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Fun with Figaro

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How better to celebrate the 250th anniversary of Mozart's birth than by staging what Jay Lesenger calls "one of the greatest operas ever written" and penned, by the way, by one of the greatest composers of all time.

Lesenger will direct "The Marriage of Figaro" in its first appearance at the Chautauqua Opera in the 12 years he's been at the helm as artistic director. He first discovered the work of the renowned Austrian composer when Lesenger was 7 or 8.

"My second-grade music teacher put on a recording of "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik," and I fell in love with it" he said. "My parents bought me the record, and I played it over and over again."

Cut to the present, and Lesenger is still enjoying Mozart, this time in comic operatic form based on a very clever 1784 play by Beaumarchais titled "La Folle Journee."

Set in Seville, Spain, in the castle of the philandering Count Almaviva, "Figaro" centers on the romantic entanglements that occupy most of the major characters, but also benefits from the humorous escapes of the minor ones, which include an amorous teenager, a scheming old maid, a drunken gardener, and a silly young girl.

"We're all having so much fun doing, 'Figaro,' which has everything in it you could want – high and low comedy, farce, heartbreaking arias, and Mozart's psychological penetration and genius for characterization in music," said Lesenger.

While he doesn't find the work difficult to direct, he does find it time-consuming, chiefly because there is so much *recitative* or spoken dialogue in the opera.

"It's a lot like a play, in that there's so much more information compressed into a shorter period of time, unlike sung dialogue, which takes a good deal more time to express an idea."

One advantage the current production has is that the major characters have previously sung their roles elsewhere. Even so, Lesenger reports their finding new subtleties, nuanced plot elements, and variations of emotional contact in rehearsal.

For its production, which opens Friday, Chautauqua Opera is using an English translation of the Lorenzo da Ponte libretto by opera critic Andrew Porter.

"Porter really knows opera inside out, and his version doesn't lose anything in translation," said Lesenger. "There are others out there, but they try to be overly poetic, which requires them to leave out vital information."

The cast includes Derrick Parker starring as Figaro, Jessica Rivera as Susanna, Sarah Heltzel as Cherubino, Kelley Nassief as Countess Almaviva, Michael Chioldi as the Count, Susan Nicely as Marcellina, and David Ward as Doctor Bartolo. On the podium, Joseph Colaneri, a member of the conducting roster of the Metropolitan Opera, chorus master with New City Opera, and artistic director of the Opera Program at the Mannes College The New School of Music, will lead the orchestra and vocalists.