

THEATER

MOT's 'Marriage of Figaro' captures Mozart's genius for melody

BY FRANK PROVENZANO
STAFF WRITER

Nearly at the completion of his one-year apprenticeship with the Michigan Opera Theatre, bass singer Frank Pitta has arrived at a revelation. "Opera is not just the 'Fat Lady' singing," said the Rochester Hills resident.

That type of light-hearted understatement is perfectly suited for the flowing spectacle of "The Marriage of Figaro," considered by critics and audiences alike as the most entertaining operatic comedy ever.

MOT's production of Mozart's well-known opera, featuring Pitta and several local residents, opens this Saturday and runs through May 17. An additional performance was added in response to the unexpected strong public demand. Increasing ticket sales along with MOT's expanded 1997-98 performance schedule are sure signs that Motown is gaining international recognition for another type of music.

Few other operas are as accessible as Mozart's masterpiece. Novice merely have to appreciate Figaro's familiar aria "Non piu andrai" ("Say good-bye now to pastime and play, lad"), the finale to Act I, to grasp the broader dimension of melodrama put to song.

"The genius of Mozart is that

he plums the depth of emotion and delineates characters with music that's perfectly structured, yet highly expressive," said David DiChiera, MOT general director. "He is named up the Classical period and ushered in the Romantic period."

For those who consider opera esoteric and designed exclusively for the trained ears of multi-lingual aristocrats, think of "The Marriage of Figaro" as "Seinfeld" in the realm of recitative and aria — opera for every man. The lasting influence of comedy, as they say, is in the sub text, or what isn't said explicitly. For wit and characterization with an ever-twisting slapstick timing, "The Marriage of Figaro" is an operatic can't miss.

While "Seinfeld" is a show about, well, nothing in particular, Mozart's deft transformation of Pierre Beaumarchais' controversial play has the appearance of a harmless slapstick adventure about, well, "Yada, yada, yada." Of course, some may ask questions about meaning and historical context.

On a superficial level, "The Marriage of Figaro" takes place on the day of Figaro's wedding to Susanna. Both are servants of the Count and Countess Almaviva. The Count tries cunningly to win Susanna's "favor" before the marriage. Spin offs from the main story line, to use

On Stage

What: "Marriage of Figaro," an opera in four acts by Mozart presented by the Michigan Opera Theatre
Where: Detroit Opera House, 1526 Broadway, Detroit
When: May 3-4, 7-9-11, 17; 8 p.m. on Wednesday, Friday, Saturdays; 2 p.m. on Sunday.
Tickets: \$20-\$75; (313) 874-7464, (810) 645-8665.

Seinfeldian logic, is a lot of "yada, yada, yada" with amorous characters eventually finding hormonal closure.

But more importantly, there's a strong revolutionary aesthetic running through Mozart's opera. In the late 18th century Europe, there was a fermenting undercurrent of class revolt, a movement between the peasantry and bourgeoisie. In the early 1780s, Beaumarchais' play was banned because it presented a servant, Figaro, who proves superior — at least in matters of the heart — to his master, Count Almaviva. After the Vienna Emperor Joseph II was convinced that all political inflammatory elements were discarded from the play, Mozart's adaptation was allowed to open. That was 1785, three years before the French Revolution destroyed the ruling

European aristocracy.

Nineteenth-century German composer Richard Wagner, whose opera "The Flying Dutchman" carries on in a much heavier Romantic spirit, noted how Mozart's opera transcended the times. "Beaumarchais' play contains cunning and calculating battles while in Mozart they are transformed into human beings."

While unflinchingly comedic, the opera is hardly uncomplicated, said John Paul White, a professor of music at Oakland University and professional opera singer. "The style of 'Figaro,' which is basically talking on pitch is modern musical theatre," he said. "And until then, it was unusual for an opera to focus on very common people."

"The Marriage of Figaro" also presents an uncommon opportunity for Joe Pokorski, of Rochester Hills. In the role of Don Curzio, Pokorski faces the challenge of singing with a stutter as the serious, yet difficult-to-take-seriously barrister. At 23, he is one of the youngest and most promising cast members.

"There's an excitement and thrill when performing at the (Opera) House like your body is being torn in half," said Pokorski, who has appeared in MOT's "La Traviata" and "La Boheme." Two days after "The Marriage of Figaro" closes in mid May, Pokorski will travel to



Comedic classic: The Michigan Opera Theatre performs Mozart's famous opera, "The Marriage of Figaro."

Germany, where he'll sing lead tenor in the international cast of "Phantom of the Opera."

Meanwhile, longtime MOT performer Frank Buchalter of Troy, brings an every man approach to his role. By day, Buchalter is the program director at WKQI-FM. Beginning on

Saturday, Buchalter, who's performed with MOT since 1978, will sing in the chorus.

"I tell people, 'My (musical) interests range from 'Hootie and the Blowfish' to Mozart,'" he said. "I'm just happy to be one of the penants."

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attend our most popular, sellout-type shows."

The lawn fixed seating will allow 1,350 more patrons on the hill making the total capacity at the venue 16,624. By the beginning of the 1998 concert season concession stands will be built underneath the new seating area.

Other improvements planned for the summer include expanding the Pine Knob Courtyard, resurfacing the areas of the main parking lot, and adding landscaping and painting throughout the grounds. The venue will also switch to independence.

Township's public water supply. Mary Olenczak, executive director of the Ann Arbor Summer Festival, said "some bigger named stars" are coming to the series which runs from June 21 to July 13 at the Power Center, Burton Memorial Tower, Lurie Carillon, and Blanche Anderson Moore Hall at the University of Michigan.

Junior Brown and the Saline Riders Philharmonic kick off the festival Friday, June 21, with country singer Tammy Wynette,

pop act the BoDeans, R&B's Neville Brothers, comedy act Captain Steps, and diva Betty Buckley set to perform during the 14th annual season.

Rhythm and blues and jazz are on the docket at Chene Park Music Theatre on the Detroit River waterfront. Patti LaBelle, Isley Brothers, George Duke, Bobbi Humphrey, Will Downing and Phil Perry are among the confirmed acts. Chene Park promoter Thom Price said that the "Jazz on the Beach" series at Belle Isle will return this summer.

Package deals

Music fans will get more bang for their buck this summer as package tours become more frequent. The Lilith Fair (Sarah McLachlan, Paula Cole, The Cardigans, and Fiona Apple), R.O.A.R. Tour (Iggy Pop, Sponge, Ozzy, and Ozzy Osbourne, Black Sabbath, Pantera among others), Fruit of the Loom Country Comfort Tour (Hank Williams Jr. Travis Tritt), Warped Tour (Mighty Mighty Bosstones, Social Distortion),

Further Festival (Bob Weir, Mickey Hart), and Blues Music Festival (B.B. King, Robert Cray Band) are confirmed.

H.O.R.D.E. Festival organizers said that the festival featuring Neil Young, Morphine, Widespread Panic, and Primus is tentatively set to hit Pine Knob Sunday, July 27-Monday, July 28.

The Big Top Festival — rumored to include techno artists Banco de Gaia, BT, Southern Real Jack, Pluke, Faithless, and Ninja Tune — DJ Food, Coldcut, and Kid Koala — is also tentatively scheduled to come to Detroit this summer. Other techno packages are in the works.

Details on the Lollapalooza Festival were not available at press time but are expected to be announced soon.

Country concert promoter Nathan Vostal of Rochester's Southern Exposure public relations and promotions firm has announced that the Collin Raye, Crystal Bernard, and selected country music "baby bands" tentatively scheduled to perform at the Phoenix Plaza

Thursday, June 26.

Radio station festivals are hitting the circuit again this year. CIMX-FM (98.7) will have its "98X Birthday Bash" with Beck, Pavement, Soul Coughing, Sloan and Dr. Octagon, Wednesday, May 28, at the Phoenix Plaza Amphitheatre in Pontiac. Its sister station, CIDR-FM (93.9) is hosting "Riverfest" on Sunday, June 29, at the Phoenix Plaza. Morphine, Odds, Patty Griffin, William Topley, Thornetta Davis, Whiskeytown, and Stewart Franche are among those performing at the concert which benefits Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Metro Detroit.

Details about WHYT-FM

(96.3)'s "PlanetFest '97" will be released within the next couple of weeks, according to Mark Wuggazer, the station's marketing director.

"What we're working on is even bigger and better than last year and that's not just hype. We're looking at securing a really major league superstar headliner and that ain't no joke," he said.

WWW-FM's Budweiser Downtown Hoedown is returning to Hart Plaza in Detroit Friday, May 16-Sunday, May 18. Headliners include Burning Daylight and Diamond Rio on Friday, May 16; Buffalo Club, Mark Wills, David Lee Murphy,

Mark Chestnutt, Holly Dunn and Patty Loveless on Saturday, May 17; and David Kersh, Jeff Wood, Kevin Sharp, and John Berry on Sunday, May 18. The free festival starts at noon every day.

"It's a much better value overall," Corey explained about multi-act shows. "It's a longer show. There's more acts. We haven't seen some of the package tours that were out last year like Lollapalooza, House of Blues shows that were very popular last year. If you add those to the mix, we're assuming that we're going to get some portion of those — it really makes for very strong season."

Benefit spotlights music for the heart

BY LINDA ANN CHOMIN
STAFF WRITER

FAR Conservatory of Therapeutic and Performing Arts in Birmingham will present nationally-known pianist David Syme in a concert to benefit persons with disabilities 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, May 7 at The Community House in Birmingham.

Tickets are \$25 per person and includes Afterglow. For tickets and more information call (810) 646-3347.

Preceded will benefit therapy, art instruction, athletic training, and leisure services for children with special needs.

Syme is well known to Detroit audiences for his appearances

with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, and for classical concerts in venues such as the Lincoln Center, Kennedy Center and major halls in 11 European countries. A Juilliard trained pianist, Syme is called "The Human dukebox" for his uncanny ability to recall and play thousands of songs on the piano. Since 1990, the West Bloomfield resident has become known to millions of radio listeners through his live, call-in request shows. He has played favorite songs on radio stations from coast to coast including WJR in Detroit. This is the second time Syme will give a performance to benefit FAR Conservatory.

"Last year's performance was

great for children and adults," said Connie Lott, FAR Conservatory executive director. "David and his band do a wide repertoire of songs that are popular with everyone."

FAR Conservatory opened in June 1974 with classes in drama, music, art, dance, and ice skating. FAR continues to provide innovative services to its clients, and has expanded its challenge to serve all children, adolescents and adults with special needs. Students have a range of disabilities that include mentally and emotionally impaired, closed head injured, autistic, learning disabled, speech impaired, deaf, blind, and physically impaired.



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