

The San Diego Union-Tribune

Review |

San Diego Opera's majestic 'Figaro' a feast for the eyes and ears

Bass-baritone Evan Hughes is Figaro and soprano Sarah Shafer is Susanna in San Diego Opera's "The Marriage of Figaro" at the San Diego Civic Theatre. (J. Katarzyna Woronowicz Johnson)



Pam Kragen Contact Reporter

Beautiful is the best word to describe San Diego Opera's production of "The Marriage of Figaro," which opened the company's season Saturday at the San Diego Civic Theatre.

The stately scenery, gorgeous singing, near-flawless conducting and smart, funny direction are worthy support for Mozart's masterwork, which is jam-packed with some of 18th-century opera's greatest hits.

The eye-popping scenery by Leslie Travers is grand enough to earn its own applause, but the performers are equally impressive in the 1786 opera, which makes a welcome return to San Diego Opera after an 11-year absence.

Soprano Caitlin Lynch is a standout as Countess Almaviva, the heartbroken wife of the philandering Count, who is not-so-secretly plotting to deflower his wife's virgin maid, Susanna, before her wedding to his manservant, Figaro.

Lynch's Countess is so shattered by the revelation she can hardly move or even dress herself. And her creamy and supple voice aches with pain and longing in her famous arias "Porgi Amor" ("Oh, love") and "Dove Sono" ("where are the lovely moments?").

Big-voiced bass-baritone Evan Hughes also impresses as the wily and jealous Figaro, the character who helped the besotted younger Count win his wife's hand in the prequel tale "The Barber of Seville."

Hughes' comic aria of warning about the devilish wiles of women "Aprite un po' quegli occhi" ("Open your eyes"), delivered to the men in the audience with the house lights up, is a highlight of the second act.



John Moore, left, and Caitlyn Lynch play the Count and Countess in San Diego Opera's "The Marriage of Figaro." (J. Katarzyna Woronowicz Johnson)

Mezzo-soprano Emily Fons is charming, funny, boyish and vocally outstanding in the pants role of the lusty young page Cherubino.

Baritone John Moore is taken with being the show's villain and plays it with sly menace and aces his character's aria "Vedro mentr'io sospiro" ("Shall I ...?").

In her role debut as Susanna, soprano Sarah Shafer has a crisp, sweet and lovely voice with solid middle and top, but it's not as big as those of her co-

stars, so on opening night it was often lost in ensemble pieces and occasionally beneath the orchestra.

Also featured in the production are Ashraf Sewailam as Dr. Bartolo, Joseph Hu as Don Basilio, Scott Sikon as Antonio and Lisa Frisque as Barbarina.

Susanne Mentzer stars as Marcellina, but on Saturday she was under the weather. She performed that stage role and recitative for the opening performance but L.A. soprano Julia Metzler stepped in on short notice to flawlessly perform the sung parts of the role from the side of the stage.

The impressive production, directed by Stephen Lawless, is co-owned by San Diego Opera and three other American opera companies. San Diego is the last stop on the four-city tour, so Lawless has had the most time to hone his theatrical vision here.

His concept, honoring the original source material by playwright Pierre-Augustin Beaumarchais, shows the aristocracy in decline. The servants will outwit their master and the women will team up to fight male domination. To represent this visually in the 3-hour, 20-minute opera, Travers' manor home gradually disintegrates into chaos with the servants symbolically smashing a bas-relief sculpture of the Count by the end.

That state of decay is also reflected in Travers' costumes, with the increasingly defiant Figaro abandoning his servant livery and powdered wig and the outsmarted Count becoming increasingly disheveled. **Thomas C. Hase's lighting design symbolically reflects the dark old attitudes giving way to bright new ideas.**



Evan Hughes as Figaro stands before the fracturing "family tree" scenery in San Diego Opera's "The Marriage of Figaro." (J. Katarzyna Woronowicz Johnson)

The production is presented in its original time and place, but it's contemporary in its language and frank approach to sexuality.

Conductor John Nelson confidently leads the San Diego Symphony musicians through Mozart's meticulously written score. In the first act on Saturday, the orchestra overwhelmed the singers at first but Nelson skillfully pulled back within the first 10 or so minutes. San Diego Opera's chorus master Bruce Stasyna does double-duty for "Figaro" as production harpsichordist.

San Diego Opera's "Figaro" is grand opera in every sense of the word. It may be a long sit for a first-time opera-goer, but with its singers and design, it's also a glorious introduction to the art form. It's sung in Italian with English supertitles projected above the stage.

"The Marriage of Figaro"

When: 7 p.m. Tuesday, and Friday. 2 p.m. Oct. 28.

Where: San Diego Opera at the San Diego Civic Theatre, 1100 Third Ave., downtown.

Tickets: \$49 and up

Phone: (619) 533-7000

Online: sdopera.org

pam.kragen@sduniontribune.com. Twitter: @pamkragen

Copyright © 2018, The San Diego Union-Tribune