The Marriage of Figaro (in Italian) by WNO

Reviewed by Denis Joe February 2012

Of the three operas that Mozart composed to libretti by Lorenzo Da Ponte ***The Marriage of Figaro*** is perhaps the most popular. Welsh National Opera presented their latest production of *Don Giovani* last year and will be presenting *Cosi Fan Tutti* in the autumn season, later this year. The three operas are recognised as amongst the greatest ever written and *The Marriage of Figaro* as one of the most perfect operas (see Anthony Negus in WNO programme p.12).

This production was not in the traditional dress, which is disconcerting as the central issue that sets off the story is *droit de seigneur* (the right of the feudal lord to the first night with a bride). This production sets the opera in Spain in the days of the Republican 1930s. In itself that is not such a big problem as the set design, by Paco Azorin, which was very similar to that used in last

year's production of *Katya Kabanova,* with exaggeratedly tall doors. Whereas the approach to this sort of set worked well for the Janáček opera, in that it emphasised the increasing existentialist crisis for the heroine, for me the large and open set did not correspond to the intimacy required for this opera, that relies on a lot of informal communication between the characters.

Another drawback was the portrayal of Figaro (the, usually, excellent David Soar). From the outset, when he is alone with the woman he is to marry, Susanna (Elizabeth Watts), Soar's Figaro comes over as domineering and arrogant. Whilst this may be understandable given his relation to Susanna, it tends to become unrepresentative of the character as the opera goes on. Whilst the traditional portrayal of Figaro is that of a happy-go-lucky and intelligent individual it is tempered with a touch of servility to remind us that we are watching a portrayal of a social underling. So when things seem difficult for Figaro: when the Count tries to force him to marry Marcellina (sung by Sarah Pring) or when, in Act 3, Susanna mistakes Figaro's affection towards Marcellina, it really is hard to sympathise with Figaro, and it is necessary for the audience to feel some pity for his frustrations. In one particular scene at the end of Act 1 where Figaro teases the page, Cherubino (a wonderful, Jurgita Adamonyté), David Soar plays the scene like Ricky Gervais playing David Brent (admittedly, one of the biggest mysteries for me, is what made *The Office* such a popular programme).

The stage set of Act 2 and Act 3 is further annoying as again the backdrop is large and the stage is sparse meaning that the cast move about as if to fill up the empty space, when standing still and delivering their exchanges or airs would make more sense. Added to that, the is made of distorted reflections. The thinking behind it may well have been to reflect on the rather bemusing class relations of the characters, but it seems cartoonish in places where those reflections distort like a hall of mirrors. The biggest drawback to a reflecting backdrop, particularly one that moves, is that it catches the light and is really annoying for the audience.

Having said that, everything comes together in the final act. Set in a garden (the only scene set outdoors) the backdrop is coloured and moves in to make less space on the stage and create greater intimacy between the character. This whole act is sheer genius and I felt really moved by the singing - it was the first time that everything came together to create beautiful and convincing opera.

The libretto for *The Marriage of Figaro* is complicated. Basically the servant, Figaro, is to marry his love Susanna but discovers that his master, Count Almaviva, who has renounced the right to 'the first night' is planning to take Susanna away with him in order to seduce her. Figaro sets in motion a plan to expose the hypocrisy of his master, who, in turn, discovers an earlier pact between Figaro and Marcellina that came about when the servant borrowed money from housekeeper, promising to marry her if the loan was not paid off, which it had not been.

Although the template for the opera, based on the comedy, *La Folle journée ou le marriage de Figaro* , by the French playwright Pierre Beaumarchais (one of a trio of plays around the characters, which includes *The Barber of Seville* and *The Guilty Mother* which was used as the story for an opera by the 20th Century composer Darius Milhaud), is *opera buffa,* it is difficultto see it as anything other than serious drama. It does have its comical moments and uses recitatives between airs. There is the use of deception in the plot, though it is less contrived than most, and the deception use by the Count over his plans to seduce Susanna is straightforward denial rather than something more convoluted, so deception is not the central driving force of *The Marriage of Figaro.*

Under the Austrian monarchy, the comedies of Beaumarchais were banned, seen as products of the Enlightenment. Joseph II had already banned the plays of Beaumarchais from being performed, but they were allowed to be published. When Da Ponte went to offer the opera to the emperor, Joseph reminded him that the comedies of Beaumarchais had been banned. La Ponte replied “Yes sire, but I am writing an opera, not a comedy”, suggesting that the librettist did not see *The Marriage of Figaro* as *opera buffa*. Yet whereas death (usually as a sacrifice) was, for the most part, an incident of serious drama and opera, what lends Beaumarchais’ plays and Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro* their label as serious work was that they were a product of the ideals of the Enlightenment, and whilst comedy was a vehicle to make those points, the response by the monarchies of Europe also suggests that they say little to laugh at.

The airs of *The Marriage of Figaro* are, on the whole, less to do with comedy and contain some of the most wonderful music Mozart ever wrote. Figaro’s aria at the end of Act 1, *Non più andraí*, is sung to one of the greatest opera tunes ever; so great, that Mozart was to use it again in *Don Giovani.*

David Soar’s rendition was masterful, full of the pomp and self- aggrandisement that the tune demands. Jurgita Adamonyté’s singing is so beautiful and one gets the full pathos and innocence in the first act aria *Non so più cosa son, cosa faccio,* when he (the boy character is played by a female soprano, which was a tradition at the time when boy castrati were unavailable or unsuited for a role) is telling Susanna how the Count had caught him alone with the gardener's daughter, Barbarina.

The opening aria of Act 2, *Porgi amor,* where the Countess, aware of Almaviva's infidelities, prays for her husband's love. This is sung with such tenderness by Rebecca Evans, one of the great sopranos that WNO is fortunate enough to have singing. Her rendition of
Porgi amor
is typical of the dramatic ability she brings to her singing. There is nothing pathetic about her style, her down-to-earth approach gives the aria a feeling of realism. The same can be said for her delivery of
Dove sono
in Act 3.

Whilst I have reservations about the set design and the setting, on the whole this is a wonderful *Marriage of Figaro*
. The change in the running order of some of the airs and recitatives does nothing to undermine the drama and flow and I doubt that you would find a much better production, particularly in the quality of the singers.

That is, perhaps, what has made British opera such a success. Companies such as English National Opera, Opera North, Scottish Opera and Welsh National Opera can draw on some of the greatest singing talents in the world. I think that part of this is to do with the fact that Opera in Britain, unlike France, Germany and Italy, does not have such a long tradition. Singers are more dexterous in their repertoire than one would find in those other countries. But that does not mean that the quality of the voice suffers. Opera and song recital are such demanding arts. I think that there is very little reason to travel throughout the world to see opera. I have experienced some of the greatest productions of *Tristan and Isolde*, for example, and had no need to travel to Bayreuth (not that I could afford it). Home-grown talent, such as the excellent Anne Evans and John Tomlinson are recognised as world class exponents of the emotional and physical demand that Wagner's operas make.

Bryn Terfel as Figaro in The Marriage of Figaro, Southampton