

'Figaro' is lavish, entertaining

By **JIM LOWE**
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BARRE – Mozart is to opera what Shakespeare is to theater. Like the playwright, the composer's operas are full of characters and situations that are real, and that we come to care about. And Mozart's music is as divine as Shakespeare's poetry – but most of all, both are incredibly entertaining.

Friday's sold-out audience at the Barre Opera House certainly reflected that when the Green Mountain Opera Festival presented a visually stunning, musically rewarding and delightfully entertaining production of Mozart's comic opera, "The Marriage of Figaro." (The performance will be repeated today at 3 p.m.) The enthusiastic applause rang through the 600-seat hall throughout the evening – including a spontaneous response to the final set.

With this production, the Waitsfield-based festival, now in its fourth year, becomes a worthy competitor to all but the largest regional opera companies in North America. With Jacques Lacombe, a conductor of international standing, and a brilliant director, Ellen Schlaefel, period set by the Mad River Valley's

own Gary Eckhart, and lavish and beautiful costumes by Robina D'Arcy-Fox of White River Junction, Friday's performance was a feast for the eyes as well as the ears.

The da Ponte libretto, based on a controversial play by Beaumarchais, describes an "Upstairs/Downstairs" battle for the honor of one of the servants about to marry another. Susanna, the Countess's lady in waiting, is about to marry Figaro, the Count's manservant, but the Count wants first dibs on the bride. True, he abolished the custom, but Susanna is too attractive to forgo. If that weren't enough, the over-sexed teenage page boy Cerubino wreaks havoc throughout the estate.

In a plot worthy of the Bard himself, the Countess, hurt by her husband's philandering, conspires with Susanna to bring the Count to his knees – quite literally.

All this is set to some of the most beautiful expressive music ever written. Like Shakespeare, Mozart truly understood people.

The cast universally sang well. Soprano Jennifer Aylmer, as the canny Susanna, sang naturally and brilliantly, and gave the part a fine comic lilt.

Andrew Wilkowske was ideally cast as the warm-hearted but all-too-human Figaro. Despite his occasional but irritating embellishments to Mozart's sublime lines, Wilkowske's singing was full of the ease and warmth that makes this character so lovable.

With her more burnished soprano, Kate Mangiameli was a regal but human Countess and, save for a few

rhythmic irregularities, sang with an almost haunting lyricism. Baritone Phillip Addis had real vocal presence as the regal but flustered Count. Mezzo-soprano Adriana Zabalá was hilarious and touching as the wily Cherubino, both vocally and theatrically.

The three comic roles, the only caricatures in the opera, were particularly funny and well performed. Mezzo-soprano Katrina Corbeil was Marcellina, bass Mark Freiman was Bartolo and tenor Brett Colby played both Basilio and Curzio.

There were a few quibbles, but they didn't mar the total effect.

Lacombe's conducting was light and lyrical and the orchestra, though a pick-up ensemble, sounded great. Some of the lines, though, in the slower arias might have been a bit more lyrically elastic without losing their Classical form. And in the finale, how the Count realizes that the Countess knows of his peccadilloes is somewhat unclear.

"The Marriage of Figaro" is an "ensemble piece," meaning that rather than starring roles, there are seven that must be treated as equals to make it work. But, like Shakespeare, the ensemble quality applies to much more than just the singers, and the Green Mountain Opera Festival production is a fully cohesive evening of beautiful entertainment.

The Green Mountain Opera Festival presents the final performance of "The Marriage of Figaro" today at 3 p.m. at the Barre Opera House. Tickets are \$50-\$10; call (802) 476-8188, or go online to www.barreoperahouse.org.