



Il Barbiere di Siviglia

WILMINGTON, DEL - 2/27/22

OperaDelaware, Baltimore Concert Opera

OPERADELAWARE returned to live performance with *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, a vigorous joint venture with Baltimore Concert Opera (mounting its first-ever fully staged production). February 27's matinée welcomed many front-line health workers and first-time operagoers; crowd response was very positive. Anthony Barrese led an unusually complete edition of the score, and—following the lead of Will Crutchfield's Teatro Nuovo explorations—encouraged the very capable cast to improvise decorations in both recitative and sung passages. This led to a vivid, if sometimes way over-the-top musical performance. Surely major decorations should wait until after melodies are stated once through; the lesson scene turned into a free-for-all, with Rosina (Mary Beth Nelson) and Bartolo (Tim Mix) initially channeling Britney Spears and Cher numbers. Throughout the show, the improvising worked better, and served clearer theatrical purposes, in the recits; some of the inserted cadenzas and interpolations duly wowed, but others turned shrill or unmusical.

Clownish exaggeration was the order of the day in Octavio Cardenas's production. Granted there are commedia dell'arte subtexts to Beaumarchais's plot, it also deploys recognizable human beings. Not here, with oppressive make-up, non-stop gags and dodging distracting supers standing in for character work. Given that framework, the cast acquitted itself bravely.

Christopher Bozeka's Almoviva was impressive, with a fine technique and expert agility aligned to a pleasant timbre that carried well. He certainly earned his right to sing "Cessa di più resistere"—maybe not quite at the Brownlee/Flórez level but with panache and style. Brian James Myer brought considerable stage charm and savvy plus a fine, pliable instrument to Figaro, winning audience cheers as the barber should. For a lyric baritone, Myer commands uncommon tonal heft in his lower register. At this fourth of four shows, the entrance aria's high Gs emerged roughly, making his subsequent high interpolations seem a needless risk.

Mezzo Mary Beth Nelson has everything she needs and more for success in this repertory: an attractive stage figure who moves expertly, she showed ease and vocal clarity in both traditional mezzo and soprano Rosina turf. Not her fault that Cardenas' commedia concept positioned her as a particularly hoydenish Colombina auditioning for Seville's Got Talent, with physical gags repeated again and again, finally losing any humor. If Rosina and Almoviva are saddled with two hours of circusy overkill, any sense of the music's genuine emotion—her hurt at seeming betrayal by "Lindoro" and both lovers' nascent joy in "Ah, quel colpo"—just won't land. Tim Mix made an inventive, often hilarious and well-vocalized Bartolo. As Basilio—inevitably in Father Guido Sarducci sunglasses, surely among the hoariest of *Barbiere* clichés at this point—Kevin Short unfurled the most sumptuous voice of all, showing just a tad of rust. When not asked (endlessly) to interpolate coughing jags, Julia Laird's spirited Berta sang very well. The choral direction amounted to often pointless sketch comedy "funny movements."

For transportability and COVID safety, the cast and chorus moved the set units, which aided flow even if though it lessened the sense of Rosina's isolation. Almoviva and Bartolo's costumes were needlessly unflattering (the latter evoking a bumble bee with an insecure Nabucco helmet, gussied up in St Patrick's Day green) but Kathleen Doyle did summon up some gorgeous *Good Night Moon*-worthy colors. Hector Quintero's lighting proved the show's best-judged design element. Once the horns warmed up, Barrese's players performed well. Make no mistake, this *Barbiere* offered lots of fun and much good singing; but less directorial sledgehammer would have achieved even more. —David Shengold

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