

Cleveland Opera Theater: a conversation with *The Marriage of Figaro*'s title character

by Mike Telin



“The challenge of performing the role of Figaro is holding onto all of the words, but the character is so much fun,” Christopher Holmes said. “As a baritone, I’m used to playing the bad guy, which is a lot of fun too, but this role is written so well that I’m really looking forward to it.” This week the Oberlin graduate will make his Cleveland Opera Theater debut, singing the title role of Mozart’s popular opera buffa *Le nozze di Figaro*.

Directed by Scott Skiba, performances will take place at the Cleveland Masonic Auditorium in MidTown on Friday, April 28 at 7:30 pm and Sunday, April 30 at 3:00 pm. Domenico Boyagian will conduct the Cleveland Opera Theater Orchestra and cast, which includes Christopher Holmes as Figaro, Marian Vogel as Susanna, Brian Keith Johnson as Count Almaviva, and Rachel Copeland as Countess Rosina. The opera will be sung in Italian with English supertitles.

A mainstay of the repertoire, *The Marriage of Figaro* is the first of Mozart’s collaborations with librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte. The plot is filled with mistaken identity, surprise paternity, and intrigue, as the servants Figaro and Susanna triumph in marriage while comically thwarting the attempts of the philandering Count Almaviva to seduce Susanna.

“I’ve sung the role of the Count a couple of times, but this is my first Figaro,” Holmes said during a recent telephone conversation. “He’s a good-natured fellow, and although he’s motivated by money and other worldly things, there’s something about him that is virtuous.”

Based on a comedy by Pierre Beaumarchais, the opera is a social commentary about the lower versus the upper class. “As good-natured as Figaro is, he hasn’t been treated well by the Count,” Holmes said. “In the beginning of the opera, he understands that the Count is trying to seduce Susanna. But then he thinks, ‘OK, I can play that game too. I can be just as clever and cunning as the Count.’”



Holmes said that it is the combination of comedy — servants outsmarting the aristocracy — and great music that makes *The Marriage of Figaro* as popular with audiences as it is with performers. “With all the twists and turns of the plot and music — especially during the Finale of Act II — you just don’t know what is going to happen next.”

The production will be presented in period setting, an aspect that Holmes finds fun. “I think audiences like that, and it does make it a little more relatable. Scott’s all about bringing out the theatrical side of opera, and Mozart, especially *Figaro*, is perfect for that approach. Of course, you need to serve the music, and I think he’s doing a great job of making it physical and entertaining while staying true to the score.”

The baritone said that he is enjoying his first experience working with Skiba, noting that the director gives the cast room to bring their own takes on their characters to the production. “It’s interesting because Scott will give some general ideas during staging rehearsals, and then say, ‘Let’s just play around with it.’ He’ll watch what you do, then offer suggestions, so it becomes a collaborative effort. And that makes it even more enjoyable.”

Holmes is also having fun working with the rest of the cast. “Everyone is new to me but it’s been great getting to know them. I remember meeting Jason Budd, who’s singing Don Bartolo, at a competition way back when. One of the great things about this business is, you work with people so intensely for a short period of time, then you walk away lifelong friends.”

This week performances mark the kick-off of Cleveland Opera Theater's Free Student Ticket Program. For more information and to reserve tickets, contact [Lisa Yanofsky](#), Director of Education and School Programs.

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