

Figaro at the Cohn

Oh mio caro Wolfgang

by Glenn Walton

Ach Mozart! How do I love thee? —Let me count the ways . . .

Before falling into senseless protestations of (ever-increasing) affection for the music of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (and reviewing the Canadian Opera Company's (COC) production of *The*

Marriage of Figaro which is the purpose of this article) I would like to make a confession to an old friend.

Years ago I made the acquaintance of a flautist whose Mozart mania was complete and immutable. Nothing could drive out the dreamy look that came into his eyes upon mere mention of the composer. I scoffed, like all of the uninitiated. While not immune to the charm and melody of what I considered very nice music, compared to the punch of Beethoven or the romanticism of Chopin, Mozart's music seemed unexciting, tame, superficial, even. Silly me. A victim of the instant electronic age, in which anything demanding more attention than, say, your average television commercial was ignored on the popular radio, only through extended exposure would I join the ranks of the aficionados. I have capitulated, entirely, irrevocably, and happily, to my own case of Mozart sickness. Lucky me.

Opera is an acquired taste, and so is, I think, the subtlety of Mozart's music. I have often thought that his continued popularity (which, indeed, has only grown) is one of the genuine triumphs of civilization in a wild and disordered world. His music is universal in appeal, and ultimately, optimistic. The era of operatic heroines expiring of rare and fashionable diseases came after Mozart (1754-1791). Of his six works that are a regular part of the operatic repertoire, 4 of them end happily and in a major mode. Even *Don Giovanni*, while tragic, ends not with the rouse's demise, but with a forward-looking ensemble. Among other things, Mozart's operatic fare is entertaining,

and audiences usually leave the theatre (if the thing has been well staged) happily.

And so to *Figaro*. The opera has a silly plot, concerning marital and ex-marital intrigue in the palace and gardens of the Count Almaviva. Beaumarchais's original was considerably watered down by librettist Lorenzo da Ponte, fearful as he was of imperial censorship. What was originally a critique of court authority became amorous frivolity. An inferior composer's music would have ensured the opera's immediate failure: fortunately for da Ponte, there was a Mozart to compose it. His music is so wonderful that it seems irrelevant to criticize mere human failings in ventures such as the COC's production.

Cherubino in the opening performance. She is one of those lucky coincidences of acting talent and musicality that goes places in the operatic world, and I was glad to see that she will be singing the title role in *Cinderella* next year. Her Cherubino was a delight to hear and watch; even dressed in women's clothes she retained her boyish awkwardness. Phil Stark was fittingly obnoxious as Don Basilio with his lisp and perfectly modulated German accent (which however became rather distracting, as was his constant flicking of a handkerchief). John Ostendorf's Figaro was lively and incidentally, appropriately sexy (another trait not normally associated with opera singers) and Sandra Gavinchuk played a spirited Barbarina. I could go on with the list; suffice it to say that the



Happily, the production was good: well-sung, even better acted, and fun to watch. If it looked easy to put on *Figaro*, that was the company's success; it certainly isn't easy to stage an opera. This most difficult of the performing arts depends on a successful combination of all the elements of theatre: music, drama, dance and spectacle. You name it, opera's got it. One measure of the COC's success was an admirably even production. If it lacked somewhat in spirit, that is, in my opinion, partly the audience's fault. Theatre is a two-way street, and an actor or singer depends on audience response to charge his performance. I found myself in an undisciplined audience at the Cohn, and had to shush up two elderly ladies (albeit without hats) who talked through the entire overture. (Admittedly operas are often too long and you get the squirmies, but in the overture already?) The ovations were perfunctory and uninspiring to the singers, and my sympathies were with them.

If any individuals in a uniformly good cast need be singled out for praise, my vote goes to Deborah Milsom, who played the pants role of

acting in general was surprisingly good for an operatic company, plagued as they often are with singers who can't act or actors who can't sing.

Then there was the singing. At the risk of bringing the wrath of the Dalhousie Voice Department down on my head I must admit that I enjoyed the singing —uncritically and naively. The voices were healthy and lyric, and, for the most part free of the over-trained vibrato and metal that too often characterizes operatic voices. Some of the arias suffered in translation and would have sounded better in Italian or even German, but as the plot was so important it was a good thing that the recitatives were in English. *Figaro* contains immensely innovative ensemble writing that pointed the way towards the music drama; the finales were handled well by the company, despite a somewhat uneven orchestra. . .but I begin to quibble. One can be happy we get any opera at all in our city. The COC's *Marriage of Figaro* was much better than nothing—and any Mozart is a plus in our musical life. Bravo, Canadian Opera Company, and bravo Maestro Wolfgang, for your service to humanity.



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