

Rossini's 'Barber' comes to Detroit

By Christopher Tkaczyk
Daily Arts Writer

La la la LA LA LA la la la LA LA LA ... Figaro...FEE-garo...FEE-GAR-OH!

Michigan Opera Theater's new production of the hilarious Gioacchino Rossini opera "The Barber of Seville" is a surefire hit. A sensational ensemble of lead actors is sure to make Detroit Opera House audiences depart into the night with the famous tune running through their heads.

"The Barber of Seville," the grandfather of all opera buffa, features a classic boy meets girl story gone awry but patched up by the heroic clown, a role fulfilled by Figaro, the barber himself. It is 1600's Seville when the famous overture's first chords charge from the pit, and loverboy Count Almaviva has set newfound sights on the lovely and delicate Rosina, a ward to the brutish but affable Doctor Bartolo, who intends to wed her himself. It is with Figaro's willing aid (and affinity for gold coins) that Almaviva sets out to pursue the impoverished maiden, locked up within Bartolo's villa.

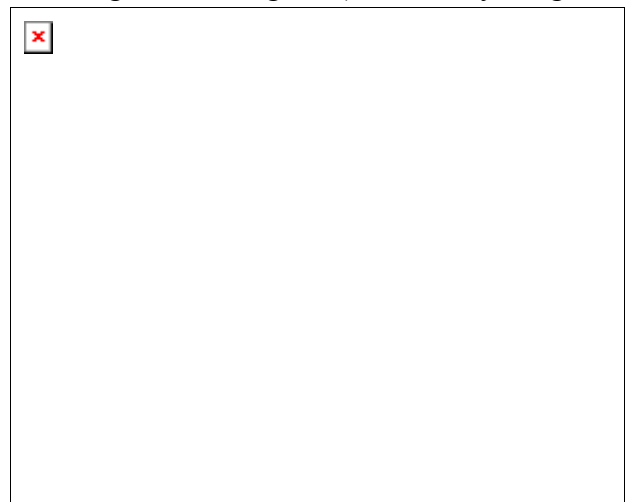
Yes, it is a story of romantic buffoonery unfolded completely with stock characters, but the political undertones remind us that life hasn't always been as "correct" as we imagine it to be today.

And if the story isn't entertaining enough, Rossini's famous score is sure to please the ears of enthusiasts and opera amateurs alike.

"Barber" is rife with famous numbers, and the MOT cast delivers each with polished energy. Figaro's classic aria, Largo al factotum della città, seemed a toy for Earle Patriarco, who enjoyed playing with it as if it were an old rag doll. He tossed the notes around with ease and gave an excellent turn as the barber, a role seemingly fit for the young singer.

But opening night was stolen by Donato Di Stefano as Dr. Bartolo. Di Stefano, in his U.S. opera debut, dignified his villain with a warm heart and comical antics. His nuances of character were almost vaudevillian in nature, but captured the essence of the piece and provided operagoers with delightful entertainment. He is Dr. Bartolo, down to the very essence of the character.

Less successful was Vivica Genaux as Rosina, who's aim at the classic *Una voce poco fa* missed its mark. Genaux is a gifted singer, no doubt, and handled all her notes well, but didn't deliver a stunning take. Whether or not she is capable of providing a full-voiced Rosina is a question to be considered, for the omission of a lengthy note remained an undaunting disappointment. But the role is somewhat tricky and covers a wide range in a short span and Genaux was able to rush through without erring too profusely.



Courtesy of Michigan Opera Theatre
Earle Patriarco, Vivica Genaux and Bruce Fowler sing about the barber.

The loud voiced bass Michele Bianchini demanded attention as Don Basilio, friend to Bartolo and music teacher to Rosina. His moments onstage were skillful and commanding and completed the dark duo of himself and Bartolo.

The staging by director Dorothy Danner of this classic story is a breath of fresh air for the company, whose most recent staging of the opera in 1993 featured talented singers, but lacked the energy needed to bring in barrels of chuckles. A proper performance of "The Barber of Seville" leaves audiences with flushed cheeks and warm smiles, as witnessed at Saturday's performance. The opera's early 19th Century humor is as energizing today as it was at its 1816 premiere in Rome.

John Stoddart's set, a simple but grand design of the Bartolo villa is set on a rotating spindle. The action of the opera unfolds between rotations, and the highly effective transition scene near the end of Act Two is a perfect handling of the sometimes clunky plot sequence. While Figaro and Almaviva are climbing a ladder to Rosina's bedroom window, Dr. Bartolo's schemings are also shown as the revolving set features a glimpse at both the inside and outside of the estate. Todd Hensley's detailed lighting places the scene into an electrical storm, an otherwise tricky effect to pull off. Danner's staging is brilliant here, and gives each of the characters something to do, rather than stand and sing.

The company's rousing attack, when the military is called in to control an outbreak of argument in the Bartolo home, is deft and graceful, otherwise normally cluttering the stage with useless extra voices. Here, Danner invokes a wonderfully choreographed staging reminiscent of a military march, capped off with dramatic lighting, proving again that she has pumped more pulse into an already pressurized show.

Opera fans are sure to find this "Barber" an excellent addition to the fall opera schedule and shouldn't be overlooked. "The Barber of Seville" is also a great opera for those waiting to break their virginal operatic seal, even if only to sing along to "Figaro! Figaro! FI-garo!"

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