

*Virginia
Opera*

Mozart's the
Marriage
*Celebrating
His
250th
Birthday* of
Figaro

STUDY GUIDE

2005-2006 SEASON

THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO

by

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Libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte

after a play by Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais

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Premiere

First performed on May 1, 1786, at the Burgtheater in Vienna, Austria.

Cast of Characters

Count Almaviva	Baritone
Countess Almaviva	Soprano
Susanna , maid to the Countess	Soprano
Figaro , valet to the Count.....	Bass
Cherubino , the Count's page.....	Mezzo-Soprano
Bartolo , a doctor from Seville.....	Bass
Marcellina , housekeeper to Bartolo.....	Soprano
Don Basilio , the music master.....	Tenor
Don Curzio , a magistrate	Tenor
Antonio , the gardener, Susanna's uncle.....	Bass
Barbarina , daughter of Antonio	Soprano

Brief Summary

Setting: The Almaviva's country house near Seville during the late 18th century

Figaro, the valet to Count Almaviva, and Susanna, the maid to the Countess, are about to be married. Susanna tells Figaro that the Count is turning a philandering eye toward her. Figaro is determined to use his wits to prevent the Count from compromising his wife-to-be. He shares his plan with Susanna and the Countess, who is equally distressed by her husband's behavior. They all agree that the Count needs a good lesson.

The Countess's former guardian, Dr. Bartolo, arrives with Marcellina, his old housekeeper. She and Bartolo want to enforce a loan agreement that will require Figaro to marry Marcellina if he does not repay money he owes her. The Count's page, Cherubino, further complicates matters with his lovesick behavior toward the females of the household, and the Countess in particular. He is trying to avoid the Count because he has been caught dallying with the gardener's daughter, Barbarina. Figaro manages to escape marriage to Marcellina by explaining that he cannot get his parent's consent to marry because he was kidnapped as a baby. When questioned closely about his parentage, the subsequent explanations and clues reveal that he is actually the son of Marcellina and Dr. Bartolo.

The various plots ebb and flow until they reach a climax that evening in the garden. Susanna and the Countess have switched clothes, impersonating each other, in hopes of catching the Count red-handed. Everyone ends up in the garden, confused and blundering in the dark. Only the Countess and Susanna, and eventually Figaro actually know what is actually transpiring. When all identities are revealed, the Count is humbled and asks for his wife's forgiveness. She lovingly forgives him. Peace and harmony is restored in the Almaviva household.

Full Plot Synopsis and Musical Highlights

Act I

Figaro, the valet to Count Almaviva, and Susanna, the Countess' personal maid, are together in the room they will share after their marriage, which is planned for later in the day. In a little duet, "Cinque, dieci, venti" (Five, ten, twenty) the couple talks past one another as they are intent on their tasks - Susanna is trying on her wedding bonnet and Figaro is measuring the room to locate the bed. A second duet, "Se a casa madama la notte ti chiama," (If perchance Madame should call you at night) reveals that Figaro is pleased that the room is between the apartments of the Count and the Countess so that it will be convenient if their services are required during the night. In the duet Susanna responds as she is leaving, saying that their bedroom might be too conveniently located for the Count if Figaro is away and she is there alone! In a short aria, "Se vuol ballare signor Contino," (If you wish to dance Mr. Little Count) Figaro muses somewhat tartly that if this is the case he will have to find a way to outwit the Count and his roving eye. After Figaro leaves, Dr. Bartolo and his old housekeeper, Marcellina, arrive. Marcellina shows the doctor a document that requires Figaro to marry her if he does not repay a sum of money he borrowed. Dr. Bartolo promises to help to help her attain Figaro as a husband because he wants revenge for Figaro's part in engineering the marriage of his ward, Rosina, to the Count. He expresses his feelings in the aria, "La vendetta, oh, la vendetta," (Revenge, oh, sweet revenge).

Susanna returns and is joined by the Count's page, Cherubino. He is flustered because he has been caught by the Count with Barbarina, the gardener's daughter, and has been dismissed. He explains in a short aria, "Non so piu cosa son," (I no longer know what I am) that he seems to be girl crazy and can't explain his actions. He hopes the Countess will intercede on his behalf. Cherubino then snatches one of the Countess' ribbons from Susanna and in exchange gives her a love song he has written. The Count's voice is heard outside the door and Cherubino quickly hides behind an armchair. The Count enters, sits in the armchair and tells Susanna of his great affection for her. As he is speaking, the music master Don Basilio's voice is heard outside the door. The Count jumps up and hides behind the armchair just as Cherubino quickly jumps into the chair and is covered with a dress by Susanna. Don Basilio enters asking for the Count and also looking for Cherubino. He gossips that Cherubino is in love with the Countess. Upon hearing his wife's name mentioned in such a context, the Count leaps up in consternation. Basilio immediately retreats, making excuses, and Susanna nearly faints. The Count then relates the story of how he discovered Cherubino with Barbarina and in doing so uncovers the page hiding in the armchair. The Count is furious, but is instantly aware that Cherubino has overheard his overtures to Susanna.

Figaro arrives with a group of peasants who thank the Count in a choral piece for relinquishing the *droit de seigneur*, the feudal right of the lord of the manor to take precedence over husbands on their wedding nights. Figaro asks the Count if he is ready to perform their marriage and places a white veil, the symbol of purity, on Susanna's head. All applaud the Count's virtue as he acts most agreeable, but it is clear to Figaro that he is

playing for time. After the peasants leave, the Count forgives Cherubino (in exchange for his silence) and sends him off immediately for military duty in Seville. Figaro asks Cherubino to see him before he leaves and then sings the aria, "Non piu andrai," (No more will you, amorous butterfly). The aria ends with an extended military march which sends Cherubino off to battle as all bid him a fond farewell.

Act II

The music indicates a quiet, introspective atmosphere. The Countess Almaviva is sitting in her boudoir. The violins begin the beautiful melody that introduces her aria, "Porgi amor," (Grant, love) in which she laments the loss of her husband's affection. Susanna enters and the two women begin discussing the Count's behavior. Figaro joins them and together they hatch a plan to curb the Count's passions. Figaro suggests that the Count receive an anonymous letter informing him of a planned rendezvous between the Countess and her lover. This should make the Count jealous and distract him. In addition, Figaro has persuaded Cherubino to delay his departure so that he can participate in another ruse. In this second ploy Figaro proposes that Susanna agree to meet the Count in the gardens after dark, but that in her place will be Cherubino wearing a dress. The Countess will then discover the pair and the humbled Count will be chastened into better behavior. All agree and Figaro leaves to find Cherubino.

Presently the page arrives, having been informed by Figaro of the planned ruse, and sings the love song he has composed, "Voi che sapete che cosa e amor," (You who know what love is). Afterwards he begins to try on women's clothes. Susanna departs the room for a moment leaving Cherubino alone with the Countess. He wants to use this opportunity to declare his love for the Countess, but before he can do so the Count arrives and demands entry. Cherubino locks himself in the dressing room and the Countess lets her husband in. After a loud noise comes from the closed dressing room, the Count, who has already received Figaro's anonymous note, refuses to believe that Susanna made the noise. Susanna has secretly reentered the room and hidden behind a screen. Meanwhile the Count is demanding entrance into the dressing room. When he cannot gain entry he locks all the doors to the room and, taking the Countess with him, leaves to get tools to force the door open. After they leave, Susanna comes out from her hiding place and calls to Cherubino. The page leaves the dressing room and jumps out the window, leaving Susanna to lock herself in the dressing room.

As the Count and his wife return, the Countess decides to confess that Cherubino is in the dressing room but that it is only a harmless little prank. The Count, who does not see the joke, is unrelenting in his fury and makes accusations at his wife. When the dressing room door opens it is Susanna who walks out. The startled Count is instantly contrite and begs forgiveness for his hasty words.

Figaro arrives to say that all is in readiness for the marriage ceremony. The Count first questions him intently about a certain letter he received anonymously. Figaro is denying all knowledge of it when Antonio, the gardener, arrives, complaining that someone who looked like Cherubino had jumped out of the dressing room window and trampled his flowerbed. Figaro quickly states that it was he who jumped out the window

trying to avoid the Count. The disbelieving Count is still questioning Figaro when Marcellina arrives with Dr. Bartolo and Don Basilio. She pleads her case with the Count and shows her document with a flourish. The Count promises her a quick resolution, which causes half the group to rejoice while the other half despairs. This ensemble finale to Act II is one of the most extended numbers in the opera. It begins as an angry duet between the Count and the Countess, “Esci omai, garzon malnato,” (If you’re coming out, low born rat), and becomes a trio, a quartet, and eventually, all the way to septet as all the principals are added. It is organized into three distinct movements and is considered a perfect example of the marriage of music and drama in opera.

Act III

The Countess urges Susanna to carry out their plan for a rendezvous with the Count later that night. The Countess, however, decides that she will be the one disguised in Susanna’s clothes, not Cherubino. She wishes to catch her husband in the act of infidelity. The plan is put into motion. Susanna meets the Count and in a duet, “Crudel! perche finora,” (Heartless! Why now?) sets the time of their meeting. The delighted Count reaches an understanding with Susanna that after their meeting he will give her the money for Figaro to pay his debt to Marcellina. As Susanna dashes off she meets Figaro and tells him she has won his case for him. Overhearing this remark, the Count angrily sings the recitative, “Hai gia vinta la causa! (Their case is won!) and aria, “Vedro, mentr’io sospiro,” (Shall I live to see) and decides to force Figaro to marry old Marcellina, despite the promise he has just made. He rails bitterly that his servants are happy while he is frustrated. Of the fourteen solo arias in the opera, only four of them are preceded by accompanied recitative. This aria is the first of them

At this moment Marcellina, Dr. Bartolo and a judge, Don Curzio, enter, dragging Figaro with them. Curzio states that according to the law Figaro must either marry the old housekeeper or pay her the money he owes. Figaro protests, declaring that he is of noble birth and cannot marry without the consent of his parents. When pressed to identify his family, Figaro relates that as a baby he was lost or kidnapped, but the richness of his infant clothes and his unusual birthmark clearly indicated that he was of high birth. Immediately upon his mention of the birthmark, Marcellina questions him closely and then exclaims that he is her long lost son, kidnapped by robbers. In addition, his father is Bartolo! The group embarks on a sextet, “Riconosci in questo amplesso,” (Recognize in this embrace). At that moment Susanna arrives, carrying a bag of gold, intending to pay off Marcellina. Seeing the old spinster embracing her beloved Figaro, she jumps to the wrong conclusion. While Susanna rages at Figaro, the Count seethes in frustration and Figaro embraces his newly found parents. Finally, the misunderstanding is cleared up and a double wedding ceremony is planned.

Barbarina, the gardener’s daughter, comes in with Cherubino in tow. The page is petrified that the Count will discover him in the castle. As they depart Barbarina tells him not to worry. She will dress him in women’s clothing and he can hide among a group of peasant girls who will be presenting the Countess with a bouquet. The Countess appears, and feeling unsettled and agitated by the deception she is planning, sings the

accompanied recitative, “E Susanna non vien,” (Still Susanna has not come). Thinking tenderly of the past when her husband loved her very dearly she continues with the aria, “Dove sono i bei momenti,” (Where are the golden moments) as she ponders the sad state of her cold, miserable marriage. Departing, she resolves to change her husband’s ungrateful heart.

The Count returns, deep in conversation with Antonio, the gardener. Antonio informs his master that Cherubino is still on the premises being disguised as a girl. In a temper the Count decides to investigate further and the two storm off just as the Countess returns with Susanna. In the duet, “Che soave zeffiretto,” (What a gentle zephyr) they put the finishing touches on their plan by writing a letter to the Count confirming the arrangements for that evening’s rendezvous. The letter is fastened with a pin which the Count is instructed to return to Susanna as confirmation that he will keep the appointment.

A group of peasant girls, including the disguised Cherubino, arrives with their token of affection for the Countess. As they present her with the flowers, Antonio rushes in with the Count and the two unmask the hapless page. Just as his lordship is about to banish Cherubino forever, Barbarina asks for the favor the Count promised her during an episode of indiscretion. She wishes to marry Cherubino. Embarrassed by this revelation, the Count readily agrees.

Finally, the much-anticipated marriage of Figaro and Susanna is to take place. Marcellina and Bartolo, now that their long lost son has been discovered will also marry. During the double ceremony Susanna slips the letter to the Count who pricks his finger on the pin. Figaro notices this and comments on it. The deceptive actions are artfully woven into the dances that accompany the celebration. The wedding ceremony concluded, the Count bids all to enjoy the festivities and rejoice.

Act IV

Barbarina is searching for a pin that she has dropped. It is the pin that sealed Susanna’s letter to the Count. He has asked Barbarina to return it to Susanna. Figaro, walking with his newly found mother, sees Barbarina’s distress and inquires. When she explains, he realizes that the note passed to the Count during the wedding ceremony was from his new wife Susanna. Figaro gives Barbarina a pin borrowed from Marcellina and rushes off to avenge the wrong he believes the Count and Susanna are committing. Left alone, Marcellina decides to warn Susanna of Figaro’s actions because she is sure Susanna is innocent of any wrongdoing. And besides, women should stick together!

Barbarina briefly reappears on her way to meet Cherubino and slips into an arbor. Figaro returns, meeting Bartolo and Basilio, whom he has called to witness Susanna’s infidelity. Telling the two older men to hide until needed, the disenchanted valet begins a bitter monologue on the sad fate of all husbands in the accompanied recitative, “Tutto e disposto,” (Everything is ready). He continues with the aria, “Aprite un po’ quegli occhi,”

(Open your eyes for a moment) which is a brilliant character study of Figaro's unhappy state. Concluding that women have hearts of stone Figaro returns to his hiding place.

Susanna and the Countess sneak into the garden, dressed in each other's clothes and accompanied by Marcellina. She warns the two women that Figaro might be hiding nearby. Seeing her husband in the shadows Susanna enjoys teasing him a little by making him believe she is waiting for her lover in the recitative and aria, "Deh vieni non tardar," (Come now, do not delay). The Countess goes to her appointed place in the garden where she will wait.

All eleven principals are involved in the great finale to the opera, which begins with Cherubino's words, "Pian pianin le andro piu presso," (Softly now I'll come closer to you). He is on his way to meet Barbarina when he sees the Countess in disguise and, believing her to be Susanna, tries to steal a kiss. As the page approaches her, the Count appears and Cherubino rushes off, terrified. Figaro moves in closer to see what is going on while the Count begins to woo the woman he and Figaro believe is Susanna. The amorous lord gives her a ring and persuades her to follow him deeper into the shadows. As Figaro starts to interfere, the real Susanna, dressed as the Countess, comes forward to stop him. Though she tries to imitate her mistress, Figaro recognizes her. Realizing the deception the two women have planned, Figaro teases his wife until she reveals her true identity. As they kiss, Figaro and Susanna hear the Count still pursuing "Susanna" not realizing it is his own wife. The newlyweds decide to practice a final bit of trickery. When the Count approaches they embrace ardently. The Count thinks he is seeing his wife being unfaithful and calls for witnesses. Bartolo, Basilio, Don Cuzio and Antonio come running. Cherubino, Marcellina and Barbarina are pulled from their hiding places. Figaro pretends he is terrified while the Count denounces his "wife." Susanna hides her face and asks for forgiveness. The others echo her plea but the Count refuses. The real Countess regally comes forward and, removing her disguise, asks if her intervention might obtain a pardon. The onlookers are amazed but the Count is mortified and realizes he has been caught red-handed. All the tangled plots have now been unraveled and it is time for reconciliation. With a melody of pure beauty the Count begs his wife's pardon, which she grants. The assembled company picks up the melody in a choral benediction that provides the soothing balm of forgiveness and love.

Historical and Literary Background

During the 1780s the French playwright Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais wrote three plays about a charming rascal named Figaro, an intelligent and enterprising barber who constantly outwitted his aristocratic employers. When Beaumarchais wrote this witty series of plays, the beginnings of revolution were stirring in France. The rigid class system was a focus of discontent. Though set in Spain rather than France, Beaumarchais' plays about Figaro were frowned upon by government censors because their hero was a somewhat rebellious servant who was far cleverer than his noble master. *The Marriage of Figaro* underwent censorship six times before Beaumarchais could have it performed publicly. King Louis XVI remarked that it was "detestable and unplayable," but artists and intellectuals could see its wit and charm. Another controversial factor was Beaumarchais' portrayal of women as the mental and moral superiors of men. The lovely and intelligent Countess in *The Marriage of Figaro* eventually outsmarts her husband, who is a philandering scoundrel.

Beaumarchais is best known for his plays about Figaro, but he had additional accomplishments in his life that make him as amazing and varied a character as any of those in his plays. He was an excellent musician, a watch-maker, a secret agent for the French government, an architect, an inventor, and an arms dealer, among other professions. He was the harp instructor to the daughters of King Louis XV and maintained a private fleet that helped supply the American rebels in the War of Independence. Beaumarchais was not unlike his famous creation, Figaro, and it is felt that he drew upon his own experiences to produce this wonderful character.

Beaumarchais' *Marriage of Figaro* is remembered today as an important milestone in the run-up to the French Revolution. It is the opera by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and his brilliant librettist, Lorenzo da Ponte, that has enshrined THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO as the masterpiece even more exciting, humorous, and true to life than Beaumarchais' original play. Stage director David Farrar once remarked that FIGARO is sometimes likened to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, revealing the highest and lowest elements of human behavior, its characters emerging from adversity and deception variously wiser and enlightened.

Mozart met the adventurous Da Ponte at the Viennese court where he became a successful writer of poems and opera librettos for a variety of composers, including Mozart. When collaborating with Mozart on FIGARO, Da Ponte wisely toned down the political passages of the play and, instead, focused on the human elements of the story. The main theme of the opera became love and forgiveness, rather than revolution. The characters became more sympathetic and realistic; some of the aristocrats turned out to be charming and kind, others bumbling and stupid. The same was true of the servants. To complement Da Ponte's words, Mozart wrote music that characterized Figaro and his friends to perfection. For example, the Countess sings two arias that not only express her inner thoughts, but, because of their formal structure and musical style, give her an importance that she lacks in the play.

At its premiere in 1786, THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO was highly successful. Unfortunately, the Austrian emperor was ill at ease with the story's liberal overtones. Rival composers encouraged criticism of the work. There were a total of nine

performances in Vienna. Its performance in Prague proved to be more pivotal, leading to the commission of *Don Giovanni*.

The truly great success of Mozart's THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO did not begin until long after the composer's death when his work became more fully appreciated. Today, FIGARO is considered by many to be the most perfect of Mozart's operas. The fineness of his musical characterizations and the ingenuity of the ensembles confirm his talent as a musical dramatist. He is considered one of the world's greatest musical geniuses not just because of his operas but because was the master of all musical forms including opera, symphony, concerto, chamber music, solo vocal and instrumental music and choral works, creating some of the most glorious music known to man. Though he lived barely thirty-six years and his adult life was filled with frustration and poverty, he left the world a legacy that still astounds, excites and fulfills the senses.

Discussion Questions

1. Why would the concept of a servant outwitting his master be considered revolutionary?
2. Mozart has been called the master of musical characterization. What have you heard in the opera that supports this statement?
3. The ensemble is unique in opera. Many people are expressing themselves simultaneously, yet all remain in character and can be understood. How is this possible?
4. For all its humor, THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO has some bite. Give some examples.
5. What is the message at the end of the opera?
6. The plot of the opera is very convoluted. How much time passes during THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO? The answer is reflected in the secondary title of the play and opera. (The Crazy Day)
7. In the original play, the author, Beaumarchais, made it clear that he considered women to be the mental and moral superiors of men. Was the opera successful in upholding Beaumarchais' belief?
8. In the opera, love is presented in four life stages, represented by four couples. Identify the four couples and put them in order according to general age grouping.
9. Two sides of the master-servant relationship are explored in this opera. Compare and contrast the relationship between the Count and Figaro, and the Countess and Susanna.
10. How does Mozart handle the concept of forgiveness? How important is it in the context of a comedy? Does Mozart cloak serious subjects in comedy for a reason?

of the country's folk music and legends. Composers such as Aaron Copland, Douglas Moore, Carlisle Floyd, Howard Hanson, and Robert Ward have all crafted operas that have been presented throughout the world to great success. Today, composers John Adams, Philip Glass, and John Corigliano enjoy success both at home and abroad and are credited with the infusion of new life into an art form which continues to evolve even as it approaches its fifth century.



The Operatic Voice

A true (and brief) definition of the “operatic” voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is “born,” while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is “trained.” The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices that can sustain the demands required by the operatic repertoire do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique that allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. The Italian word “*squillo*” (squeal) is used to describe the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice “type” and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited.

Within the five major voice types (*Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass*) there is a further delineation into categories (*Coloratura, Lyric, Spinto, Dramatic*) which help to define each particular instrument. The *Coloratura* is the highest within each voice type whose extended upper range is complimented by extreme flexibility. The *Lyric* is the most common of the “types.” This instrument is recognized more for the exceptional beauty of its tone rather than its power or range. The *Spinto* is a voice which combines the beauty of a lyric with the weight and power of a *Dramatic*, which is the most “powerful” of the voices. The *Dramatic* instrument is characterized by the combination of both incredible volume and “steely” intensity.

While the definition presented in the preceding paragraph may seem clearly outlined, many voices combine qualities from each category, thus carving an unique niche in operatic history. Just as each person is different from the next, so is each voice. Throughout her career Maria Callas defied categorization as she performed and recorded roles associated with each category in the soprano voice type. Joan Sutherland as well can be heard in recordings of soprano roles as diverse as the coloratura Gilda in *Rigoletto* to the dramatic Turandot in *Turandot*. Below is a very brief outline of voice types and categories with roles usually associated with the individual voice type.

	<i>Coloratura</i>	<i>Lyric</i>	<i>Spinto</i>	<i>Dramatic</i>
<i>Soprano</i>	Norina (Don Pasquale) Gilda (Rigoletto) Lucia (Lucia di Lammermoor)	Liu (Turandot) Mimi (La Bohème) Pamina (Magic Flute)	Tosca (Tosca) Amelia (A Masked Ball) Leonora (Il Trovatore)	Turandot (Turandot) Norma (Norma) Elektra (Elektra)
<i>Mezzo-Soprano</i>	Rosina (Barber of Seville) Angelina (La Cenerentola) Dorabella (Così fan tutte)	Carmen (Carmen) Charlotte (Werther) Giulietta (Hoffmann)	Santuzza (Cavalleria) Adalgisa (Norma) The Composer (Ariadne auf Naxos)	Azucena (Il Trovatore) Ulrica (A Masked Ball) Herodias (Salome)
<i>Tenor</i>	Count Almaviva (Barber of Seville) Don Ottavio (Don Giovanni) Ferrando (Così fan tutte)	Alfredo (La Traviata) Rodolfo (La Bohème) Tamino (Magic Flute)	Calaf (Turandot) Pollione (Norma) Cavaradossi (Tosca)	Dick Johnson (Fanciulla) Don Jose (Carmen) Otello (Otello)
<i>Baritone</i>	Figaro (Barber of Seville) Count Almavira (Le nozze di Figaro) Dr. Malatesta (Don Pasquale)	Marcello (La Bohème) Don Giovanni (Don Giovanni) Sharpless (Madama Butterfly)	Verdi Baritone Germont (La Traviata) Di Luna (Il Trovatore) Rigoletto (Rigoletto)	Scarpia (Tosca) Jochanaan (Salome) Jack Rance (Fanciulla)
<i>Bass</i>	Bartolo (Barber of Seville) Don Magnifico (Cenerentola) Dr. Dulcamara (Elixir of Love)	Leporello (Don Giovanni) Colline (La Bohème) Figaro (Marriage of Figaro)	Buffo Bass Don Pasquale (Don Pasquale) Don Alfonso (Così fan tutte)	Basso Cantate Oroveso (Norma) Timur (Turandot) Sarastro (Magic Flute)

Opera Production

Opera is created by the combination of myriad art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible in the operatic format. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. Wigs, costumes, sets and specialized lighting further enhance these performances, all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or dramaturg who alone or with a librettist fashions the script or libretto that contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the composer and librettist entrust their new work to a conductor who with a team of assistants (repetiteurs) assumes responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The conductor collaborates with a stage director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The stage director and conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a design team which will take charge of the actual physical production.

Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers must all be brought “on board” to participate in the creation of the new production. The set designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using “blueprint” plans to design the actual physical set which will reside on the stage, recreating the physical setting required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. Following the actual building of the set, painters following instructions from the set designers’ original plans paint the set. As the set is assembled on the stage, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to throw light onto both the stage and the set in an atmospheric as well as practical way. Using specialized lighting instruments, colored gels and a state of the art computer, the designer along with the stage director create a “lighting plot” by writing “lighting cues” which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this production period, the costume designer in consultation with the stage director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate “period” fashions.

As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.

