

Opera Philadelphia delivers Mozart with doors, beds, and heaps of fun

"Marriage of Figaro" production that opened



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Amid the burgeoning hipness of Opera Philadelphia, you'd be right to ask if the recent emphasis on provocative new works means that old operas and their core audience might get the short shrift. The answer offered by the new *Marriage of Figaro* production that opened Friday (and was seen by me on Sunday) is that the two need not be mutually exclusive.

The total package - orchestrally, theatrically and vocally - was among the better *Figaro* productions I've encountered and is easily recommendable to all operatic demographics.

Mozart's 18th-century bedroom comedy about rebellious servants, sexually-deprived masters and all-around forgiveness unfolds like a well-oiled machine on a good day. But the Sunday performance went beyond that. The opera was like a living organism that, over its three ultra-busy hours, moved through the looking glass and into real life. When all activity screeches to a halt near the end - with everybody giving up superficial concerns and lovingly rediscovering each other - the resolution of conflict felt cathartic. Mozart operas usually speak beyond their own time. But this one felt *so* 2017.

The ceaselessly clever production by Stephen Lawless acknowledges that this compulsively farcical opera would be nothing without doors and beds, and there are plenty, mostly in a representational 18th-century style, though with interesting departures: Later on in the Leslie Travers set design, the doors gave up making architectural sense, simply allowing characters to pop in and out of the plot as quickly.

Lighting changes signaled when character were addressing the outside world or raging from within. That's what it takes to keep up with Mozart's swift narrative, and this production did so with all comedy drawn from characters and plot - as opposed to having shtick piled on to keep the laughs coming at any cost.

With staging (plus pithy surtitles) that so effectively amplifies the characters, the performance felt like a love fest between performers and audience. That's not to say all was flawless. Bits of stage business didn't always work. The first-scene set has an ugly rendering of the family tree that the servants were serving. No big deal.

If you don't recognize many of the singers' names, neither did I, and was happy that there were no big box-office stars earning their salaries by grandstanding.

All voices were excellent. John Chest was particularly sonorous as the Count, and if Branden Cedel's Figaro had less vocal veneer, it was appropriate to the simmering character.

Layla Claire's fast vibrato beautifully suited the heart-broken Countess. And though I was a tad disappointed by Ying Fang's lack of mischief in the role of Susanna, the sublime Act IV aria was sung as well as I've ever heard it.

As Cherubino, Cecelia Hall was a charming presence though the magnitude of her voice wasn't right for that of a teenage boy.

Though I initially feared for the singers with the breakneck tempo conductor Corrado Rovaris established in the overture, the pacing went from breathless to buoyant as the opera went on. It's a long piece, but never felt that way, the performance always revealing Mozart's endless invention that powered this ever-remarkable opera. The harpsichord, usually heard only in recitatives, joined some of the arias and ensembles in witty, improvisatory fashion.

Details and intricacies don't often register in a theater as large as the Academy of Music. Yet this *Figaro* did know exactly what they wanted to convey and did so with maximum clarity.

The Marriage of Figaro will be repeated May 3, 5 and 7 at the Academy of Music. Tickets: \$19-269. Information: 215-732-8400 or www.operaphila.org.