

UC Santa Barbara Opera Theatre - Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* on February 8 and 10 2018

Professionals and grad students collaborated as colleagues to bring Mozart's whimsical farce to magical, musical life

Among life's clichés 'masterpiece' is likely one of the most overwrought, but Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) is one of a handful of geniuses who deserve the compliment

**DANIEL
KEPL**

OPERA REVIEW

in spades. Virtually all his music, particularly those works from the last years of his too short sojourn on this planet, are bona fide masterpieces.

Le Nozze di Figaro (The Marriage of Figaro) composed in 1786 during a burst of creative energy facilitated by his librettist, Lorenzo Da Ponte (*Don Giovanni*, *Così fan tutte*), is as perfect a work of art as can be conceived by the human mind. UC Santa Barbara Opera Theatre brought its dazzling genius to sparkling life on February 8th and 10th with a fully staged production at Lotte Lehmann Concert Hall on the seaside campus.

Featuring a cast and orchestra assembled from the Department of Music's best and brightest - mostly grad students - and with directorial and additional musical assistance from faculty and guest professionals on stage and in the pit, the excitement on opening night was palpable.

From the first notes of the opera's famous overture, conducted with insouciant flair and contagious vigor by Opera Santa Barbara Artistic and General Director Kostis Protopapas, the performance on February 8th flew by like an E ticket. On loan to UCSB Opera Theatre, maestro Protopapas was in firm but benign command, especially when he sat down at the harpsichord from time to time to dash off deliciously coy recitativo accompaniments throughout the evening.

Delighted appreciation for the musical jokes and discreet sight gags planted throughout the opera's three hours occasioned frequent applause in support of UCSB's wonderfully musical cast, which executed

Mozart's famous solo arias, duos, trios, quartets, quintets, sextets, and choruses with studied and steady style and panache.

A number of those in attendance might have been experiencing a live opera performance for the first time, but a large group were seasoned opera buffs, followers of maestro Protopapas and his Opera



Baritone Byron Mayes (Figaro) and soprano Naomi Merer (Susanna) - Photos by Matt Perko

Santa Barbara colleagues, who played strategic roles in making this *Figaro* special. Approval by opera nuts and neophytes alike, gave currency as well as acclamation to UCSB Opera Theatre's high standard of preparation and performance.

Mozart gave the world a *Figaro* score of knockout tunefulness and stunning virtuosity. Despite the legendary opinion of Emperor Joseph II about too many notes, not a single hemidemisemiquaver is wasted or superfluous. Achieving artistic success in presenting such a delicate musical and theatrical soufflé takes coaching from a village of widely experienced production professionals.

The exciting snap, crackle, and pop that distinguished UCSB Opera Theatre's *Figaro* indicated with

exclamation points, this lucky cast enjoyed mentoring from some of the best in the business.

Soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian (Stage Director); tenor Benjamin Brecher (Music Director/Producer); Richard Adamson (Set Designer); Ben Crop (Lighting Designer); and Lise Lange (Costume Designer) lent their extensive collective experience in professional theatre and opera to this production. The result, sung in Italian no less, was a perfect synergy of intent, training, purpose, and polish.

Richard Adamson's set design was clever. A revolving scene change capability made for efficient use of the small stage area at Lotte Lehmann Concert Hall and suited the set piece needs of this all too class conscious Da Ponte/Mozart propaganda piece.

Placing the servant's quarters at the center of Count Almaviva's house - the eye of the storm, so to speak - Adamson conjured a kind of physical metaphysics on people's revolutions that were just around the historical corner and about to rock European status quo to its core.

Ben Crop's experience in lighting several of Santa Barbara City College's Garvin Theatre shows over many years gave him experiential wiggle room to explore lighting possibilities at Lotte Lehmann. Making color an ambient companion to mood, Crop's lighting gave hue and ballast to Adamson's set changes.

A stylish eighteenth century wardrobe on loan from opera/theatre friends on the east coast afforded Costume Designer Lise Lange several beautiful opportunities to match elegance and period to set and lighting design. Special thanks to Hair and Make-up Designer Sarah Flores for her expert wig fittings - very important.

Uncompromising directorial and musical leadership from UCSB Assistant Professor of Voice soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian and tenor Benjamin Brecher, Head of the Voice Area at UCSB gave stellar cachet to this production, top down.

Bayrakdarian's many professional engagements with opera companies around the world singing works from the major repertoire including *Figaro*, has given her a canny eye for artistic as well as comedic detail.

Bayrakdarian's staging was all about movement - sensible, conversational, natural movement. The action flowed accordingly, with several comedic episodes and neatly choreographed mis-adventures set up by Bayrakdarian and Brecher in the manner of good theatre - the gags pressed subtly - comedy as confection.

Together, artistic team Brecher and Bayrakdarian assembled an ideal



Baritone Tyler Reece (Count Almaviva)

vocal cast for this *Figaro*. Baritone Byron Mayes (MM/DMA) in the title role was rich in stage presence and ripe of voice - deep, projecting, mature, and rounded. Soprano Naomi Merer (MM/DMA) as Figaro's fiancée Susanna, brought a masterful sense of comedic verisimilitude to her role and championed a voice that grew in warmth and consonance as the evening progressed.

Peruvian-American soprano Kelly Newberry (DMA) created a sensation in the pants role of Cherubino, not only for her superb voice but also her captivating stage presence. Likewise, bass-baritone E. Scott Levin, who has enjoyed an active professional career since 2002. His Doctor Bartolo was a lesson in delicious comedic effect; a perfection of professionalism and charm that had to have inspired his younger colleagues.

Soprano Julie Davies (DMA) brought her fulsome and beautifully supported voice to the role of Countess Almaviva, while baritone Tyler Reece (DMA) contributed not a little comedic skill and solid singing to his role as Count Almaviva. Mezzo-soprano Molly Clementz (Marcellina); tenor Zachary Mendez (Don Curzio/Basilio); soprano Carol Tsai (Barbarina); bass Byron Wu (Antonio); and a delightful women's chorus of Alexandra Lopez, Alexandria Jackson, Cloe Gentile, and Terra Giddens rounded out the excellent cast.



Bass-baritone E. Scott Levin (Dr. Bartolo) and soprano Molly Clementz (Marcellina)



Daniel Kepl has been writing music, theatre, and dance reviews since he was a teenager. His professional expertise is as an orchestra conductor. He will lead the Emeriti Philharmonic tour of Portugal August 15-26 2018.

Visit:
performingartsreview.net
emeritiphilharmonic.com