

CIM Opera's *The Marriage of Figaro*: conversations with Susanna and Figaro

by Mike Telin



The celebrated collaboration between Mozart and librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte yielded three of the most popular operas in the repertoire. This week, CIM Opera Theater will present *The Marriage of Figaro*, the first of those operas, beginning on Wednesday, November 4 at 7:30 in the Cleveland Institute of Music's Kulas Hall. Performances run through Saturday. The opera will be sung in Italian with English subtitles.

Based on Pierre Beaumarchais' play *The Marriage of Figaro*, which had been banned in Vienna due to the plot's lack of moral restraints, the opera is full of comical, manipulative mind

games as Count Almaviva neglects his wife, the Countess Rosina Almaviva, in order to pursue her maid Susanna, who is about to marry his valet Figaro. Luckily, everything works out in the end for all parties.

"No offense to the other characters, but I think Susanna happens to be the mastermind of the entire opera," soprano Caroline Bergan told me during a lively joint conversation with her fellow cast member, bass Daniel Fridley. Bergan, who will sing the role of Susanna, went on to say that her character is incredibly intelligent, cheeky, and always a few steps ahead of everyone else. "She also has a pureness and innocence about her. It's the combination of innocence and intelligence that sometimes makes the role difficult to play. Also, she can't *always* be seen as the mastermind."

Fridley, who will perform the role of Figaro, said that while his character likes to think that *he* is the intelligent mastermind, he isn't. "He's trying to hatch all of these plots, but every time he tries, it doesn't quite work out the way he expects," Fridley said. "Because of that, Figaro ends up getting pulled along through this adventure by Susanna's plotting

more than his own.” It’s a crazy plot to be sure, but Bergan and Fridley both think that the opera is very funny and people will laugh from beginning to end.

Both singers have enjoyed the process of developing their characters with director David Bamberger, who has spent a lot of time focusing on their movements and gestures onstage. “Mr. Bamberger wants a clear divide between how the aristocracy moves and how the servant class moves,” Fridley said, adding that he has had to learn how to be lighter on his feet and “more smiley and mobile.”



The same is true for Susanna. “I too am a servant,” Bergan pointed out. “I also need to be quick on my feet. Whereas the Countess is sometimes in her own world and has moments that are very grand, Susanna is always interacting with someone, so I need to be active even when I’m not singing.”

While both feel that it’s the interaction with all of the characters that makes being part of the cast so much fun, Fridley said that the ensemble-driven opera is musically very contrapuntal, and the challenge for the performers is to focus on the entire score. “In the sextets and septets you not only need to be aware of what you’re doing, but even more aware of everything else that is happening before, after, and during your part.” Bergan agreed. “You can’t just sing your part, you have to constantly be listening to the other parts as well. I have to say that my favorite part of the opera is the Act II Finale with its never-ending layers upon layers of ensemble writing.”

Do they have a favorite aria? “Absolutely,” Fridley answered quickly. “‘Aprite un po’ quegli occhi’ is my favorite because it’s the one where Figaro is the most raw. He

talks directly to the audience for the first time in the opera. He actually believes that his wife is going to meet up with the Count, and he's not particularly pleased about it. It's that moment when his emotions get the better of him, and he says that all women are faithless. Even though that's not true, it's always amusing to sing about."

Bergan looks forward to the aria "Giunse alfin il momento...Deh vieni, non tarda," which she called "quite challenging, because you've pretty much sung the entire opera and finally get to create such a beautiful moment, especially after the craziness of the Act II Finale. I think this is Susanna's moment to shine."

At the end of the conversation I asked both cast members how they found their way to opera.

Although he was born elsewhere, Daniel Fridley grew up in Oregon and considers himself to be a proud Oregonian. A first year master's student at CIM, he did his undergraduate work at Oregon State University, where he entered with the intention of becoming a choral conductor. He started singing in the fourth grade when he joined a community children's choir. When he was young he was obsessed with *Rigoletto*. "I wanted my father to play the entire opera at least once a day," he said with a laugh. But after he began singing in choirs, he paid no attention to opera and wanted nothing to do with it when he entered undergraduate school. "I took the vocal performance option only because I wanted to develop my voice. Then I was cast in my first opera scene. Ironically it was the Act IV Finale of *Figaro*. From that moment on I became more interested in opera as an art form and enjoyed singing it more and more too."

Born in Florida to a French mother and a Norwegian father, Caroline Bergan spent most of her childhood in Europe in the hometowns of her parents. After returning to the States in 2000, she eventually enrolled at the University of West Florida to study nursing, but when her mother became ill she withdrew in order to care for her. During that time her mother advised her to choose a career that she loved. "I took her advice very seriously. I loved to sing in the shower, and for as long as I can remember I've wanted to sing onstage. One day I went to my church and asked the choir director to make a CD of two art songs that I could use to audition for the University of West Florida's music program. I listened to them over and over again until I had them memorized because I couldn't read music." She was accepted, and now has one remaining class to complete for her master's degree at CIM.

Fridley and Bergan concur: once you've been bitten by the opera bug, there's no turning back.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com November 2, 2015.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)