

**Review****Ohio Light Opera: *Gypsy Baron* (July 2)**

by J.D. Goddard

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On Tuesday afternoon, July 2, at Friedlander Hall on the campus of The College of Wooster, the Ohio Light Opera presented their opening summer performance of Johann Strauss Jr.'s *The Gypsy Baron*. The scoring and the nature of the piece led many critics to consider it neither a comic opera nor a lyric opera, and thus an operetta. Whatever you call it, during the composer's lifetime *The Gypsy Baron* enjoyed great success, second only to the popularity of *Die Fledermaus*. This was a time when Vienna was awash in the beloved waltzes of Strauss Jr. and audiences turned out in droves to hear his always engaging melodic waltz themes while dancing the evenings away.

For today's audiences, however, staging an operetta such as *The Gypsy Baron*, with its predictable story line, romantic happy ending, concealed identities and syrupy dose of social satire can prove to be a daunting task. Ignaz Schnitzer's libretto (English translation by Ruth and Thomas Martin) utilized the usual stock operetta types: feuding Hungarians and gypsies, a buried treasure and a notable absence of genuine mirth.

Director Steven Daigle's cast included a mixture of faces old and new to the company. Tenor Stephen Faulk (*Ottokar*) sang with a gentle and lyric subtlety. He was wonderfully convincing as the love sick young romantic. His coy yet hidden love for Arsena shown keenly throughout and his boyish enthusiasm was refreshing.

Baritone Stefan Gordon lent a Steve Martinesque stylization to the role of Count Carnero that was quite a hit with its humorous and captivating wit. His vocal prowess was strong, exacting and prudent.

As the adventurer, Sándor Barinkay, tenor Andrew Maughan brought to the stage a mature, solid, and well placed voice that rang throughout the hall. His commanding stage presence gave his character genuine authority and strength.

Mezzo Julie Wright Costa was buoyant and assured as the gypsy matriarch, Czipra. Her strong, resonant voice carried well into the house.

Baritone Jesus Murillo was buffoonish and foppish as the pig farmer. Though his ridiculous wig and opulent costume were humorous, a more subtle approach to his characterization would have been much more appropriate and appealing. Less, at times, can be more.

Mezzo Olivia Maughn was strong and confident in her role as Mirabella, and she brought to the stage a maturity of vocal strength. Her attention to detail and character analysis were astute and consistent throughout the show.

As Arsena, soprano Elise Kennedy (*Arsena, daughter of Zsupan*) sang with a clear brilliance supported by solid vocal training. Her ease of movement on stage was a pleasure to watch and her character was well portrayed.

Soprano Tara Sperry was outstanding as Saffi. Her stage presence and gypsy mannerisms were well thought out and her voice was strong, resonant and brilliant.

Filling out this fine cast in smaller roles were Mark Syder, Christopher Nelson, Nathan Brian, Luke Hefner, Clark Sturdevant, Michael Lucas, Jarrett Smith, Alexia Butler, Nadia Fayad, Benjamin Krumreig, Hannah Kurth, Wendy Muir, and Emily Neill.

As usual the OLO chorus was outstanding and their vocal cohesiveness and clarity were impeccable. Conductor Steven Byess did an impressive job of holding this difficult score together with its constant metric nuances before and after musical lines. Director Steven Daigle made usually wise choices with regard to movement and story line.

Carol Hageman's choreography was pleasing and simple; a few more performances will help settle the cast in. Whitney Locher's costumes were excellent and Cassandra King's sets were charming, though sight lines were sometimes cut off on the outer perimeters downstage. Erich R. Keil's lighting was effective and appropriate.

It is always a pleasure to hear and see the productions put forth by the Ohio Light Opera. Their attention to detail, professional approach and entertaining performance style make for an always enjoyable afternoon or evening. We are blessed to have this fine troupe of professionals in our backyard and so easily accessible.

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