

*Le Bon Journal Review by Anne Ku*  
**Figaro, the Barber of Seville in London**

**W**ho is the Barber of Seville? Why, Figaro, of course. The story in Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* follows that of Rossini's *Barber of Seville* even though Figaro was written before the *Barber of Seville*. Both operas are among the most popular of all time. The stories are set in Spain, yet the operas are sung in Italian, based on the original plays in French, and now enjoyed in London.

Rossini was not the first who set the first of Pierre Beaumarchais' trilogy to music. Fans of Giovanni Paisiello staged such a disturbance at Rossini's premiere in 1816 that the curtain fell before the end. Decidedly better than Paisiello's, Rossini's opera quickly spread all over Europe.

I just happened to be in London on the consecutive days of the *Barber of Seville* performance in Ealing, followed immediately the next day by the Royal Opera House's final production of the *Marriage of Figaro* which was broadcasted live on big screens across the country. For the latter, I chose Canary Wharf, the new financial centre of London, far from the madding crowd of Trafalgar Square, to have my picnic with my English guest from Staines.

The annual Ealing Summer Festival that first started with jazz in 1985 has since expanded to include a carnival in nearby Greenford in June, opera, comedy, blues, world music, and a literary festival in September. Every year these events are staged mainly in the 28-acre Walpole Park near Ealing Broadway.

Hailed as the greenest borough in London, also appropriately labeled "Queen of London boroughs," Ealing has a population just over 300,000, comparable to that of Utrecht in the Netherlands where I had spent the last two years. This is the second year of opera in Walpole Park, which opened Bizet's *Carmen* in 2007. Both operas (*Carmen* and *Barber of Seville*) were produced by the London-based Opera A La Carte, which tours the country.

As the weather was wet, windy, and grey the week before, I was naturally hesitant to order a ticket. Not knowing that the opera would be performed inside a marquee, I imagined myself sitting on the fresh grass under an umbrella, shivering in my San Franciscan coat, and wishing myself to be elsewhere. Nothing could be further from my fantasy, as I got there on the 15<sup>th</sup> of July, seated between two French-speaking friends in the cozy dark environs of that huge marquee, with the cool summer breeze and the remnants of sunset spilling through the entrance.

Undisputedly producing an opera is by far the most expensive of all musical performances for it combines live instrumental music with soloist (and often choral) singing and acting, not to mention the sky-is-the-limit investment in costume, props, set, and lighting. I was curious how the *Barber of Seville* could be produced for 20 pounds a ticket for just two days, especially with the risk of an outdoor concert in such uncertain weather and in a festival known for jazz, not opera. Without the guarantee of a full house, the trimmings would have to be made somewhere, somehow: costume, set, or music? Quantity or quality?

To my slight chagrin, Opera a La Carte reduced, or rather, arranged the music for a five-member ensemble, consisting of piano, violin, clarinet, bassoon, and accordeon. Some of the modifications were clever but the sound took some getting used to. Nevertheless this should not come as a surprise, for a full orchestra is very dear. At least the voices would be heard without amplification.

Mezzo soprano Victoria Simmonds is absolutely delightful as Rosina who is wooed by the Count, first disguised as a drunken soldier and later as her music teacher. Figaro, played by a Dutchman Jochem Van Ast, in a jolly bright outfit, is the cunning matchmaker for his master, the Count. This production was set in the 1920's with minimal prop.

In the sequel, *Marriage of Figaro*, the Count has married Rosina but now desires Susanna, the fiancée of Figaro. The Countess (Rosina) and Susanna join Figaro to plot their way to true love. The story gets more complicated by the arrival of Dr Bartolo and Marcellina, all in a day's work.

Once you get used to the formula of mistaken identities, pretense, love, jealousy, and reconciliation, you can't help but laugh at the seriousness of the characters in their pursuit. The English subtitles on the big screen of Royal Opera House's production of *Marriage of Figaro* helped me greatly in appreciating the details of the Italian libretto.

A live performance in the Royal Opera House could command tickets up to STG 200, for the unparalleled singing and star acting by divas, full orchestra in the pit and the entire cast in period costume. But who can afford such prices other than season ticket subscribers and the real aficionado's? In comparison, 20 pounds for Ealing's outdoor opera is a bargain!

Luckily there is a trend to make opera more accessible and affordable to the public through such innovative adventures as live broadcast on big screens, outdoor festivals, and in the extreme, the efforts of Yo! Opera in Holland in exporting opera to the streets, on busses and in doorways of flats where people live. This September, for instance, I will once again enjoy opera near a canal in Utrecht's Museum District, in the open and for free, in the Utrecht Uitfeest.

While plenty of information about Figaro surfaces on the Internet, there is hardly any mention of the third play in Beaumarchais' trilogy. Surprisingly, the little known third play in this trilogy centres around the Countess who is the Guilty Mother, *La Mère Coupable*. Set 20 years after the marriage of Figaro, the countess has an illegitimate child of the love-stricken page Cherubino, who first appeared in *Marriage of Figaro*. Once again, Figaro to the rescue!

**Related links:**

Opera A La Carte: <http://www.operaalacarte.com/>

Ealing Summer Festival:

<http://www.ealing.gov.uk/ealingsummer>

Royal Opera House: <http://www.roh.org.uk>

Yo! Opera: <http://www.yo-opera.nl>

Outdoor opera in Utrecht Uitfeest:

<http://www.oudegrachtoperaconcert.nl/>

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