

Review**Opera Western Reserve: *Barber of Seville*
at Stambaugh Auditorium, Youngstown (November 30)**

by Robert Rollin



Last Friday evening, November 30, Opera Western Reserve presented its annual Stambaugh Auditorium production. It has been several years since the company has scheduled an *opera buffa*, or comic opera, and Giachino Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*, among the greatest in the genre, was a marvelous choice. Area opera lovers responded with an enormous appreciative crowd. Headlining the production was Youngstown-born tenor, Lawrence Brownlee, internationally known for his beautiful voice, remarkable technical agility, and dramatic flair. The Company dedicated the performance to Dr. Carol Baird for her

devotion to the arts education of the children of Youngstown City Schools and her activities as The Youngstown Connection Founding Director. Prior to the performance Brownlee expressed his appreciation for Baird's irreplaceable contribution to his artistic development.

Rossini wrote this masterpiece at the age of twenty-four, and the production sparkled with stunningly attractive singing, rapid-fire pacing, and fine choral and orchestral accompaniment. Brownlee, as Count Almaviva, Rosina's eager suitor, led the impeccable cast, and lived up to his international reputation with fabulous vocal delivery. His pearly tone and fine acting were consistent all evening.

Randa Rouweyha as Rosina, old Dr. Bartolo's reluctant and sophisticated ward, shined brightly, as she dashed about the stage. Her eyes gleamed, and she tossed-off her difficult *bel canto* soprano lines with knowing looks and animated gestures.

Brian Keith Johnson as Figaro, the barber, seemed to revel in his role as lively catalyst to the silly events leading inexorably to the lead couple's happy marriage. He really made Figaro come alive as the schemer, trickster figure, who always has witty asides and quick-witted actions. His sharp eyes glowed brightly, and he paced his finely agile singing and acting with cheerful alacrity.

Jason Budd as the greedy and possessive old Dr. Bartolo, delivered his role with appropriate exaggerated buffoonery, ignoring the young lovers even as they fall in love.

Timothy Bruno's Don Basillio, the scheming music master, was attractive and engaging. His darkly attractive vocal quality further enlivened the role. Bruno's Act Two aria, "A Rumor is like a vapor" was especially effective, as the orchestra presented explosive cannon shots to the words, "it starts to sound like a cannon shot." Rossini's extended crescendo enlivened this beautifully sung aria.

The lesser roles were well played. This was especially true of Dianna Farrell's Berta, the housekeeper. Her lovely vocal quality was impeccable. Jon Simsic's role as the Sargeant was appropriately exaggerated and nicely paced.

The orchestra was conducted skillfully as always, and talented Music Director Susan Davenny Wyner paced the comedic flow very effectively. She elivened the crescendos and the fast patter in the ensembles, and deftly nurtured the ornamented *bel canto* passages in the lead parts. Production Director David Vosburgh did an excellent job with blocking that never held up the comedic flow. The main set was attractive and lent versatility to an opera conceived with limited scene changes.

Act One's final ensemble, with everyone almost shouting their ensemble parts at once, was terrific and more than worthy of the comic opera tradition. Act Two's fluctuating ensembles were consistently excellent. The music lesson scene, with Brownlee bedecked with a long white wig to impersonate a replacement music teacher, was slapstick and great fun. Rouwyeha's amusing facial expressions further supported the comedic flow, and her *bel canto* singing was gorgeous.

The consistent attention to details, fine singing, and solid balance of singers with chorus and orchestral accompaniment made this a professional production of distinction.

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