

A Comedy of Reconciliation

JESSE SIMON

It's easy to take *Le Nozze di Figaro* for granted. Not only is it performed so often that one need never go longer than a year without seeing it, but it is also a resilient work, difficult for all but the most determined director to mess up completely. But while even an average production is sure to contain a handful of delightful moments, a great production – and the Staatsoper's new *Figaro* is as close to greatness as one might hope to see in the present day – reminds us just how much humanity, in its most gloriously messy form, Mozart and Da Ponte managed to fit into the tidy package of an *opera buffa*.

It would be possible to attribute the success of the new Staatsoper production to the illuminating musical direction of Gustavo Dudamel – for whom the Staatskapelle played with exquisite poise – or to the uniformly excellent cast who seemed to grasp the inseparable nature of singing and acting. However it was ultimately the assured vision of Jürgen Flimm, working in collaboration with Gudrun Hartmann, that kept the evening moving at a swift comedic pace while simultaneously allowing undercurrents of genuine emotion to emerge at essential moments. This was not a *Figaro* that left one merely satisfied; as the characters bid farewell to the audience during the finale, one could not help but feel energised by the transformation, however temporary, that had occurred as the result of this 'crazy day'.

Mr Flimm and Ms Hartmann managed the difficult task of transposing the story to a completely different time and place – in this case, from eighteenth-century Seville to a beach-side summer house in the 1920s – without straining the credibility of the action, or drawing attention to the ingenuity of the relocation. And while *Figaro* is all too often played as a straight farce, the directors here seemed mostly concerned with creating a gallery of vividly rendered characters whose presence relied more on subtle human flaws than comedic clichés and slapstick; there was, of course, still ample room for physical comedy – centred largely around the Count, who had a tendency to trip over himself and, in one scene, managed to get his head stuck in a beach chair – but much of the comedic force came ridiculous situations being made to seem oddly plausible.

©

Berlin, sábado, 7 de noviembre de 2015. Schiller

Theater. Mozart:

Le Nozze di

Figaro. Jürgen

Flimm and Gudrun

Hartmann, directors. Ildebrando

D'Arcangelo (Count Almaviva), Dorothea

Röschmann (Countess Almaviva), Anna

Prohaska (Susanna), Lauri Vasar (Figaro),

Marianne Crebassa (Cherubino), Katharina

Kammerloher (Marcellina), Otto

Katzmeier (Bartolo), Florian Hoffmann

(Basilio), Peter Maus (Don Curzio), Olaf

Bär (Antonio) and Sónia Grané

(Barbarina). Staatskapelle Berlin. Gustavo

Dudamel, conductor





Momento de la representación de 'Le nozze di Figaro' de Mozart. Dirección musical, Gustavo Dudamel. Dirección escénica, Flimm y Hartmann. Berlín, Staatsoper, noviembre de 2015 © Berlín Staatsoper, 2015

The directors also seemed to delight in the dramatic potential offered by the recitatives which, in this production, were paced as finely as the numbers. Both the early scene in which Susanna makes Figaro aware of the Count's intentions, and the dialogue between the Count and Countess immediately preceding the second act finale were peppered with suspenseful pauses that may have tested the patience of the continuo harpsichordist, but did a marvellous job of heightening the comedic mood. One could almost hear the wheels turning as the Countess debated whether or not to reveal the identity of the figure hiding in her wardrobe.

Of course it would be impossible for any production to be so invested in its characters without a cast of committed performers, and this evening had no obvious weaknesses. Indeed it would be difficult to isolate a single performance that outshone the others, although the Susanna of Anna Prohaska came very close. Ms Prohaska's voice, both agile and substantial, is capable of great purity and charm, but also has a thrilling impulsiveness that can reveal unexpected depths to even Mozart's most straightforward melodies; it was not surprising that she was able to deliver a delicate, moving 'Deh vieni, non tardar' in the fourth act (backed by some extraordinary playing from the woodwinds), nor that she would switch so effortlessly between tender and obstinate in her respective dealings with Figaro and the Count; yet the full measure of her artistry was on display in the third act sextet, in which her repetitions of 'sua madre', each shaded with a new level of realisation, gave a surprising emotional heft to a scene that is often played merely for laughs.

Dorothea Röschmann's excellent Countess was suffused with suffering and nobility, and her third act aria was easily one of the best performances of the evening. She was able to suggest that her maternal affection for Cherubino – given a well-sung and convincingly passionate performance on this evening by Marianne Crebassa – was beginning to fill the vacuum left by the Count's infidelities; and when she forgave the Count at the very end, it was the magnanimity in her voice that made the scene not merely plausible but cathartic.

As the Count, Ildebrando D'Arcangelo achieved a near perfect balance between bumbling and threatening. His attempts at suavity ended invariably in disaster, yet the air of physical incompetence that surrounded his every action was offset by an imposing and humourless voice that stopped him from descending into mere caricature. Indeed it was Mr D'Arcangelo's ability to be simultaneously the funniest and most serious figure on the stage that made him such a compelling character; his confrontations with the Countess in the second act bristled with blind jealousy and his comically misguided attempts to seduce Susanna were underlined by a sense of real danger.

In the midst of such dominating presences, it would have been easy for the titular character



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to be pushed to the sidelines. Yet Lauri Vasar's earnest, intellectual Figaro came remarkably close to the essence of the character as originally outlined by Beaumarchais, a caustic observer of the upper classes who is moved to action only when his own interests are threatened. Although there was nothing especially comedic about Mr Vasar's Figaro – he was very much the straight man at the centre of numerous overlapping schemes – he delivered one of the best readings of 'Non più andrai' in recent memory, as well a thoughtful, resigned 'Aprite un po' quegli occhi' that seemed, refreshingly, addressed more to himself than the audience.

Even the minor roles were well-cast, perhaps most notably the Marcellina of Katharina Kammerloher who was elegant enough to pose a genuine threat to Susanna, and who handled the transition from schemer to mother with ease. The character was greatly enhanced by the welcome inclusion of her fourth act aria, 'Il capro e la capretta' performed on this evening with a pleasing mix of tenderness and worldly wisdom; this delightful aria is often cut on the grounds that it disrupts the mounting action of the final scenes, but in providing a necessary counterweight to the severity of Figaro's warning to husbands, it made the fourth act that much more satisfying.



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The not-so-secret weapon of the evening was undoubtedly Mr Dudamel, whose grandly scaled Mozart sound – both pleasingly old-fashioned and brilliantly detailed – was matched by an ability to articulate the crucial moments of a given scene with no sacrifice of dramatic momentum. In the second act finale especially, Mr Dudamel was able to wind up the tension between the Count and Countess, then capture the mood of prevailing disorientation after Susanna emerges from the wardrobe; moments later he slowed down the action as Figaro attempted to answer the Count, but then set everything racing for the thrilling final septet. Mr Dudamel's direction occasioned spirited playing from the Staatskapelle, resulting in a *Figaro* where the action on stage was accompanied by music of the highest quality.

Shortly after the première, it was announced that the Staatsoper's new *Figaro* would be broadcast on Arte TV; and, given the high quality of the orchestra, the singers and the staging, it would not be wholly surprising if the production eventually made its way onto DVD. Certainly it had the air of a production that might reward repeated viewings; without being slavishly traditional or ambitiously abstract, it managed to capture the essence of the opera's inexhaustible human comedy.