




HGO's vibrant, glowing *Le nozze di Figaro* is proof positive of the eternal durability of Mozart's masterpiece

07/11/2021 by Colin Clarke

 **United Kingdom Mozart, *Le nozze di Figaro*:** Soloists; Chamber Orchestra of Hampstead Garden Opera / Thomas Payne (conductor). Jacksons Lane Theatre, Highgate, London, 5.11.2021. (CC)

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HGO's *Le nozze di Figaro* © Laurent Compagnon

Production:

Director – Julia Mintzer

Set Designer – Charles Ogilvie

Sound and Lighting designer – Jonny Dancinger

Choreographer – Carmine de Amicis

Dramaturg – Ben Poore

Cast:

Figaro – Louis Hurst

Susanna – Shafali Jalota

Count Almaviva – Thomas Chenhall

Countess Almaviva – Camilla Harris

Cherubino – Esme Bronwen-Smith

Basilio / Don Curzio – Martins Smaukstelis

Bartolo – Hector Bloggs

Marcellina – Becca Marriott

Antonio – Owain Evans

Barbarina / Bridesmaid 2 – Astrid Joos

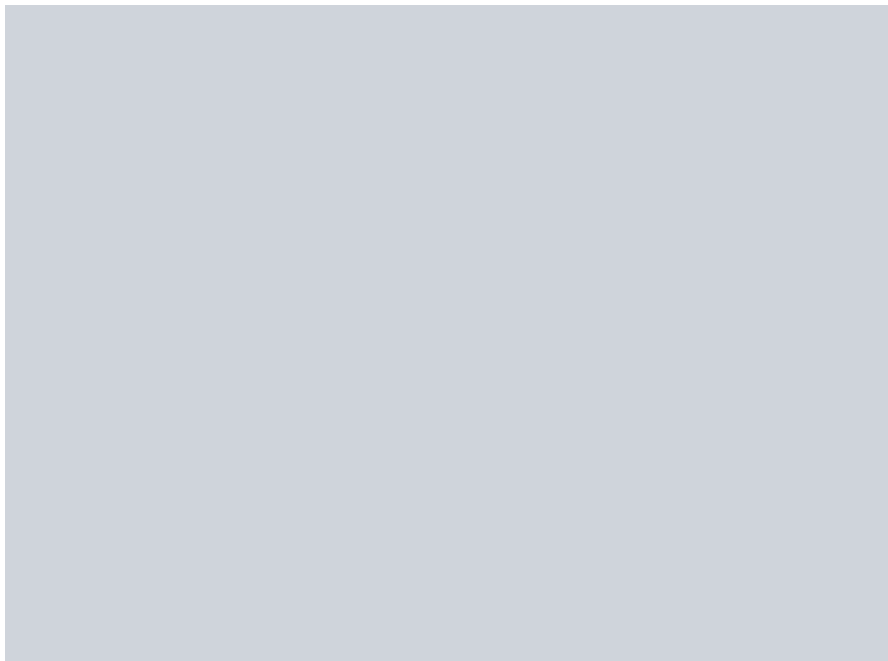
Bridesmaid 1 – Phoebe Smith

Chorus – Anna Simmons, Angela Yang

Mozart's eternal *opera buffa* *Le nozze di Figaro* fizzes gloriously in this production from Hampstead Garden Opera. The production is a miracle of maximal effect with minimum material (the stage remains constant throughout) thanks to superb lighting by Jonny Dancinger: space is superbly, imaginatively used, with equally superbly

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A reduced orchestra brings its own illumination to the process: suddenly a string quartet can be the accompaniment, gracious, elegant, while single winds and horn add Mozart's colours beautifully. Bravo to all concerned (the small orchestra is to the right of the stage in two tiers) particular praise perhaps for first violin Jonell Yeo, single-handedly negotiating her tricky lines for the entire event with aplomb. The conductor was Thomas Payne (who also conducted Holst's *Sāvitri* for HGO back in August 2020). A former member of the Jette Parker Young Artists Programme at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, Payne is clearly a name to watch. His clarity is remarkable, not least in the way he handles the accompanied recitatives. Elspeth Wilkes plays continuo on an electronic keyboard on harpsichord settings – somehow, it works brilliantly, due to Wilkes's lightening reactions to her singers.

The whole thing knits together thanks to the fact this is a company effort. Mixed-period costumes add to the sense of a mix of *opera buffa* and English farce (and let's face it *Figaro* has plenty of elements of the latter about it). Hides and reveals were slick as can be, especially impressive on the first night. The cast (there are two) was clearly carefully chosen to maintain a high level, showcasing some of the finest young talent (both singing and acting) around the UK today.

The Figaro and Susanna, Louis Hurst and Shafali Jalota respectively, offered a match of equals, Hurst has an impressive list of roles already under his belt, and this was a fine, confident assumption. Hurst's voice is firm, confident, while his acting is full of life. British-American soprano Shafali Jalota delights as Susanna; her roles already

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There was one role that stood out above all others though: and it's the role that normally gets a token reference in reviews for the so-called 'pin aria'. And yet Flemish soprano Astrid Joos elevated this role considerably. She has real stage presence as well as a lovely, clear voice and the ability to meld into a large company. This was a notably feisty Barbarina. I look forward to seeing how this singer develops.

A recent Masters graduate at the Royal Academy, Thomas Chenhall's Count took a role that can be one-dimensional and added nuance as well as projecting the voice superbly (I can't imagine Jacksons Lane is the most grateful acoustic for singers.) His recanting at 'Contessa perdono' was, for once, moving and convincing. He was matched by the superb lyricism of Camilla Harris's Countess, her two big numbers the epitome of Mozartean charm and emotional depth. Obviously a young Countess, her voice has real command; and she was able to bring a light touch to the role at times, too.

The Cherubino of Esme Bronwen-Smith was brilliantly in the spirit of *buffa*, ever amusing and – and I mean this in the nicest way possible – what a convincing male she makes, thanks no doubt to HGO's superb costume and make-up department. An absolute masterclass in character acting, her 'Non so più' was deliciously light. Becca Marriott was a hugely characterful Marcellina; Latvian tenor Martins Smaukstelis took on the roles of Basilio and Don Curzio, his voice often honeyed, while Hector Bloggs was a confident Bartolo.

Subtitles were sometimes funny ('Bloody hell' for 'O dio') and sometimes, well, absent. But that last was a first night hiccup, I am sure. There is something symbolic about parts of Jacksons Lane itself being only partially open and yet once one negotiates the way in and to the stage, there is life itself, vibrant, glowing, continuing. A metaphor for our times, perhaps, as well as proof positive of the eternal durability of Mozart's masterpiece. A great evening.

Colin Clarke

■ Opera & Ballet, UK Opera

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