

Baldwin Wallace's Spring Opera to open this Thursday evening

by Daniel Hathaway



This weekend when Baldwin Wallace presents its Spring Opera, two casts of students will be singing in a work written by a composer younger than themselves. Wolfgang Amadè Mozart finished *La finta giardiniera* in Munich in 1775 at the age of 18 and saw it performed in January of that year.

"It's a crazy story, a funny piece with something for everyone — mad scenes, lust, joy, sorrow," stage director Benjamin Wayne Smith said when I spoke to him recently in his studio. "It's a somewhat clunky version of what Mozart did so well later with the marriage of the comic and the dramatic. There are moments of jaw-dropping beauty, and moments when

you see somebody who is just trying to find his feet. I started out admiring the piece and grew to love it."

Opera fans can catch this early Mozart work at the Kleist Center on the Baldwin Wallace campus on Thursday, Friday and Saturday, February 26, 27 and 28 at 7:30 and on Sunday, March 1 at 2:00.

If *La finta* is not one of Mozart's best-known titles, a lot of that has to do with the disappearance of the original materials. Until the Italian version finally turned up in the 1970s, the piece was known only through *Die Gärtnerin aus Liebe*, the German *Singspiele* Mozart converted it into, rewriting some of the music in the process.

Smith found the piece to be tailor-made for his BW singers. "Mozart opera is a safe training-ground for young singers. You're not going to hurt yourself with this material, and it's a great way to develop your vocal strength and stagecraft. And with *La finta*, I can give the most opportunities to the most singers. I have a very fit class of strong tenors and great sopranos. There are seven leading roles, and everyone has at least one aria. That gives fourteen people a real stage opportunity."

I ask Ben Smith to give a Seattle Opera “Long Story Short” version of the synopsis. He rolls his eyes a bit, but says, “I’m not going to dodge your question. There’s a central story line about a rich, powerful woman who has gone undercover as a gardener to spy on a man who stabbed her in a jealous rage. He gets confused and we spend one and a half acts with her running hot and cold on him. At the end, she forgives him. There are a couple of other love triangles percolating, and it ends just like most Mozart comedies — with happy days and ‘all hail, Love.’”

Trimming the work down for a modern cast and audience has been something of a struggle. “We lost a total of ten arias but left the finales basically intact. We made ruthless cuts in the recitatives. Those are difficult for students because they require a facility and a sophistication with language. This piece has more recitatives than any other piece I’ve ever worked on,” Smith said. “Later in Mozart’s career, Da Ponte’s texts are thoughtful and concise, but that’s not true with the unknown librettist of *La finta*. There’s one recitative in Act II (we call it ‘the judgment recitative’) that’s ten pages long! I cut as much as I could, but it was a real puzzle to put together.”

There are still plenty of recitatives left, but the students will have the expert help of guest conductor Clinton Smith, who will both conduct the orchestra and accompany the recitatives. “He has his own choirs and orchestras in Seattle and Minneapolis,” Ben Smith said. “He’ll be a strong dance partner for the students because he gives them lots of information from the keyboard.”

Rehearsing dual casts in a comic opera has both its advantages and complications. Early on when the two teams have the opportunity to see each other work, there’s an opportunity for cross-fertilization of ideas. “I tell them to steal what they want from each other, then I give them permission to do their own show, and the comedy takes care of itself. Now we’re at a point when they’re not seeing each other’s work. They have to make it their own.”

Benjamin Wayne Smith is delighted with the work his students are doing. “I tell them that this piece will live and die on the energy we are able to bring to the stage. Some nights we finish rehearsing at 10:30 and they say they’re going to have to stay up all night studying for a test, but their energy is inspiring.”

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