

The Marriage of Figaro: Just right for our ears

By Edmund Gordon for The Buzz, the Highgate Society Magazine

Emperor Joseph II of Austria after hearing 'The Abduction from the Seraglio' is reported to have said to Mozart that the music was 'too beautiful for our ears'. Few others would quibble similarly.

Bruno Ravella, Director of Hampstead Garden Opera's latest Upstairs at the Gatehouse Production, of Mozart's 'The Marriage of Figaro', contrasts in a programme note the virgin territory he crossed for HGO's last production, Jonathan Dove's 'Mansfield Park', with the well travelled paths to one of the best known operas. Seeking refuge from previous influences he started with reversion to Da Ponte's libretto and the Beaumarchais play.

In reviewing a fresh production of an established work a similar problem arises. One obvious criterion is whether justice has been done to the music. The reputation of 'The Marriage of Figaro' stems primarily from Mozart's genius. Had I closed my eyes throughout, could I report that Music Director, Oliver-John Ruthven, the 14-strong orchestra (Musica Poetica London) and the evening's cast (Milo Harries (Figaro), Julie Moote (Susanna), Andrew Sparling (Dr. Bartolo), Alison Thorman (Marcellina), Felicity Turner (Cherubino), Jon Stainsby (Count Almaviva), William Davies (Don Basilio), Jessica Gillingwater (Countess Almaviva), Nicholas George (Antonio), Hugh Benson (Don Curzio), Harriet Burns (Barbarina), Morgane Kypriotti and Emma Lewis (Bridesmaids) plus the HGO chorus (estate staff) had given worthy accounts of the score? Happily, I could. Standards were, as usual, high.

Vital though the music is, this review is of a theatrical performance. My eyes, open throughout, beheld well realised period costumes and a set with period details, both by Holly Seager, suiting theatre space and production demands admirably. They took in also the results of the journey from Da Ponte and Beaumarchais to the distinctive directorial concept. Was the destination, to use Michelin's phrase, worth the detour? Broadly, yes. The performance offered much for the capacity audience to appreciate.

However the Director's starting point left him wishing to develop dark, serious issues raised by the plot. I am not sure if this wish served the piece optimally. The composer and librettist described it as a 'commedia per musica'. It seems clear that it was conceived as an opera buffa, in which humour and satire were intended to predominate but convey serious Enlightenment principles. In addition, B.D.Fisher has written of music in 'The Marriage of Figaro' 'creating a new drama of sensibilities and underlying subtleties and truths which transcend the libretto'. Mozart is thought to have harked back, like the Director, to Beaumarchais. Though this may be the origin of the transcendence, I think it more likely etheaaa enius led him to soar above all precedent.

Emperor Joseph II's comment quoted above ended: 'and immensely many notes, my dear Mozart.'. The composer allegedly replied: 'Just as many as necessary, your Majesty'. With Mozart as guide detours may not be critical.