

The New Criterion

Dispatch January 13, 2022 11:00 am

An excellent night of singing (et cetera)

by Jay Nordlinger

The bottom line, I will put at the top: last night's *Marriage of Figaro* at the Metropolitan Opera was fabulously sung. *Fabulously* sung. The performance of an opera has many components—but let's not overlook the singing. Let's not overlook the obvious. I sometimes adapt the lyrics of Irving Mills (who teamed with Duke Ellington): it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that sing.

It is true, also, that last night's *Figaro* was exceptionally well acted—which is a bonus. A big fat bonus, especially in an intricate, romping, serious Mozart / Da Ponte / Beaumarchais work.

I will simply go through the cast, beginning with the title character. An American bass-baritone, Ryan McKinny, was Figaro. He sang handsomely and embraced his role with pleasure. He did several athletic things onstage, including pushups during "Non più andrai."

His Susanna—*our* Susanna—was Lucy Crowe, the English soprano. She sang with beauty, spirit, and accuracy. She never strayed from the pitch. She was in the center of the note all night long—even when intervals were quick and awkward. Recitatives were natural, conversational, and musical. She spun "Deh vieni" like silk, or lace. If the house had been full, it would have broken out into pandemonium. As it was, our tiny band cheered as loudly as possible. (January + pandemic = sparse audience.)

One more thing about Ms. Crowe: from my seat, she looked rather like Amy Poehler, the comic actress, and *Saturday Night Live* alum.

Adam Plachetka, the Czech bass-baritone, was the Count. In 2015, I reviewed him as Figaro, in Salzburg: "He was explosive, cunning, and very human. In other words, he was a fit Figaro." He was a very, very fit Count. He was a lovable rogue—an imperious lord of the manor, and total horn-dog, with a soft and decent side. There was a touch of Ralph Kramden in his portrayal—bus driver as count. "To the moon, Rosina!" He was consistently funny—buffoonish, or oafish, without being hammy. And yet "Contessa, perdono" was very tender and moving.

The Contessa? Golda Schultz, the South African soprano. I have heard her in a variety of music, on the opera stage and in the recital hall. I don't recall having heard her in Mozart. She is surely a

Mozart singer. She sang “Porgi, amor” —and “Dove sono,” for that matter—in long, easy breaths. Critically, she sang this music with great love: love of singing, love of Mozart, love of music. She had both regality and simple femininity—simple humanity—as the Countess does.

I have heard bigger sopranos in this role—bigger in volume and bigger in reputation. I have never heard a more satisfying or admirable one.

Speaking of satisfying and admirable: Isabel Leonard, the American mezzo, was—as she has been at the Met before—Cherubino: the “girl playing a boy playing a girl.” Ms. Leonard, as I have complained in the past, is boringly perfect. (Just kidding about the “boringly” part.) There is little for a critic to say. One can only repeat. Maybe I can say this (though I have probably said it before): She is both clean and rich. Her singing is pure, yes, but not spare. There is a lushness, or a glow, within the cleanness and purity.

I might say this, too: she should not be penalized for her consistent excellence. William F. Buckley Jr. once wrote that Paul Johnson, the British historian and journalist, was underrated, or taken for granted, because of the routineness of his excellence.

“One of the canniest performers in opera,” I wrote a few years ago, “is Maurizio Muraro.” True. “Muraro is a pro in virtually every phrase and gesture.” True. This Italian bass-baritone made his Met debut as *Figaro*’s Dr. Bartolo in 2005. He is reprising that role now. Muraro produces an ample sound, without forcing—and that sound is a treat to the ear. Joining him as Marcellina was Elizabeth Bishop, another American mezzo. Like Muraro, she is a canny veteran. She did not try to make too much of Marcellina; she did not make too little of her either. She was exemplary in her part.

Don Basilio was Giuseppe Filianoti, the Italian tenor. A comment on the stage direction, if you will: Basilio is played awfully straight—which sacrifices some comedy. As long as I’m commenting on the stage direction: Antonio, the gardener (played by Paul Corona, an American bass), could be drunker.

Do I have any more cavils about the stage direction? No. The direction—in the care of Paula Williams—is smart and stylish.

Barbarina is an inviting role for a young lyric soprano, just starting out—and Erika Baikoff, a Russian American, took advantage of it. Barbarina gets to sing that little F-minor aria that Mozart creates. A strange and wondrous little creation.

Leading all this in the pit was Daniele Rustioni, the Milanese conductor, who is also leading the Met’s *Rigolettos* this month. (For my review of the Verdi opera, go [here](#).) Mozart’s overture—the most sparkling creation in Christendom?—did not go especially well. It was on the limp side. Rather, it suffered from the quality of okayness. You want to be better than okay in this overture. Also, there were flubs in the orchestra, seldom heard at the Met.

Any other complaints? Yes. For example, the end of Act i could have used a greater sense of military pomp. How about overall, though? Maestro Rustioni led this masterpiece surehandedly. He was both leaderly and unintrusive—which is a good way to be in Mozart, and other music.

When he took the stage at the end of the night, he pointed enthusiastically at the continuo player—the fortepiano player—asking him to stand up and bow. The player, Jonathan C. Kelly, did. A warm gesture on the part of the conductor.

The small audience cheered for all the performers as lustily as possible, as if trying to make up for its size.

Speaking of size: For many years, I have resisted the contention that the Met is too big a house for Mozart. It's up to the performers to create intimacy, you know? A good conductor, in particular, will make a cavernous barn seem a jewel box. But . . . my resistance is weakening. *The Marriage of Figaro* is, in one sense—a literal sense—a “chamber opera”: a significant part of the action takes place in a bedroom. Forgetting the singers, I often wanted the orchestra louder last night. I wished for a more immediate experience.

But I have written a rave, haven't I? And every word true.

Jay Nordlinger is a Senior Editor at *National Review*.

[His podcast with *The New Criterion*, titled “Music for a While,” can be found here.](#)