas Pastia's men's room.

John Conklin's sets of stone and dark gloom (from Houston) hemmed in the action. The staging, by Mark Streshinsky, was too frequently laughable. A zombie-unit of the Spanish army apparently had conquered Seville, turning the Sevillians into zombies as well. Chorus movement was mainly confined to block formation, attractively arranged but dull as possible. Only in Act 4 did the scene open up with vibrant energy for the (drastically cut) procession into the arena. Then came the final tragedy (in the opera and the staging), as Don José appeared, immaculately dressed and in his own personal spotlight, holding something behind his back. (Ooh! Could that be a knife?)

The most consistent all-round artists were in fact the four smugglers: Amita