

Brilliant *Barbiere* Graces Pesaro's Boards

Charles Jernigan, August 18, 2018

In his book *A Life with Rossini*, Alberto Zedda, conductor, musicologist and co-founder of the Rossini Opera Festival (ROF) in Pesaro, tells a story which took place when he was a young musician just out of the Milan Conservatory, in the 1950's. He had been hired for his first major job by the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music and to conduct at the Summer Zoo Opera in that city, and the opera at hand was *The Barber of Seville*. During rehearsals, he asked the flautist to speed up the playing of a passage in accord with the tempo marking in the score of the performing edition. He was told by the flute player, who was at that time the pre-eminent flautist in America, that it was impossible to play the passage that fast. Zedda told him to do what he could, and a year later, he found himself in Bologna, where *Il barbiere's* autograph score is housed in the Conservatory library. Zedda looked up that "flute" passage and discovered that Rossini had assigned it not to the flute, but to the piccolo, an instrument which could easily play it as fast as requested. Looking further, he discovered hundreds of mistakes in the standard printed score--which got him into trouble with the Ricordi publishing house, which had distributed that error-laden score for decades. Eventually he was proved right, and, repentant, Ricordi asked him to create a new critical edition. It turned out to be the first critical edition of any Italian opera and of course the first of any Rossini opera, and it began work which the Rossini Foundation of Pesaro has pursued now for several decades--the creation of critical editions of all of the Rossini operas and his other music, work which is now nearing its end.



Figaro (Luciano), Rosina (Wakizono)

The wonderful new production of *Il barbiere di Siviglia* by Pier Luigi Pizzi at this year's ROF of course uses Zedda's critical edition, which cleaned up so many mistakes and changes

which had crept in through thousands of performances over a hundred and fifty years. But the production itself also seemed brand new--bright, sunny, in black and white with occasional colorful accents--so that it cleans up dozens of hoary jokes and bits of physical comedy which have become 'traditions' in Barber productions over decade after decade. It is a model of how to take an iconic (and perhaps overdone) opera and make it all seem new to the most jaded operagoer. Pizzi, as is his wont, designed the sets and costumes as well as directing the stage action. Pizzi is a classical minimalist, and this set is no exception, with the white, clean lines of two houses facing each other in the first scene, with a square in between. We are in Seville, at the time when the librettist Cesare Sterbini (and Beaumarchais before him) set the action--the eighteenth century. A single fruit tree in a pot gives color to the scene; the chorus, Fiorello, the Count and Figaro are in black and white costumes. So is Dr. Bartolo. It is spare and simple with classical balance; somehow it manages to respect the libretto and be modern at the same time. It is a "concept" production which hides its "concept" in plain sight. There is absolutely no regietheater egoism which proclaims, "I am the Director, I am God, look at Me." With Pizzi's brilliance, there is no need. He cleans the slate, as it were, and lets the opera speak for itself.

Like the sets, the costumes strip away two centuries of accretions of what the Barber should look like. Rosina's simple, classic, silken gowns are in light colors--blue, green, white. Count Almaviva wears a red cloak. The musicians sometimes wear bright purple, but for the most part everyone is in black and white. Figaro strips to his breeches while singing his "Largo al factotum" and bathes in large basin of water. His action is emblematic of the production: strip away the accumulated traditions so we can see and hear this opera with new eyes and ears.

Love may be the subject of the story here, but money is the real protagonist. The serenading singers in the opening scene scramble for the Count's coins, Figaro's imagination is spurred "All'idea di quel metallo" ('at the idea of that metal-gold'); Bartolo wants to marry Rosina for her dowry; Basilio betrays Bartolo for a purse from the Count; Bartolo accepts the fait accompli of the Count's marriage to Rosina when the Count promises him money. Only Rosina and Lindoro/Almaviva operate on the basis of love. She spurns money for her "poor student" Lindoro; he is enraptured to discover that she loves him for who he is and not for his wealth. But they are young and have not yet learned that money makes the world go 'round, and not love. Pizzi's production makes the money angle quite clear, as he makes all of nuances in this superb libretto crystal clear. He also comes up with a number of comic bits which are new and replace dozens of stale, old jokes that one has seen over and over in *Barbiere* productions. The most startling of these is when Almaviva arrives in Act II disguised as the Music Master, Don Alonso. Pizzi has him enter with big shoes on his knees as if he is a dwarf. It must have taken Maxim Miranov some time to learn to walk on his knees (his lower legs dragging behind, covered by a long cloak). Some old jokes remain, such as the sneezing servants, offered snuff by Figaro; but that is in the libretto, and Pizzi is very respectful of the libretto.

The production is also full of youth and high spirits. The young people look young and bound around the stage and often come out on a runway which comes to the front of the orchestra, a foot or two from patrons in the first row. Rosina is directed to be girlish and full

of high spirits, but firm and sure of herself. It is all in the libretto, from her first, famous aria "Una voce poco fa" on. Pizzi takes his cue from that: she can be "docile," "rispettosa" and "obbediente," but best not cross her, because if you do, "sarò una vipera/E cento trappole/.../farò giocare" ('I will be a snake/and I will set a hundred traps'). Just as money and love are opposites in this opera, so are the young (Rosina, Almaviva, Figaro) antagonists of the old (Bartolo, Basilio). Pizzi understands this and the youth and unbounded energy of the young people, in both actions on stage and music, is infectious.

On the musical side, Davide Luciano's Figaro was perfect. His big voice filled the large spaces of the Adriatic Arena, he acted with his voice and as far as I could tell, he was note perfect. He won the biggest ovation of the evening. Aya Wakizono, whom I have seen before in Italy, was a lovely Rosina; she has a creamy, smooth and full mezzo-soprano voice--no bird chirping coloratura for this Rosina. Maxim Miranov may have a slightly small voice for the big space, but his high tenor is quite beautiful and his Rossini ornaments flawless. Of course he sang the often cut (because of its difficulty) "Cessa di più resistere" at the end, and his natural good looks won many sighs in the audience. (Los Angeles recently saw him as Gluck's Orphée.) Two old pros sang the two buffo roles of Don Bartolo and Don Basilio, and needless to say they are old favorites in Pesaro--Pietro Spagnoli, who started singing here in 1989 and Michele Pertusi, whose first Pesaro assignment was in 1992. (Pier Luigi Pizzi's first ROF was even earlier, 1982, one year after the Festival began). Elena Zilio was part of the very first Festival as Pippo in *La gazza ladra*. In 2018, 36 years later, she sang Berta, and she was formidable! The cast was rounded out by William Corrà as Fiorello/Official and Armando De Cecon as Ambrogio. Somehow, these singers all made the music seem incredibly fresh and new, as if we had not heard Figaro's "Largo al factotum" or Rosina's "Una voce poco fa" forever, in everything from Bugs Bunny cartoons to Carnegie Hall concerts.

The same could be said for the Orchestra Sinfonica Nazionale della RAI (Italian Radio and Television National Orchestra) under the vigorous leadership of Yves Abel. Mostly, it was a rhythmically "alive" reading and exciting; only in the "Freddo e immobile" ensemble which begins the Act I finale, did I feel that the pace was a little slow. It certainly took off for the stretta which ends the act. The local Chorus of the Teatro Ventidio Basso was good too.

This may have been the best *Barber of Seville* I have ever seen. It was certainly the truest to Rossini's original concept. Sometimes, with beloved works, it is best to strip everything away and get back to basics. Once again we understood why this work is an unalloyed masterpiece.