

# The Marriage of Figaro

## Keynotes

Earlier this season, Pacific Opera Victoria brought you servings of epic legends and historical tragedy. After these robust and beefy offerings, it's time for something zesty and sweet to round out the opera year.

*Mozart's Le nozze di Figaro* could be summed up as very concerning workplace harassment turned into a happy ending for all. Yet within its fluffy exterior, we can find deliciously-woven plots, subplots, and non-sensical antics. For full disclosure, I absolutely love this opera. I have had the immense pleasure of working on it as a repetiteur (i.e. rehearsal pianist), as Antonio in an Italian summer production (so much gelato!), and as the Count & Figaro in concert circumstances. What keeps this Mozart workhorse fresh? I suspect it has something to do with the relatability of the emotional impetus of so many of the characters, whether they're virtuous or not.

Working class bride-to-be Susanna is deeply in love and just wants to have a low-key wedding ceremony to celebrate that love. Her betrothed, Figaro, is also very much in love

but prone to suspicion. Their employer, the Count, and the local page boy, Cherubino, are variably hoping to sow their wild oats. On the more downtrodden side, the Countess is despondent, betrayed, and unsatisfied. Old-timers Marcellina and Dr. Bartolo are feeling past their prime and hoping for a win (perhaps revenge by technicality). And music teacher Don Basilio needs gossip to break up an otherwise uneventful routine.

When these clear individual emotions interact, however, we are presented with collisions, misunderstandings, and confusion – in other words, a beautiful, complicated mess. I like to think that this is pretty similar to our everyday lives: we often start our days with a hope or expectation in mind and then life happens—and so often 'life' is other people. From certain perspectives, this could constitute a disaster, but in Mozart, there is a silver lining on the horizon. To illustrate my point, a brief culinary expedition: the story of the 'Eton Mess'. Supposedly at a fancy 19th century cricket match, a beautiful cast of ingredients was assembled for a scrumptious pudding. Strawberry, meringue, cream! And then life intervened and the pudding ended up crashing to the floor. What did the personnel on hand do to deal with this disaster? They scooped up the parts from the ground and served up a delectable, smashed dessert—a resounding success!

As per my previous spoiler, *Le nozze di Figaro* has a happy ending—in one way or another, everyone ends up with their just desserts. After all the wild scuffles of the day, there is hope for redemption, unity, and love. Unrealistic? Depends. Sweet? Definitely. Whether in an opera or in real life, it is something we can all hope for.

ALEX CHEN



The Marriage of Figaro set in progress at the Opera Shop



# The Marriage of Figaro

Throughout the decade Mozart lived, worked, and died in Vienna (1781-91), Italian opera continued to thrive as it had for decades, despite the intermittently successful attempt made by Emperor Joseph II to promote German-language Singspiele. A large community of professionals – composers, librettists, impresarios, performers – competed with one another to score hits while responding to the ever-evolving, often capricious tastes of audiences and individual patrons alike. In the words of music historian H.C. Robbins Landon, opera was that genre in which “you could have the most colossal success on Monday and be out on your ear by Friday” – as Handel had discovered some forty years before Mozart’s arrival in the Austrian capital.

In hindsight, the two operatic professionals who tower over their colleagues are, of course, Mozart and his finest librettist, Lorenzo da Ponte. They may have seemed like two among many during their time in Vienna, but Emperor Joseph himself was aware of and receptive to their gifts and accomplishments, and one of Mozart’s staunchest and most vocal admirers was his older colleague and friend, the great Joseph Haydn.

Haydn’s own operas are rarely performed now, but he did compose a large number for the Esterhazy court (all of his surviving operas are in Italian) where they were well-received, even earning a compliment from Empress Maria Theresa. But after being in the audience for *Le nozze di Figaro*, Haydn acknowledged Mozart’s absolute supremacy in this genre, and largely abandoned the composition of opera, even turning down a lucrative commission for a comic opera with the recommendation that Mozart receive the contract instead. Notwithstanding Mozart’s own oft-quoted dictum

– “I would say that in an opera the poetry must be altogether the obedient daughter of the music. Why are Italian comic operas popular everywhere despite the miserable libretti?” – no great composer of opera is not also a perceptive dramaturge (which Haydn was decidedly not). We know Mozart was an astute judge of libretti and considered most of the ones he encountered unsatisfactory. Certainly, he was sure enough of his own tastes to have offered suggestions to and even made demands of the equally confident da Ponte. After deciding to set *Le nozze di Figaro* both artists talked about the need to defy established traditions of opera buffa to better tell the story and serve the characters.

Very few composers of opera equal Mozart’s genius for portraying human beings musically (and nobody surpasses it, in my opinion). The emotions of his

characters, their reactions to events in the drama, their inner thoughts, their individuality – all of these are captured perfectly in music which also provides, when required, a perfect accompaniment to stage action. Above all, Mozart is able to create actual flesh-and-blood people rather than types – we leave the theatre not only humming the tunes, but thinking of Susanna and

Figaro, Cherubino, Countess and (yes!) Count Almaviva as people we may have met or even known at one time or another.

One of Mozart’s most powerful (and difficult to define) gifts is that for melody. In the opinion of Joseph Haydn, “It is the melody which is the charm of music, and it is that which is most difficult to produce. The invention of a fine melody is a work of genius.” whose own explanation as to how he composed was: “I write [music] as a sow piddles.”



Drawings by Costume Designer Nancy Bryant.

I suspect this was said in annoyance to an importunate fan, as Mozart was known to be an extraordinarily hard, if sometimes quick worker.

*Le nozze di Figaro* begins with an Overture that sets an atmosphere of intrigue, excitement, back-stabbing skullduggery and is self-contained in that it does not quote any music from the opera that follows – as do the other two da Ponte operas and *Die Zauberflöte*. Here are a few musical observations to consider.

The first scene already departs from the operatic convention of the time in that we meet the servants first – Figaro and Susanna, who are to be married this very day – and they are each pre-occupied with a particular task. Figaro is measuring the floor of the room Count Almaviva has given them to determine if their marriage bed will fit into it. Susanna is admiring her wedding bonnet and trying to get Figaro to notice it. Figaro's music is introduced and then accompanied by a dotted-rhythm, rather square and military orchestral figure, whereas Susanna's is flowing and lyrical. It is telling that by the end of this Duettino, both are singing Susanna's tune (suggesting that while Figaro may be the man, Susanna is more likely to be in control).

Rhythm in general helps shape a melody, and Figaro's dotted rhythm in particular helps shape our perception of his character: Act One begins and ends with Figaro singing music in this militaristic vein – he may be a servant, but he's (almost) nobody's pushover. In her 1983 book *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart*, the American musicologist Wye Jamison Allanbrook suggests that almost every aria and ensemble in *Le nozze di Figaro* suggests a dance type – moreover, that the specific social dances also reinforce status, with the Minuet indicating the upper classes, and the Gigue representing the peasants. A significant degree of intrigue in the plot is conveyed in Act Three with comparatively few words while a fandango is being danced and played.

In all of Mozart's Italian operas the plot is forwarded through the medium of recitativo – in which the text is declaimed more than it's sung, the singer being

expected to alter the written note values in order to adopt the rhythms, tempo, and delivery of ordinary Italian speech. The most prominent style of recitativo in Figaro is called secco ("dry") and is accompanied only by harpsichord. This is equivalent to dialogue in a musical (or opera such as *Zauberflöte* or *Carmen*), and conveys much of the plot detail in direct, straightforward prose with little if any text repetition (thus the surtitles are especially helpful – especially as one of the most crucial and comic plot twists is presented entirely as recitativo secco). Another style is accompanied – or more accurately punctuated – by the orchestra, and is reserved for particularly important events in the plot.

Aside from the First Act, which Figaro finishes with his military-style aria, each of the Acts ends a Finale. This was a tradition of the time, but Italian opera finales were expected to present each and every one of the characters in the order in which they were introduced. Mozart and da Ponte instead created contrasting sections of music and text which flow into each other naturally, thus continuing to present the story convincingly. Consider the very last two sections of Act Four's Finale: the Countess graciously extends forgiveness to her husband despite having endured his heartless treatment throughout the rest of the work. The reconciled couple, along with their soon-to-be-wed servants and the rest of the assembled cast, can look forward to happiness and contentment. The music is, quite simply, some of the most beautiful ever composed by Mozart or anyone else, and confirms the Countess's sincerity and dignity as firmly as her music has done throughout the work. The opera then concludes with a lively coda in D major (the key of the Overture – always Mozart's practice) which insists on a happy ending. Perhaps the Count will remain a loving and faithful husband ... or perhaps Mozart and da Ponte have told us too much about his personality for us to believe in his sincerity.

We may each decide for ourselves!

ROBERT HOLLISTON



# Upcoming Events

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## THE FLIGHT OF THE HUMMINGBIRD | SPRING

Pacific Opera Victoria and Vancouver Opera are thrilled to present the original opera for all ages, *The Flight of the Hummingbird*. *The Flight of the Hummingbird* will return to BC schools in the Spring of 2024. Please stay tuned for upcoming performances and tours. Sponsored by Lorna Harris and Robert Milne.



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6:30 PM | Tickets on Sale April 3 | Tickets \$100 with a \$50 tax receipt

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## THE LUMINARY SERIES | DECEMBER 2024 - MAY 2025

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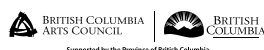
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