

Mozart's operatic masterpiece at Manoel

FOR the second production of the Bank of Valletta's Opera Festival 2004 (Manoel Theatre, March 20, 21) Operalaboratorio of Palermo presented a broadly traditional staging of Mozart's *LE NOZZE DI FIGARO* that surely must have delighted newcomers to this masterpiece while giving ample pleasure to seasoned Figaro watchers.

Nozze is a very entertaining operatic comedy, an incomparable masterpiece with brilliant tunes for the soloists, and glorious ensembles and of all the operas of Mozart this is the one that best merges a sensitivity and delicacy in its musical construction and workmanship with the common touch.

Elegant and humane comedy sits comfortably next to farcical elements and Elizabeth Smith's and Vincenzo Pirrotta's production exploited this aspect of the opera without, however, eschewing the more serious undercurrents that dot the libretto and the music. It was a lively, well-paced production, very funny in parts. At no time, however, was the production allowed to break the bounds of comedy and the feeling of anxiety that pervades both music and situation in the last act, was given just the right amount of emphasis.

This was a straightforward production, tastefully dressed, that moved fast and bubbled with the music. It did away with conventional sets: the stage was mostly bare stage except for some furniture that was changed to suit the scene – this was fine for the three indoor scenes, less convincing in the last scene which suggested to me a cemetery more than a garden. A black curtain served as a backdrop – this I found rather too sombre for the atmosphere of the production, even though it admittedly allowed the costumes with their mostly pastel colours to stand out and the lighting effects to stand out in relief.

Most of the names of the protagonists were familiar to us from Operalaboratorio's previous visits to Malta: bass-baritone Maurizio Lo Piccolo (Almaviva) and sopranos Natasa Katai (the Countess) and Caterina Ilardo (Susanna), while soprano Valentina Vitti and baritone



OLIVIERO GIORGIUTTI as Figaro is badgered by the ladies in *Le Nozze di Figaro*
(Pictures by Darrin Zammit Lupi)

Oliviero Giorgiutti were welcome additions to the team.

These were all young voices that might not be exceptional either in timbre or in size, but they are certainly promising and deserve to be nurtured. Their diction is superbly clear and it was a joy to hear so much of Da Ponte's pacy text in this ideally intimate theatre. Their movements on Saturday tended to be a little awkward towards the beginning of the performance, but eventually the artists relaxed and their performances became more convincing.

Susanna's is a very taxing part: she is seldom away from the stage but Caterina Ilardo was a pretty and sweet-voiced Susanna in control of events after she had recovered from the predations of Lo Piccolo's roué count. Baritone Giorgiutti was a histrionically agile and hugely engaging Figaro, vocally secure and expressive. The Countess' first aria *Porgi amor*, one of the most taxing entrances for any soprano if only because of its simplicity, sounded a little pinched in tone, but Katai's voice soon got warmer and more expressive.

The best acting in the company was Valentina Vitti's spunky Cherubino, bright of voice as well as character with clean and precise singing, light-hearted and frivolous.

The least expressive of the group was Maurizio Lo Piccolo who has a fine voice but he tended to remain rather poker-faced throughout the performance: one would have liked to see more expression both in his singing and in his acting.

Among the secondary characters on Saturday it was Oriella Di Noto's Barbarina that struck me most for the quality of the singing. The other characters came straight out of the *opera buffa* genre, directed to act and sing as characters in a farce. Though their singing was not particularly striking it was adequate and they contributed to the overall success of the production and the performance. Vocally they were at their best when they joined the main characters in the marvellously inventive and dexterous septet that closes the second Act and in the finale. Susanna's duet with Marcellina (soprano Roberta Caly) in Act I was funny and vocally well-handled. The chorus looked good and sang well.

Under Michael Laus' sprightly direction, the National Orchestra brought out all the sparkle of Mozart's immortal score and the moments when the orchestra overpowered the singers on stage were few and far between.

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