

A Misremembered Past

JESSE SIMON

During a two-week interval of optimism sometime in mid-March of this year, the concert halls and opera houses of Berlin attempted a cautious reopening with strict entry requirements and ample space between occupied seats. The ‘pilot project,’ as it was known, was cancelled about a week before it was due to start, and the Staatsoper’s contribution, a new production of Mozart’s *Le Nozze di Figaro*, was performed to an empty house and streamed live to computer screens across Europe. On the strength of that broadcast, the new *Figaro* seemed thoroughly dismal, not only lacking in energy, but completely bereft of the caustic spark that has kept the opera at the centre of the repertoire for more than two centuries.

For its first run of live performances, the production benefitted from both the buzz of a real audience and a generally superior cast to that of the première. The orchestral playing was stately and majestic, and much of the singing was excellent. Vincent Huguet’s staging, however, remained aggressively bland and perplexingly uninspired, a triumph of sets and costumes over ideas and characters, the sole concept of which did not seem to have evolved beyond “Hey, Look! It’s the Eighties!” It would have been easy to dismiss the whole thing as an exercise in hipster vacuity had it not been for Mr Huguet’s essay included in the programme booklet: it turns out that not only is there a central concept behind the staging, but it’s actually rather interesting. The idea that the three Mozart-Da Ponte collaborations together form an extended critique of sexuality from youth (*Così*) to old age (*Don Giovanni*) is not without promise, and the notion that Guglielmo, Almaviva and Don Giovanni constitute a single protagonist running through the three operas is certainly intriguing.

If only any of those ideas had made it onto the stage. What emerged instead was a work of vapid pop-camp, over-cluttered with Eighties signifiers (Cassettes! Aerobics! Leopard Print!) and weighed down by turgid direction. Although *Figaro* has an unmistakable debt to the devices and situations of farce, it does not necessarily have to be played for laughs for its comedy to be effective. What it does need, however, is a light touch, an ability to pivot characters quickly, gracefully and plausibly from one mood to another. Although the

Huguet, *Le nozze di Figaro*
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Staatsoper Unter den Linden.
Mozart: *Le Nozze di Figaro*. Vincent Huguet, director. Gyula Orendt (Almaviva). Federica Lombardi (Countess). Anna Prohaska (Susanna). Gerald Finley (Figaro). Corinna Scheurle (Cherubino). Katharina Kammerloher (Marcellina). Florian Hoffmann (Basilio). Siegfried Jerusalem (Curzio). Peter Rose (Bartolo). David Ostrek (Antonio). Liubov Medvedeva (Barbarina). Staatskapelle Berlin. Daniel Barenboim, conductor



Gyula Orendt (Graf Almaviva) und Nadine Sierra (Susanna) in 'Le nozze di Figaro'. Music by W. A. Mozart. Daniel Barenboim, conductor. Vincent Huguet, director. Berlin, Staatsoper unter den Linden, September 2021. © 2021 by Matthias Baus.

staging made some laboured attempts at broad comedy, it took itself far too seriously to establish a credible comedic tone; and in the absence of lightness, the intrigues and entanglements of the characters came across as little more than melodrama, albeit without the grand rendering of human emotion that is melodrama's saving grace.

Instead of emotion, the staging offered a series of scenes that unfolded with little connection to one another, and a group of characters who seemed startlingly inconsistent from one appearance to the next. Only the Countess seemed fully formed: a retired pop-star who had married her manager, she seemed tired both of her husband's inattention, and of living in a gaudily decorated house with an entourage of hangers-on.

When she lay on the sofa in her husband's office during the third act and sang 'Dove Sono' it felt like the first time a scene had been driven by a recognisable human emotion all evening. Sadly she seemed to exist in a vacuum.

Although the Count made a show of acting lecherous or frustrated or jealous at various points in the evening, there did not appear to be a through-line connecting these disparate points to a single identifiable character. Figaro fared even worse, wandering in and out of scenes without purpose, never once suggesting the high stakes of his scheming; the battle of wills between servant and master, one of the opera's richest veins of comedic potential, was allowed to amount to nothing. Yet the staging's greatest flaw may have been its inability to develop Susanna into anything other than an object of desire. Susanna is, in many ways, the moral centre of the opera, the one character who – until the final scene – is able to maintain a clear head amidst the surrounding intrigues. Here she was merely unfathomable, lacking a strong camaraderie with the Countess, obvious affection for Figaro, or any definite attitude towards the intentions of the Count. With so little else going on, the action was soon reduced to the budding affair between the Countess and Cherubino, the only part of the story in which the staging seemed to have any interest.



Riccardo Fassi (Figaro) and Nadine Sierra (Susanna) in 'Le nozze di Figaro'. Music by W. A. Mozart. Daniel Barenboim, conductor. Vincent Huguet, director. Berlin, Staatsoper unter den Linden, September 2021. © 2021 by Matthias Baus.

The lack of strongly delineated characters might not have been so bad had the singers been allowed to stand on the stage and deliver their lines without interference, but the production seemed convinced that something needed to be happening on stage at all times. Yet the action imposed on each scene was often distracting. Figaro chopping vegetables while singing 'Se vuol ballare' had a certain logic, but Bartolo binding Marcellina's hands during 'La vendetta', removing his belt and wielding it like a whip seemed deeply off in tone. Was it supposed to be funny? Sexy? Creepy? Was it a reference to Devo? Or was it simply a winking reminder that everyone in the Eighties was really into S&M? Having come up with the image, the staging then refused to stand behind it or follow through on its possibilities; it simply let it drop with a thud in the middle of the stage. What remained was

an awkwardness arising not from the situation, but from actors uncertain of their motivation and an audience equally uncertain of how to react.

If such throw-away moments received too much attention, many of the pivotal scenes were allowed to pass without any consideration at all. The discovery of Figaro's lineage in the third act is, on the surface, an implausible plot twist, but it sets the scene for the ensuing sextet which, with its complex intersection of sudden emotional shifts, can be one of the opera's great joys. In this staging, however, those potential emotions were downplayed to the point of non-existence; one could not say for certain if Figaro, Marcellina or Susanna were happy, perplexed or indifferent about the news.



Lorenzo Di Toro (Cembalist), Stephan Rügamer (Don Basilio), Gyula Orendt (Graf Almaviva), Nadine Sierra (Susanna), Riccardo Fassi (Figaro), David Oštrek (Antonio), Emily D'Angelo (Cherubino), Elsa Dreisig (Gräfin Almaviva) and Staatsoperchor in 'Le nozze di Figaro'. Music by W. A. Mozart. Daniel Barenboim, conductor. Vincent Huguet, director. Berlin, Staatsoper unter den Linden, September 2021. © 2021 by Matthias Baus.

Beneath its laboured scenes and lack of strong characters, one was left with the unsettling suspicion that the entire production was attempting to coast on the novelty of its visuals. Yet even these felt slightly off, never quite accurate enough to evoke real nostalgia. (How do you set an opera in the record industry of the early eighties and not feature so much as a single line of cocaine?) The sets were impressive in a conspicuous way, which is to say they looked as though they had cost a lot to build; there was plenty of gold and expensive furniture. The costumes ranged from satiny to sparkly, and if the Count and Countess always appeared mildly elegant, most of the surrounding characters were attired somewhere between tacky and garish: Figaro, with jeans, t-shirt, and cowboy boots had the air of a present-day Berlin hipster who had not yet mastered the basics of dressing himself, while Susanna – who, in the final two acts, ended up wearing a variation on the 'mullet' wedding dress from Guns 'n' Roses' *November Rain* video – seemed to have been faxed in from the early nineties. Yet despite its lapses in judgment, the sets and costumes seemed by the far the most deeply considered part of the staging. They were certainly the elements that

drew greatest attention to themselves in the course of the evening, perhaps because they were the only parts of the production in which the production team had any confidence.

The intrusive quality of the staging worked not only to the detriment of the action, but the music as well; indeed the staging was so concerned with trying to insert visual action into the various arias and ensembles that the performances were rarely given the necessary space to unfold. This was a shame as the cast was generally quite strong. As the Countess, Federica Lombardi came closest to transcending the limitations of the production: 'Porgi, amor', delivered from the front of the stage while the curtain was still lowered, emerged with exquisite tone and sweetly shimmering high notes, while 'Dove sono' was one of the evening's most beautiful moments. Even in the ensembles, especially the trio section of the second act Finale, Ms Lombardi was often able to establish herself as the grounding force within the scene.

If the production's conception of *Figaro* never amounted to much, Gerald Finley was

nonetheless a source of constant vocal delight: of all the singers he seemed most comfortable with the spacious tempi, using the leisurely pace of ‘Se vuol ballare’ to craft beautifully acerbic lines, and elucidating the full psychological torment of ‘Aprite un po’; he also proved a worthy exponent of ‘Non più andrai’, transforming it into the show-stopper that it occasionally fails to be. Anna Prohaska, an elegant Mozart singer as well as an actress of considerable talent, sang a memorably charming Susanna in the (sadly) now-retired Jürgen Flimm production that opened at the Staatsoper in November 2015, able to summon the full inner life of the character with a few deft strokes. On this evening she seemed wholly abandoned by the production, her instinct for the character seemingly at odds with whatever the director had in mind. Her vocal performance was nonetheless full of gracefully turned lines and subtle dynamic shifts, and her sweetly enraptured ‘Deh vieni’ was a highlight of the second half.

Gyula Orendt, one of the few singers who had also appeared in the première broadcast, was an understated Count, but his refusal to exaggerate often worked to his advantage. In the first part of the second act finale his careful sparring with the Countess gave the scene a necessary shot of dramatic energy, while the reserved quality of his ‘Vedrò mentr’io sospiro’ hinted at greater depths of character than the staging seemed willing to allow. As Cherubino, Corinna Scheurle delivered two charming arias, of which ‘Voi che sapete’ was perhaps the more direct and eloquent. The smaller roles were also well cast with Peter Rose an imposing Bartolo and Katharina Kammerloher an engaging Marcellina; it was a great shame that the production offered no ‘Il capro’ for her to sing.

Although Daniel Barenboim tended to favour broad tempi throughout the evening – often to the benefit of the singers – there was nothing slack in either his direction or in the response from the modestly sized ensemble in the pit. From the familiar opening bars of the overture he exacted great excitement, luxuriating in the detailed string parts, building to vigorous peaks and striking a tone of refinement that would continue throughout the evening. If there were a few moments in the two finales where a more urgent pace might have dispelled some of the stasis on the stage, Mr Barenboim’s patient approach yielded many moments of beauty and insight in the work’s central arias.

As good as the cast and orchestra had been, they occasionally seemed of secondary importance to the shimmering surfaces of the costumes and sets, which seemed calculated to appeal to the ever-elusive ‘young people’ demographic. Yet the reason for *Figaro*’s longevity – apart from the inextinguishable brilliance of Mozart’s vocal writing – is that a well-told reading of Da Ponte’s libretto will work regardless of what the singers happen to be wearing; less attention to period detail and greater attention to the contours of the story would have yielded a vastly more entertaining evening. But if this *Figaro* failed to cohere as a work of comedy or drama, one still wants to give Mr Huguet the benefit of the doubt: his new production of *Così fan tutte* – the first instalment in his proposed trilogy – is due to open in a week, and one can only hope that seeing it will help to illuminate his vision of *Figaro* or, at the very least, explain some of its peculiarities.