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March 12, 2009

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## Arts Listings

### SF Cabaret Opera Presents 'Marriage of Figaro'

By Ken Bullock Special to the Planet  
Wednesday March 11, 2009 - 07:30:00 PM



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The cast of *The Marriage of Figaro*: Steven Hoffman (*Figaro*), Eliza O'Malley (*Susanna, Berkeley shows*), Joaquin Quilez (*Count Almaviva*), Meghan Dibble (*Cherubino*), and Suzanna Mizell (*Susanna, San Francisco shows*)

Stripped of its overtly political satire, Mozart and Lorenzo Da Ponte premiered their adaptation of *Marriage of Figaro*, proclaiming a new form of musical theater. San Francisco Cabaret Opera's production (under the aegis of Goat Hall) teases out the vaudeville still lurking in the sleek new—or Neo-Classical—model, once again fusing entertainment with lavish singing. The show started last weekend in San Francisco and now, with some changes in cast and accompaniment, migrates to the Hillside Club, a few bucolic blocks east of the Gourmet Ghetto.

This production—and *Figaro* itself—inspires a playful anachronism reminiscent of the Captain of the Guard in *The Scarlet Empress*, reassuring Marlene Dietrich as the young Catherine the Great, who is shocked by his advances: "This is the 18th Ccentury! Live a little!"

They live a lot—and very quickly—in *Le nozze di Figaro*. During one breathless day in the palacio of a Spanish count, scheme and cabal are met by counter-scheme and cabal, authored by all hands. Marriages are arranged, broken, rearranged and broken again; libelous testimony is superceded by the surprise of family reunion, and love trysts carried out with jealous husbands lurking in the shadows—but who's trysting with whom? And wherefore? It's a true comedy, poking fun at social identity but ending in marriage and reconciliation, and every moment, big and little, exhales a youthful free spirit. There's always something new; *Figaro* always refreshes itself.

Librettist Da Ponte, a friend of Casanova, grew up in the Venice where Goldoni introduced psychological characters into the stock comic types of *Commedia Dell'Arte* with *The Servant of Two Masters*, and where Carlo Gozzi countered him with a renewal of romance tied to burlesque in *The Love of three Oranges* and *Turandot*. De Ponte dialectically combined and exceeded these innovations of the mid-century on the eve of the Revolution. He and Mozart, without being aware of Diderot's innovations in dramaturgy, which replaced the old surprises and reversals of Baroque theater with a more classic sense of "tableaux"—images and scenes that, as his German counterpart Lessing said, showed "the pregnant moment"—arrived at an original and very flexible style that gracefully incorporated the older contradictory forms. The innovation seems to invite oxymorons: a comedy that is bawdy yet graceful, youthfully innocent but with the wisdom and detachment of age.

When Da Ponte (who would end his long life in New York as the first Jew on the faculty at Columbia) presented himself before the Holy Roman Emperor in Vienna (after fleeing Venice, where he'd opened a brothel with the married mistress he'd taken as a young seminarian) to plead for the post of court poet, Joseph II asked what plays he'd written. "None," replied Da Ponte. "So we shall have a virgin muse!" exclaimed the Defender of the Faith, who hired him on the spot.

Even before Cabaret Opera's curtain goes up, the audience is treated to some sparkling diversions, with tables in front of the house, and the choruses, male and female, waiting on the patrons at arrival, looking like lusty footmen and demure maids in their antediluvian weeds. There's a lot of

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chasing around, in and out of the as-yet-unraised curtain, as Cherubino (Meghan Dibble in the San Francisco production, Elizabeth Henry in Berkeley), having just discovered love, pursues Barbarina (Sarah Sloan/Shanna Fallihee), the gardener's daughter. (Adam Broner takes the role of Antonio).

Once the curtain is raised, the complications begin. Figaro (Steven Hoffmann) and Susanna (Suzanna Mizell/Eliza O'Malley) are preparing to celebrate their wedding—but are grimly aware their master, Count Almaviva (Joaquin Quilez-Marin), intends to exercise “doite du seigneur” on Susanna, the aristocrat's right over his female subjects, by hook or crook. Meanwhile, Almaviva is jealous of his Countess, Rosina (Pamela Connelly/Letitia Page), whom the scamp Cherubino is pursuing. In true comic fashion, the lies mount, dreamt up on the spot to explain away the discovery of the last deceit—a palimpsest of hypocrisy—and the opposing sides scheme and the individuals soliloquize their own thoughts, versus what they say to each other. And what is said may change when a character dons a disguise or takes another's place, as when Figaro, who has pretended to escape out a window to cover for Cherubino (the real defenestrator), is confronted with a witness to the boy's flight, and counters with, “If he jumped, why couldn't I?”

Cabaret Opera's cast acts out their parts with piquant zest and sings wonderfully. Last weekend, Pamela Connelly's arias were stunning; Suzanna Mizell and Meghan Dibble excelled in acting and singing their roles. And Robert Ashens' piano accompaniment (Hadley McCarroll will play in Berkeley) backed these troupers with excellence and brio. Ashens' musical direction and Goat Hall founder Harriet March Page's artistic and stage direction combined artistic success with the fun of the comedy and the pleasure of cabaret style, with refreshments and conversation before the show, at intermission and after. Bravo Figaro—and Cabaret Opera!

## THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO

Presented by San Francisco Cabaret Opera

at 8 p.m. Friday, March 13 and at 2 p.m. Sunday, March 15 at the Hillside Club, 2286 Cedar St.  
\$15-\$30. (415) 289-6877. [www.goathall.org](http://www.goathall.org).