

## Oberlin Opera embraces the fun and games in *La finta giardiniera*

by Stephanie Manning



The Oberlin Opera students have recently been learning to see their stage as a playground — literally.

In Mozart’s *La finta giardiniera*, “these characters are sort of playing games in regards to their romantic relationships,” director Stephanie Havey explained. “So we’ve incorporated different children’s games and playground activities into the action, as a metaphor for how they’re manipulating each other.”

This comedic Mozart opera from 1775, which boasts enough mistaken-identity plotlines to set one’s head spinning, will be presented this weekend at Oberlin’s Hall Auditorium. Conducted by Christian Capocaccia, the Thursday, March 6, Friday, March 7, and Saturday, March 8 performances are at 8:00 pm, while the Sunday, March 9 performance is at 2:00 pm.

*La finta giardiniera*, or “The Pretend Garden-Girl,” is a less-recognizable title in Mozart’s catalog. The composer wrote it when he was just 18, together with librettist Giuseppe Petrosellini — not one of his usual collaborators. But, “it’s a great introduction for the students” to Mozart’s later repertoire, Havey said. “You still notice similarities in how he writes, and the complexity he brings to what would otherwise be stock characters in 18th-century opera.”

The multiple couples fall into various misunderstandings and deceptions in their quest for love, all taking place in a garden over the course of 24 hours. With such limited scope, “we wanted to move into something more stylized,” Havey said. A deck of playing cards, a motif also used in the production’s logo, appears right away during the work’s overture.

When night falls, “this very cheerful garden becomes dark and shadowy and feels like a maze, as many gardens are designed to be. Then they sort of find each other under the lantern light. Ultimately, they all reject their societal arranged marriage matches, and choose love in the end.”

The various hijinks and deceptions provide plenty of opportunity for comedy, a genre Havey (*pictured*) particularly enjoys. “It’s so much fun,” she said. “I think comedy allows students to work on their improvisational skills and to test the waters as a performer.”

The cast is often busy with the academic side of opera, memorizing roles and learning new languages. “But then once they’re on stage, they need to just have all of that in their back pocket, ready to go — and then it’s time to play,” Havey said.

In this production, “I really have encouraged them to play with each other, and pay attention to what’s happening in the moment,” she said. “If your scene partner jumps over here, then you’re ready to jump over there — be on your toes.”

Havey’s own interpretation of the opera involved making some cuts, particularly of the scene where the two lead characters go mad and begin to believe they are Greek gods. “In my mind, it took away from all the clever dealings that were happening previous to that,” she said. “I was more interested in the matchmaking aspect.”

All told, the original three-hour runtime was cut down to two hours of music with a fifteen-minute intermission. “That feels much more like what a modern audience is used to or perhaps looking for,” she said. “But we get all of the hijinks that Mozart was intending.”

The two different styles of vocal writing — opera seria and opera buffa — each get their time in the spotlight. “In the end, this opera has been classified as a ‘dramma giocoso,’ meaning it has the comedy and the drama. So we still showcase both aspects there, and I thought that was important for maintaining the style of the piece.”

*La finta giardiniera* is Havey’s second fully-staged opera as an official Oberlin faculty member — she was appointed associate professor and director of Oberlin Opera Theater in the fall of 2024. As a visiting professor the previous year, she led productions of Britten’s *Albert Herring* and Monteverdi’s *L’Orfeo*.

“I feel like I just hit the ground running in my first official year,” she said. It’s been quite the busy last six months for the opera program, with students staging Massenet’s



*Cendrillon*, participating in the concert production of Rhiannon Giddens' *Omar*, and getting out into the community to perform a children's opera at local elementary schools.

“We're always looking for ways to collaborate with other departments and programs — and working on some plans for next year, hopefully we'll see more collaborations.”

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