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## New Figaro: fine singers, bad production

By Pablo Bardin

*The first-rate cast and conductor don't make up for poor set design*

Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* ("Le Nozze di Figaro") is quite simply the best operatic comedy ever written, with the possible exception of Verdi's *Falstaff*. Although the opera has been performed frequently in recent years (Buenos Aires Lírica, Juventus Lyrica, Argentino) the Colón last presented it in 2002 with middling results. So it was high time for a revival at our principal opera house. One astonishing fact: our city first heard it only in 1928.

Another curious fact: the current administration decided that it is a "long" opera and so started at 8pm instead of the habitual 8:30. I see no reason for this, even if the generally-cut Basilio aria was included, to my mind a pity, for it is second-rate Mozart in a context of total wondrous quality. Fortunately the Marcellina aria stayed cut. I won't write now about this "folle journée" imagined audaciously by Beaumarchais and converted into a marvellous libretto by Da Ponte, and with Mozart's most inspired music. So let's go immediately to the results of this revival. The good news: there was a first-rate cast and a very respectable conductor. The bad news: we were stuck again, as so many times in recent seasons, with a wrong production. I saw last Sunday's performance.

Ladies first. Maija Kovalevska is a tall beautiful Lettish soprano with a ten-year career; her début here as the Countess was a definite plus. The voice is fresh and beautiful with ample volume and she handles it with refinement. However, her gestures didn't convey the sadness felt by her character.

Russian soprano Julia Novikova (début) has a smaller voice but her singing is true and very musical, and she gave us a sweet Susanna. Serena Malfi, who did "La Cenerentola" at the Colón last year, was a charming and spontaneous Cherubino, sung cleanly and with fine timbre.

There was a lot of expectation about the return of the Uruguayan bass-baritone Erwin Schrott. He made a spectacular local début as a stentoreous Monterone in *Rigoletto* (1997) and then came back as a good Colline in *La Bohème* (1999). Now he is famous as the Mozartian Figaro and Don Giovanni and a mediatic figure as Anna Netrebko's husband. Well, he is certainly impressive: a powerful voice, a flexible talent as an actor and a definite presence. Interesting the way he delivers the recitatives according to their narrative sense, sometimes resorting to a half-sung-half-spoken discourse. We met Mathias Hausmann as a convincing Danilo in Lehár's *The Merry Widow* two years ago. Tall and personable, his firm, solid voice well used, he offered a first-rate portrayal of the Count.

The smaller parts were all well taken. Guadalupe Barrientos was a spot-on Marcellina, vocally and as a character, and Luis Gaeta, who used to be an admirable Count twenty years ago, now took on Bartolo, done as a sly old man with a very humorous touch; a bit weak on the low tones, he was quite firm in the rest of the register. Sergio Spina was an atypical Basilio, generally sung by a light tenor, for he is an incisive character tenor; he transmitted the malevolence of the part and sang accurately the part, comprising his aria. Gabriel Centeno was in the picture as Don Curzio, the notary. Oriana Favaro was a touching Barbarina in her sensitive "arietta" and the Two Maids were nicely sung by Jaqueline Livieri and Cecilia Pastawski. Finally, Emiliano Bulacios was a well-delineated Antonio, the gardener.

One of the few saving graces of last year's colossal fiasco — the Colón Ring — was conductor Roberto Paternostro. There's a long way from Wagner to Mozart but he showed he knows the style and is in firm control of the orchestra and the singers. The speeds ("tempi") were orthodox and logical, and the well-playing orchestra sounded smooth and in tune. The recitatives were played with imagination by César Bustamante. The small choral contribution was nicely done under Miguel Martínez.

And now to the dark side, the production. First strange thing: why two producers (Davide Livermore and Alfonso Antoniozzi)? We make do with just one almost always, even in a group such as *La Fura dels Baus*. Livermore also did the stage design; lighting: Vladi Spigarolo; costumes: Mariana Fracasso; video: D-Wok. All local début.

The general view: 1) again the plague of unit sets. It passably works for the first three acts but fails miserably in the fourth, the Garden, where we are supposed to accept couples in black substituting for trees! 2) A completely enigmatic thing: the overture should be only heard but not here: we see an old woman in an armchair and several men in black carrying suitcases passing by; the woman reappears in the final scene and at one point Barbarina is costumed similarly and looks at her while she seems

to be dying: are we supposed to consider that she is Barbarina grown old and reminiscing the whole "journée"? 3) The enormous acting space precludes any sense of intimacy. 4) The projections are often ridiculous: e.g. the storm when Cherubino jumps out of the window. 5) the Garden scene is unintelligible and the lighting is badly conceived. 6) Voyeurism and closeness are where they shouldn't be: Susanna tells Figaro of the Count's libidinous projects while surrounded by servants. 7) Some costumes are beautiful but mix liberally historical periods. And so on. Unfortunately.