

The Post Journal
Jamestown, NY
Friday, July 9, 2006

Chautauqua Opera Season Opens With 'The Marriage of Figaro'

By ROBERT W. PLYLER

CHAUTAUQUA – Chautauqua Opera begins the 2006 season with a very fine production of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*.

The production blends first rate acting with remarkable singing to produce a performance to take your breath away.

The opera is based on the plays of Beaumarchais, which are often included among the direct causes of the French Revolution, because they show clever servants repeatedly outwitting and defeating their noble masters.

In this case, Figaro, the former barber of Seville, Spain, has now become the valet of the powerful Count Almaviva. At curtain's rise, Figaro is preparing for his marriage to Susanna, the Countess's maid. Soon we learn that the Count has developed an interest in having Susanna himself.

The plot thickens when the middle aged Marcellina produces a contract, in which Figaro has borrowed money from her, and sworn that if he cannot repay it, he will marry her. Meanwhile, the castle contains a randy young man named Cherubino, who thinks he's in love with the Countess. And Susanna. And all the other women in the vicinity.

Derrick Parker brought a big, vibrant voice to the title role, together with wonderfully mobile features which projected every comic double meaning in the libretto. Speaking of libretti, this translation, by Andrew Porter, was the best I've heard.

Jessica Rivera was a lively Susanna, full of energy and able to sing with strength and color while running across the stage, lying on her back or in any posture she was required to assume.

Michael Chioldi was in wonderful, full voice as the lecherous Count, and had the good looks to make it easy to believe he was used to having whichever women he chose.

Kelley Nassief's Countess served as a rich, dark twin to Ms. Rivera's bright soprano, and her "Dove Sono" could have touched the heart of Don Giovanni's stone statue.

A quick salute to Sarah Heltzel, whose bluff stamping as Cherubino was teamed with a lovely and very agile singing voice.

Director Jay Lesenger utterly rejected the traditional "stand and sing" staging, filling the production with energetic and very funny business.

Conductor Joseph Colaneri and the Chautauqua Opera Orchestra maintained thrilling control, giving us exquisite Mozartean phrases throughout, and never overwhelming the singers.

The sets by Erhard Rom, lighting by Michael Baumgarten and costumes by Helen E. Rodgers were all first rate.

The Marriage of Figaro was reviewed in dress rehearsal at the company's request. It will be performed at 7 p.m. Monday in Norton Hall on the grounds of the Chautauqua Institution.