

LOCAL NEWS

Bellissima Opera & Song to stage adaptation of 'The Marriage of Figaro'



José Luis Maldonado, from left, stars as Figaro, Christine Steyer, who developed the concept and script, plays the Countess, and Carl Ratner is the stage director of the Bellissima Opera & Song's adaptation of "The Marriage of Figaro" at the Nineteenth Century Charitable Association in Oak Park. (Working In Concert)



By **MYRNA PETLICKI** | For the Chicago Tribune

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You will hear all the glorious Mozart music and explore the tantalizing tale of the power of privilege — and so much more — in Christine Steyer's new adaptation of "The Marriage of Figaro."

Steyer, who is Bellissima Opera & Song's founder and director, brings four characters forward to help weave the story that explores how censorship nearly shut down the original production of this powerful opera.

Bellissima's production runs at 7 p.m. on July 30 and 31 at the Nineteenth Century Charitable Association, 178 Forest Ave., Oak Park. Tickets are \$15 to \$60. For reservations, go to bellissimaopera.com/Figaro.

"It's a very timely play, especially with what's going on in the country and in the world where we're still questioning the idea of aristocratic privilege," Steyer said. "The idea that some people are born to have more rights than others. It's a constant struggle. Are we moving in the direction of a society and a world where we believe people are more equal?"

Steyer revealed that the author of "The Marriage of Figaro," Beaumarchais, was secretly involved in the American revolution.

In Steyer's innovative adaptation, Steyer said, "I got into the heads of each of our four characters because we needed them to tell the story." That story being about whether this opera should be produced, and what changes should be made to the work before presenting it.

Those four characters were the playwright Beaumarchais; the Emperor of Austria, Joseph the Second (who Steyer declared was "one of the most progressive leaders Europe has ever had,"); composer Mozart; and librettist Da Ponte.

Those four characters will sit in front of the stage. The idea is that they are presenting the arguments about whether to produce the opera Steyer explained. Their arguments are based on historical documentation.

"We're going to see the objections the emperor had to allow this work," Steyer said. "We're going to have Da Ponte and Mozart show how cleverly they're honoring his objections on the public space but they're still doing what they want to do. The audience gets in on some of the jokes."

Steyer praised the source work, declaring, "clever libretto, clever writing, and clever use of music."

The audience will get to see the entire opera performed, only slightly shortened, in addition to the arguments of the four characters about whether it should be performed.

The opera will be sung in Italian with English supertitles. The show runs around two hours and forty-five minutes.

Steyer said the cast is enthusiastic about the adaptation because "it's adding a layer of depth without losing any of the music."

In addition to being the adapter of the piece, Steyer plays the role of the countess."

Despite the serious aspects of the work, there's a lot of humor in the piece because, Steyer reported, "it's a comedy at the end of the day."

Steyer has assembled a powerful cast, led by the worldwide baritone sensation José Luis Maldonado in the lead role of the clever Figaro.

Maldonado praised the attraction of Steyer's concept, noting people like to watch reality shows.

"There's moments where I'll break the fourth wall and talk straight to the audience. It adds a personal touch," he said. "I think the integrity of the character to the music is still there. The main objective is to dig deep into the emotions. There's extra layers that can be added."

Maldonado believes the show will be different every night, "because of how the audience would react."

He praised the ensemble.

"The cast is so wonderful that I've been able to connect with everyone. We have our side jokes. We've been able to synergize. That's what makes it so much more exciting," he said.

Steyer praised stage director Carl Ratner for his encouragement and feedback as she developed the script.

"Christine and I consulted together," Ratner said. "She was the one who created the idea. I was thinking about what's going on on the main stage and how are those actors going to be behaving while the other actors are acting their characters?"

Ratner said some people may think of "The Marriage of Figaro" as old-fashioned but "at the time that 'Figaro' happened, it was hot off the press and extremely controversial. It was a factor in world events, as the aristocrats feared it would be. It still has contemporary resonance today."

Myrna Petlicki is a freelance reporter for Pioneer Press.