



Plácido Domingo  
General Director

Kent Nagano  
Music Director

*The Marriage of*  
*Figaro*  
MOZART (*Le Nozze di Figaro*)

# REVIEWS

May 22, 26, 29m, June 2, 5, 11, 13m, 16, 19, 2004

Los Angeles Times

# CALENDAR

Monday, May 24, 2004

## OPERA REVIEW

# 'Figaro' passes chemistry test

Leads Erwin Schrott and Isabel Bayrakdarian more than live up to the hype at L.A. Opera.

By MARK SWED  
Times Staff Writer

Under the management of Plácido Domingo, Los Angeles Opera has had enormous fluctuations in quality. Sometimes the downswings are predictable — as when last-minute changes of repertory force Band-Aid opera. But the company can fool you. Its new production of Mozart's "Marriage of Figaro" looked as if it might turn out to be another product of L.A. Opera chaos. Maybe, in fact, it is. But much of it is wonderful.

When Domingo took over L.A. Opera, he announced that he planned to create a new cycle of the three operas Mozart wrote with the librettist Lorenzo da Ponte ("Figaro," "Don Giovanni" and "Cosi fan tutte") over three years with the same stage director and with music director Kent Nagano conducting. One thing

[See 'Figaro,' Page E4]



LAWRENCE K. HO Los Angeles Times  
**THE STARS:** Schrott, who played Don Giovanni, returns to the L.A. stage as Figaro. Bayrakdarian grabs her share of the limelight.



LAWRENCE K. HO *Los Angeles Times*

**TWOSOME:** Erwin Schrott portrays Figaro; as his bride, Isabel Bayrakdarian is pivotal in the opera.

## Opera's future feels secure

['Figaro,' from Page E1] after another fell through. No director could be found in time (Domingo had suggested Achim Freyer); Nagano's schedule couldn't be pinned down and he took himself out of the project. Last year, the company settled on a flashy production of "Don Giovanni," with its selling point a prancing hunk of a young baritone from Uruguay whom few local opera-goers had heard of.

That heartthrob baritone, Erwin Schrott, was quickly signed to return as Figaro on Saturday night at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. But just as with the "Don Giovanni" last season, the "Figaro" team didn't come together until a few months before the production, when the Briton Ian Judge was finally announced as director. He is a reliable pro who has worked with the company in the past, but still there was a hint of desperation.

Also, somewhere along the line, the one relatively well-known singer in the cast, French soprano Véronique Gens, dropped out. About the best the company could do was promote the production on the sexiness of its Figaro and on another singer, Isabel Bayrakdarian, who is beginning to get attention.

As it turns out, Schrott and Bayrakdarian live up to all the hype and then some. Portraying the scheming servants in a Spanish count's household, these two young singers are a dream Figaro and Susanna. They are both exceptional vocalists who simply take over the stage. Bayrakdarian gets special credit. It is no easy matter to steal attention away from Schrott once he starts cavorting. But Susanna is the wiler of the two in the opera, and this Armenian soprano from Canada gives the impression that she was born into the role.

What of Schrott's cavorting? Last year, I felt he was a promising singer who was fun to watch but a superficial Don Giovanni.

He wasn't disturbingly over the top, but it wouldn't have taken much more to get him there. One worried where he might be headed, especially given the way women swooned over him.

Intermission chatter Saturday confirmed that women — and men — are swooning all the more this year. Schrott's swaggering Figaro is the life of the party, and nothing can stop him from having a good time. At one point Saturday, a light gel burst and fell on the stage. Schrott merrily turned the gel into part of his act. A showman to the core, he added extravagant vocal embellishments to his Act I aria "Se vuol ballare" that might have seemed like period-practice pretense, but he pulled it off.

Figaro is a role that thrives on a Schrottian shot of testosterone, and though the character grows in the end, he grows only slightly. Bayrakdarian's Susanna, his bride, is the opera's pivot. Vivacious on the surface, she becomes a spiritual guide, keeping Figaro in line while also directing Count Almaviva's attentions away from her and back toward his wife. Without darkening her naturally cheerful, clear voice and high spirits, Bayrakdarian made a just about ideal Susanna. And the chemistry between her and Schrott proved something we don't find often enough on the opera stage. With young singers like these, opera's future feels secure.

Another find is Sandra Picques Eddy, a mezzo-soprano with few starring roles to her credit. She proved an extraordinarily boyish Cherubino, fine with the high jinks and then able to stop a listener cold with her coffee-with-cream voice. With Darina Takova as an unusually playful Countess, there was opportunity for a little more exploration of the relationship between the young scamp in the court and this older woman than most productions would dare.

But then David Pittsinger's Count wasn't particularly forceful, and perhaps she needed some amusement.

Judge's production updates this Enlightenment drama to what looks like Seville in the '50s or early '60s, with the Count as one of Franco's Fascists. But not much is made of that, and Tim Goodchild's handsome sets cleverly allude to the 18th century. Conductor Stefan Anton Reck added to this effect by leading an essentially modern interpretation that took its cues, especially in tempo, from the early music movement.

Judge has brought nothing particularly new or deep to this subversive drama. He does not play up the opera's political or social implications. Nor does he achieve the catharsis that great productions can. But he keeps the stage alive and the plot relatively clear. It was a good idea to allow the main characters to retain their dignity and use the minor ones — Anna Steiger's Marcellina, Michael Gallup's Doctor Bartolo, Greg Fedderly's Don Basilio, Jessica Rivera's Barbarino, Gregorio González's Antonio, Jon Kolbet's stuttering Don Curzio — for goofy slapstick.

And to Judge's credit, he recognized what he had in Schrott and Bayrakdarian. When two singers can make your heart leap and yet not steal the show, that says a lot for everyone involved.

### 'The Marriage of Figaro'

Where: Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles

When: Wednesday and June 2, 5, 11, 16 and 19, 7:30 p.m.; Saturday and June 13, 2 p.m.

Price: \$25 to \$170

Contact: (213) 365-3500

## OPERA REVIEW



Erwin Schrott is Figaro and Isabel Bayrakdarian is Susanna in Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro," at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion.

### The Marriage of Figaro

(Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Los Angeles Music Center, 3,098 seats, top ticket \$170)

The Los Angeles Opera presents W.A. Mozart's four-act opera; text by Lorenzo da Ponte based on the play by Beaumarchais. Conductor, Stefan Anton Reck, with the Los Angeles Opera Orchestra and Chorus; director, Ian Judge; sets by Tim Goodchild; costumes by Deirdre Clancy; lighting by Alan Burrett. Opened and reviewed, May 22; runs through June 19. Running time: 3 HOURS, 10 MIN.

Figaro ..... Erwin Schrott  
Susanna ..... Isabel Bayrakdarian  
Countess ..... Darina Takova  
Count ..... David Pittsinger  
Cherubino ..... Sandra Piques Eddy

With: Anna Steiger, Michael Gallup, Greg Federly, Jessica Rivera, Gregorio Gonzalez, Jon Kolbet, Leslie Dennis, Michelle Fournier, Joohee Choi.

By ALAN RICH

No opera company can long survive without Mozart's near-perfect "Marriage of Figaro" in its repertory; with the L.A. Opera having wrung full use out of its aging Peter Hall production, it was probably time to consider a change. Whether the new version, unveiled before a full and moderately happy house on Saturday night, constituted a change for the better depended on whether one favored the ears (mostly ecstatic) or the eyes (considerably less so).

Above all, the new "Figaro" is a triumphant showcase for winners of recent runs of Plácido Domingo's prestigious "Operalia" competitions: Canadian-Armenian biomedical scientist-turned-soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian and Uruguayan baritone Erwin Schrott,

who made of the eventual Mr. and Mrs. Figaro a capering, lyric delight, beautifully matched in phrasing, eloquent on their own in vocal suavity.

Not far behind was the lithe, immensely appealing Cherubino, a paradigm of adolescent testosterone created by Boston-born mezzo Sandra Piques Eddy. Darina Takova and David Pittsinger were the battling Count and Countess Almaviva; smaller roles were handily dispatched by longtime L.A. Opera stalwarts Michael Gallup and Greg Federly. In a company debut, conductor Stefan Anton Reck led a fleet, tidy performance, nicely balanced in the miraculous ensembles that are the heart of this one-of-a-kind opera.

Would that a similar tidiness had extended to visual matters. Director Ian Judge and his design crew have somehow devised a centuries-spanning "Figaro" in which the Countess reclines on period furniture while chatting on a modern telephone, and the lovers in the moonlit garden seek each other with latter-day flashlights across an empty parking lot. In one particularly ugly scene the green-uniformed Count becomes a floating head against a green backdrop.

Small but crucial details — doors presumably locked but that yield to a touch — are simply ignored or mismanaged. Somehow the one accident on opening night — a gel filter that fell from above and which baritone Schrott retrieved and disposed of in mid-aria without missing a beat — became one of the evening's events most worth the watching.

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L O S A N G E L E S N E W Y O R K

# Chandler's 'Figaro' mostly hits the mark

By Jim Farber  
DAILY BREEZE

The wonderful paradox of opera is that everything old can be new again.

Los Angeles Opera's production of Mozart's "Le Nozze di Figaro" (The Marriage of Figaro), which opened Saturday at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, is a perfect example. It is a rendition that will captivate those who are new to the work, and have the same effect on those who know the work note for note.

It's a production that works well on almost every level, and is performed by cast members who look their parts to a tee.

The conducting by Stefan Anton Reck celebrates the flowing nuances, contrasts and details of Mozart's effervescent score.

The look of the production is bold and colorful as designed by Tim Goodchild (sets) and Deidre Clancy (costumes) — from blaring reds to indigo midnight blues. But it's also a concept that plays fast and loose with elements of time and place. It's a stylistic fusion that allows 18th-century Seville and 1950s' "La Dolce Vita" Italy to exist side by side. It may confuse some viewers. I felt it worked well and added a playful touch.

The deeper challenge of Mozart's "Figaro" is to establish exactly the right balance between the opera's comic antics and emotional resonance. That task fell to director Ian Judge (of the Royal Shakespeare Company). And his solution was pure Shakespeare. He simply fol-

## Opera Review

"Le Nozze di Figaro" (The Marriage of Figaro) plays at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, June 2, 5, 11, 16 and 19, 2 p.m. May 29 and June 13, Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles. Tickets: \$25-\$160.

Information: 213-365-3500 or  
www.losangelesopera.com.

lows Hamlet's advice: "Suit the action to the word."

You are not likely to see a "Figaro" that has more dramatic credibility and sexy fun between Figaro (Erwin Schrott), Susanna (Isabel Bayrakdarian), Cherubino (Sandra Piques Eddy) and the Countess (Darina Takova) than you will here. It's a bouquet of amorous delights. At the same time you will feel the necessary degree of pathos for the Countess who has lost the love of her husband; that precocious adolescent, Cherubino, who is in love with love; and the arrogant Count (David Pittsinger) who is ultimately forced to admit the error of his ways.

Schrott and Bayrakdarian stand out as potential superstars; they

are a match made in Mozartian heaven.

He's everything you could wish for in a Figaro: a sexy hunk with a resounding baritone voice, and a knack for comic repartee. Think Antonio Banderas in "The Mask of Zorro." Now add the minxy spunk, smoldering sexuality, and deliciously toned soprano of Bayrakdarian as Susanna. Think Catherine Zeta Jones. It's too darn hot!

The second couple is strong, but not as strong, because Takova's voice on opening night was not the most supple or velvety instrument. Her two starry arias, "Porgi amor" and "Dove sono," each contained moments of clenched phrasing and thinness of tone. She was more effective in the scenes where her voice blended with the ensemble.

Pittsinger's Count, however, projected just the right combination of imperious superiority, frustrated annoyance, amorous lust and bass-baritone thunder. In contrast, Eddy's Cherubino was a bundle of pent-up hormones. Vocally, she still has some developing to do.

And then it all ends with fireworks! What more could you ask for?

WEDNESDAY  
May 26, 2004

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# L.A. Opera puts fun, finesse into 'Figaro'

Mozart's masterpiece is served well in a new production, allowing its comedy to shine.

BY TIMOTHY MANGAN  
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro" is still funny. Not in some antiquated way in which the jokes need footnotes to explain them. But in an immediate, up-to-the-minute, laugh-out-loud way.

On opening night of Los Angeles Opera's handsome and intelligent new production of the masterpiece, the audience laughed spontaneously and easily. It came as something of a surprise to this listener, who tends to read essays and analyzes extolling the deep human understanding that Mozart displays in this work and the sophistication, subtlety and intricacy of the score. It leads him to treat "Figaro" a little too reverently, perhaps, just as the rest of humanity is guffawing around him.

Mozart deserves credit of course. Beaumarchais' play and Da Ponte's libretto contain the situations and gags, but it is Mozart delivering them, and his timing, one must admit, is pretty good. In Act 2, when the Count asks forgiveness for doubling the Countess's word and virtue, Mozart has her and Susanna cackle a reply in thirds, a mean stream of righteousness - up and down, this way and that - that is completely unearned. They *have* been duping the Count, after all, and



ROBERT MILLARD

formances beginning tonight, is directed by Ian Judge, the Royal Shakespearean who oversaw Opera Pacific's clever "Tales of Hoffmann" a few seasons back. Here, the scene is updated to what is initially a rather vague period, but soon enough seems to be the 20th century at some point (the Countess has a telephone) and finally sinks in as somewhere like a midcentury, upper-crusty, British aristocratic kind of place. You half expect Jeeves to walk in with a martini on a platter and observe that the weather, sir, is exceptionally clement for trying.

Judge has a mildly earthy take on the proceedings - his characters have a strong urge to join pelvises it seems - but more than that he is detail-oriented. The singers act this "Figaro" as if it were a good play, which runs for eight more per-

**PLAYING FOR LAUGHS:**

Featured in the new L.A. production of Mozart's comic masterpiece "The Marriage of Figaro" are Erwin Schrott as Figaro and Isabel Bayrakdarian as Susanna.

**'The Marriage of Figaro'**

- **Who:** Los Angeles Opera
- **When:** May 22
- **Where:** Dorothy Chandler Pavilion
- **Next:** 7:30 tonight, June 2, 5, 11, 16, 19; 2 p.m. May 29 and June 13
- **How much:** \$25-\$170
- **Call:** (714) 740-7878

duced a radiant and randy Cherubino, breathlessly in love with anything in skirts. David Pittsinger proved a smoothly singing Count, perhaps a little too understated to be sufficiently villainish.

Delight was to be had in the smaller roles, too, with Anna Steiger a wonderfully bawdy Marcellina, Michael Gallup a properly pompous Bartolo and Greg Fedderly a supremely greasy Basilio (we didn't even recognize him).

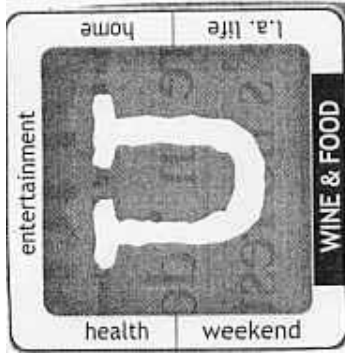
Choreographer Sergio Trujillo supplied sparkling dances during the wedding ceremonies, including a hand-clapping, foot-stomping fandango (this is Seville) and, for once, a bona fide ensemble march. In the pit, Reck, the music director of Palermo's Teatro Massimo, led with exuberant motions and wild hair. If speed initially seemed to be his main interest, it soon became evident that he had a handle on the inner workings of the score, that he enjoyed interacting with his singers and that effervescence was also within his grasp. It was a good night for Mozart.

certain swagger to the role and spits his words out. Schrott was so comfortable, in fact, that when a light filter fell conspicuously on stage, he simply walked over and picked it up without missing a beat.

Isabel Bayrakdarian is his engagingly sassy Susanna, peppy and pinpointed of voice, if sometimes monochromatic. Her simple rendition of "Deh vieni non tardar" was especially beautiful. Darina Takova made an elegant, jewel-toned Countess, though her two big arias didn't sound quite as easy as they should. Judge's direction worked against her character, though - lolling on the bed with champagne in hand and making out with Cherubino turned her into something less than sympathetic.

Sandra Piques Eddy produced and easy of voice. He brings a

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STAGE REVIEW

# Substance beats style in 'Figaro'

**MARRIAGE OF FIGARO** ★★1/2  
 Where: Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles.  
 When: 7:30 tonight, June 2, 5, 11, 16 and 19; 2 p.m. Saturday and June 13.  
 Tickets: \$25 to \$170. (213) 365-3500 or www.losangeles.opera.com.

In a nutshell: An overstylized new production hinders Mozart's opera, but beguiling singing carries the day.

**By Rob Lowman**  
 Entertainment Editor

**T**HE LIST OF timeless artworks may not be growing these days, but no matter. We already have enough to engage us. Or so listening to Mozart's "Marriage of Figaro" suggested on Saturday night.

The occasion was opening night of a new Los Angeles Opera production of the work. Directed by Ian Judge and designed by Tim Goodchild, it takes the place of Peter Hall's version, which was both well-liked and straightforward, albeit a bit spontaneous after several revivals. But the exchange has not worked in our favor.

No, playwright Beaumarchais' savvy barber-cum-valet and his bride-to-be don't now work for modern American plutocrats (see Peter Sellars), nor do they reside in a pile reminiscent of Poe's House of Usher (see Jonathan Miller).

There is, though, something decidedly Eurotrashy about Goodchild's outsized palace rooms, with their super-rich colors and anachronistic modern-day accou-

terments, like telephones and glossy magazines. And one can't ignore Deirdre Clancy's bizarrely matched costumes, each seemingly plucked from a different theatrical road company. Why, you may ask, are the count's soldiers dressed like chauffeurs, circa 1920?

More serious are the lapses Judge makes regarding 18th-century manners. Seeing Figaro kiss the hand of his master's wife, to say nothing of watching the page Cherubino smooch with her, subverts what Mozart and his librettist Lorenzo da Ponte intended. Without class boundaries, Figaro and his cohorts risk nothing — and sacrifice is central to this opera.

Still, one goes to "Figaro," primarily for the music, not the visuals, or even always the morals. And musically this production is strong. Though no one in the cast is famous, several singers no doubt will be. Topping the list is Figaro himself as personified by Uruguayan bass-baritone Erwin Schrott.

Schrott won great acclaim here last season as a sexily resonant Don Giovanni. And it's no surprise that the company signed him to this role. To be convincing, Figaro must be clever and charming. It's no bad thing if he's a lady-killer, too. And Schrott certainly is that. He swaggers across the stage with enviable self-confidence. How nice that he has a voice to match — deep and robust, but with a captivating, bright edge.

This vigorous Figaro is paired with a Susanna of commensurate gifts, soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian, a Canadian born to Armenian parents in Beirut. Though making her L.A. Opera debut with this



Bass-baritone Erwin Schrott and soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian bring plenty of sizzle, along with great voices, to L.A. Opera's "Marriage of Figaro."

Susanna's noble counterpart, the Countess, is sung by Bulgarian soprano Darina Takova. If Bayrakdarian sounds like topaz, then Takova's voice is amber. In the Countess' two great arias — "Porgi amor," about love lost, and "Dove sono," about its possible reclamation — Takova sang ardently, though she got more expressive as the opera progressed. American bass David Pittsinger's Count Almaviva, no slouch himself in the testosterone department, rounds out the central quartet. His gripping account

of the great vengeance aria "Vedro mentr' io sospiro" seethed with wounded pride, and he made a convincing foil for Figaro at every turn.

With two beloved arias, the trouser role of Cherubino has always been plum for mezzo-sopranos, and Boston native Sandra Piques Eddy assumes it enthusiastically, singing well and offering a particularly convincing portrait of a young man on hormonal red alert. No less fine were Anna Steiger as a robustly scheming Marcellina and company regulars Michael Gallup, as blustering but somehow amiable Dr. Bartolo, and Greg Federly, as an unctuous, stuttering Don Basilio.

In the pit, Stefan Anton Reck, in his company debut, made a fine first impression, leading Mozart's effervescent score with ample enthusiasm and enough sensitivity to avoid overpowering the singers, which his broad gestures certainly suggested he might do.



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**MIÉRCOLES** 26 de mayo de 2004

Los Angeles, California

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La Opera transporta con éxito 'La nozze di Figaro' a los inocentes años 50

**Silvina Sperling**  
Especial para Espectáculos

Una oleada de asombro y alegre intriga se apoderó de la platea del Dorothy Chandler Pavilion el sábado, cuando se abrió el telón en el estreno de *Le nozze di Figaro* (Las Bodas de Figaro), a cargo de la Opera de Los Angeles. La imagen de una inmensa pared roja a medio pintar, con un Figaro (Erwin Schrott) vestido de camisetita blanca y pantalón con tirantes, rodillo de pintor en mano, no es la imagen más frecuente que los *habitúes* a la ópera tienen de la escena inicial.

Y cuando Schrott se da vuelta y revela su camisetita manchada de pintura roja, y continúa cantando mientras se sube a la escalera que utiliza para preparar la habitación nupcial, en la mañana de su casamiento con Susanna (Isabel Bayrakdarian, ataviada a su vez con un vestido de amplísima falda años 50), las cartas están echadas. No será esta una versión tradicional de *Le nozze di Figaro*, sino una adaptación moderna de la obra con la que el compositor Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart y el libretista Lorenzo Da Ponte lograran burlar la censura oficial, hace 218 años.

La obra de teatro en la que Mozart y Da Ponte besaran su histórica ópera, *La folle Journée, ou Le mariage de Figaro*, escrita por Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, había sido prohibida por Luis XVI por "profundamente inhumoral". Además del derroche

# BODAS DE ASOMBRO E INTRIGA



CHRIS MARTINEZ/La Opinión  
El uruguayo Erwin Schrott es un apuesto Figaro para la moderna Susanna de Isabel Bayrakdarian.

## EN DETALLE

**Qué:** 'Le nozze di Figaro'  
**Cuándo:** esta noche y el 26 de mayo, 2, 5, 11, 16 y 19 de junio, 7:30 p.m. Mañanas 29 de mayo y 13 de junio, 2:00 p.m.  
**Dónde:** Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, 135 North Grand Street, Los Angeles.  
**Cómo:** boletos de 25 a 170 dólares. Información: (213) 365-3500 o [www.losangelesopera.com](http://www.losangelesopera.com)

tan de aprovecharse de ellos permanentemente, léase, los nobles. El director de la puesta que está presentando en estos días la Opera de Los Angeles, Ian Judge, quien se iniciara en la Compañía Real Shakespeare en 1975 y pasara desde entonces por importantes casas de ópera (Compañía de Teatro de Sydney, el Kirov, la Opera de la Ciudad de New York y el Teatro del Chatelet), decidió traer esta historia con la estética de los años 50, guiando a su equipo de escenografía (Tim Goodchild) y vestuario (Deirdre Calney) para emparentar su versión escénica

LA OPERA pág. 3D

de seducción y cortejo, cruce de parejas y confusiones de personalidad que el argumento propone, la clave del enojo del rey para tomar tanta medida fue la pues- muy inteligentes y quienes, con

ta en primer plano del amor entre sirvientes y el tratamiento de los mismos como protagonistas, como seres humanos con matices, son capaces de reconocer errores propios y de ayudar a quienes tra-

más integrada que la nobleza (representada por los personajes del Conde y la Condesa Almariva) son capaces de reconocer errores propios y de ayudar a quienes tra-

# Opera

viene de pág. 1D

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con las películas estadounidenses de aquella década. Según Judge, esa época fue el último período de inocencia de la civilización occidental.

Baste mencionar el hecho de que la Condesa (Darina Takova) aparece al comienzo del segundo acto recostada en una mullida cama, vestida con una bata de seda que cubre su escotado camisón y utilizando un teléfono blanco, ícono del cine hollywoodense de la época de oro.

El extrañamiento que provoca la transposición de tiempo y espacio no hace más que atraer la mirada (y el oído) del público, a la vez que promueve la identificación con los personajes. Un gran aporte en pos de dicha identificación es la capacidad actuarial de todos los intérpretes. Figaro, a quien el aspecto de galán seductor y la picardía del uruguayo Erwin Schrott aportan una desenvoltura total, es aquí capaz de defender su territorio (léase, su prometida) con uñas, dientes y mañas, así como de sufrir cuando se cree engañado por su amor. La soltura de Schrott es tal, que es capaz de convertir un mundano accidente de escenario (la caída de un accesorio de luz desde lo alto de la parrilla del teatro) en un servicio más que el sirviente presta a su dama. Erwin simplemente recogió el filtro de color ante la mirada de su prometida y la Condesa (y el público todo), siguió cantando alegremente y se lo llevó fuera de escena al hacer su correspondiente mutis por el foro.

Susanna se convierte en las manos (y garganta) de la armenia-canadiense Isabel Bayrakdarian en una bella e inteligente mujer, que, no por elaborar complicadas tramas de enredos deja de sucumbir a las armas de seducción de personajes que se le cruzan, como el joven Cherubino. Así como la ambientación de la obra en los 50 enfatiza su característica de comedia de enredos, también lo hace la actuación de Bayrakdarian, quien recuerda por momentos a Julie Andrews en *The Sound of Music* o a Lucille Ball, con sus grandes ojos y sus guiños pícaros.

La mezzosoprano Sandra Piques Eddy, dueña de una voz de hermosa coloratura, interpreta a Cherubino con gran agilidad y desfachatez, elementos necesarios para hacer creíble a este picaflor que se mete en todos lados, intenta liar con todas las damas del elenco, se viste de mujer para engañar al Conde y termina perdonado y a salvo de ser enviado a la guerra.

El punto "subversivo" de la obra es muy bien contrapesado por David Pittsinger quien, en la piel del Conde, sufre los embates de una sirvienta que no quiere dejarse avasallar por el patrón, de una esposa que le reclama no dedicarse lo suficiente a sus deberes maritales y

de toda la plebe que se une para, con una apariencia de fiesta cortesana, recordarle que el noble no sería nada sin sus vasallos. Estrenada en 1786, pocos años antes de la Revolución Francesa, *Las bodas de Figaro* logró sortear el presentimiento del rey de que el argumento era "la revolución en acción", por un camino de cornisa que la música suele atravesar con mayor suerte que el teatro o la literatura.

Pittsinger enfatiza en su Conde la posibilidad de dudar de su poder, desnudando ante el público tanto las bajezas como las ilusiones de su personaje. Cuando el Conde anuncia que intentará ejercer el derecho

de iniciar sexualmente a las doncellas de su feudo la noche de la boda de Figaro y Susanna, desata un vendaval de revanchas que, como en una serie de cajas chinas, se irán renovando en distinta forma y, cada vez que uno piense que la armonía ha llegado para quedarse, revelarán una nueva arista de la misma.

En la escena final (en un misterioso jardín bajo un estrellado cielo, acierto del escenógrafo y de Alan Burrett), de la boda de dos se pasa a la boda de cuatro: los maduros Marcellina y el Dr. Bartolo quienes, interpretados por la hilarante Anna Steiger y el elegante Michael Gallup, se han transformado de de-

mandantes de Figaro en padres recuperados. Por el camino se suma la pareja de adolescentes de Cherubino y Barbarina (Jessica Rivera) y, finalmente, la reconciliación de los condes quienes, gracias al engaño urdido por Susanna y la condesa, logran, paradójicamente, superar los malos entendidos entre ellos.

Finalmente, una confabulación urdida por la plebe logra resolver un conflicto mayor entre miembros de la aristocracia y enseñarle al poderoso de turno a gobernar mejor. Esta ópera es un clásico que no pierde vigencia, ni aún dos siglos más tarde de creado.

## A LOT OF NIGHT MUSIC

BY ALAN RICH

PHOTO BY ALBERT AYHAM



### IBERIAN AIRS

JORDI SAVALL: A DISSOLVE BETWEEN THE AUDIBLE AND THE VISUAL

**SPAIN'S MUSIC** is the art of the soloist, and Jordi Savall's old instruments sing it well. He brought some of this music to the Getty Center two weekends ago with his ensemble, Hespèrion XXI, and it was a fine occasion. The Getty's Harold M. Williams Auditorium is a utilitarian sort of room that doesn't inspire artistic thoughts by itself, but in another part of the museum there was an exhibition of Spanish drawings and prints from about the same era as the music, from the 1500s to the time of Goya. This, too, was mostly single-line work, elegant designs surrounded by a lot of space; if you kept the artwork in mind while listening to the music, it all came together.

The ensemble, which hails from Barcelona, has changed personnel over the years under its leaders — Savall, who draws magic from his viola da gamba, and his wife, Montserrat Figueras, whose deep, plangent contralto is the exact equivalent of her husband's instrument, a sound that makes strong men weak. Their kids Arianna and Ferran were along this time to make this a family affair; they sing and play many instruments. The percussionist Pedro Estevan may be a family "outsider," except that his playing — even on things as simple as a couple of sticks — becomes a blood relative of

everybody else's work. Every time I see the group perform, there's a kind of dissolve between the audible and the visual. That happened this time, too, even within the bare walls of the room at the Getty.

The program was an interesting grab bag. Some of the most significant early Spanish music comes from the outer edges: the Sephardic songs the Jewish exiles then carried to other countries, and the Catalán songs in their fierce, defiant, separatist language. Much of the music the group performed exists merely as outlines calling for improvisations. All of this the Hespèrion people handled wonderfully well, and they threw in some contemporary improv that didn't at all break the style. Everything they perform — at this concert and on their own Alia Vox record label, which Harmonia Mundi distributes — has this marvelous sense of sounding very old and brand-new simultaneously. Daughter Arianna found notes of her own devising to sing a love poem redolent with ancient symbolism. Son Ferran, the latest addition to the group, sang a high-flying improv in an appealing, reedy tenor. But the sound memory that I summon up, a week later, embodies the loving obsessions of the instrumental partners repeating a simple chaconne bass by

Tarquinio Merula while the voice of Montserrat Figueras floated like a royal purple robe above it all in a continuous melodic exaltation. During such moments you ask yourself whether music can get any better, and the answer has to be: No.

**BOTH L.A. OPERA'S FINAL** seasonal offerings are set in a storybook, operatic Spain, and *Figaro's* marriage ceremony actually includes a Mozartian fandango, if a rather stately one. The new *Marriage of Figaro*, which opened last weekend, after four times around for the respectable Sir Peter Hall version; it is splendidly sung, tidily conducted by Stefan Anton Reck in his local debut, but burdened with visuals that range from inexplicable to hideous.

In the former category is a design sense — both in Tim Goodchild's generally dismal sets and in the strangely unfocused costumes of Deirdre Clancy — that seems to lie across several centuries at once. During "Porgi amor," her haunting aria of loneliness, Countess Almaviva is obliged to recline in her Louis XV bedroom swilling wine from a new-looking bottle and chatting into a white bedside telephone (to whom? Susanna? A previous scene had shown an old-fashioned annunciator system in working order). The disguised lovers in the final scene prowl the palace gardens in 18th-century ball gowns and military costumes while equipped with modern-day flashlights. The business of keys, crucial to the action in the second act, is carelessly managed; a door ostensibly locked one moment yields to the touch the next.

This I find intrusive and, if you'll pardon the expression, borderline insane. It goes against what is otherwise a sublime musical performance, most of all by the Susanna and Figaro of Isabel Bayrakdarian and Erwin Schrott, both recent winners of Plácido Domingo's "Operalia" competitions and both singing actors of taste, intelligence and a marvelous command of the Mozartian line. For Ms. Bayrakdarian's spinning of the radiant, silver, stardust-encrusted thread of her "Deh vieni"

aria in the last act, with disarming stage presence to complement, no appropriate critical terms are yet known to me. As the battling Almavivas, Darina Takova and David Pittsinger were considerably above okay, while a lithe mezzo named Sandra Piques Eddy, also new to the company, created a scene-stealing Cherubino of pure adolescent testosterone.

**AND THEN THERE'S MERLIN**, which is also Spanish but no way soloistic. Are you ready to accept the news that the same Isaac Albéniz who composed all those virtuosic piano pieces and Spanish dances also entertained the notion of creating an operatic trilogy on the legends of King Arthur — in *English* — and actually got all the way through the first part?

Albéniz completed *Merlin* in 1902, immediately set out on *Lancelot*, dropped it halfway and left *Guinevere* untouched. The texts were by an eccentric Brit named Francis Burdett Money-Coutts, who had also become Albéniz's patron; they are in a highfalutin synthetic Olde English beside which Tolkien reads like this morning's *Times*. *Merlin* deals with Arthur's arrival and marriage to Guinevere (a mute dancer) and the old wizard's overthrow at the hands of Morgan le Fay. On a BBC/Opus Arte DVD of a 2003 production from Madrid's Teatro Real, in a revised and apparently cleaned-up orchestration by José de Eusebio, the opera's three acts run close to an hour apiece, not far behind *Parsifal* — which it somewhat resembles in, say, a John Williams rewrite.

Of the Albéniz we know and love there isn't a smidge — until, that is, late in the third act, when Morgan and her gnomes start planning their sinister derring-do, the orchestra breaks out in something close to a seguidilla, and finally — too late — we're back in Albéniz country. Too late, alas, also applies to major cast members: veteran Brünnhilde Eva Marton as Morgan le Fay and Carol Vaness as her accomplice Nivian, both of whom have sung on better days. The performance is identified as the world premiere of the Eusebio orchestration, and gets a snazzy production at Madrid's opera house, full of fancy lighting effects and a lit-up Excalibur straight out of *Star Wars*. *Merlin* is exactly the right opera for the collector who thinks he already has everything but longs to be contradicted. **B**