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Princeton Festival Opens Opera Series with Double Bill

By Nancy Plum

Talk about the rooms where things happen. Princeton Festival presented two one-act operas this past weekend, each taking place in a single room, but the amount of action in that one space captivated the audience in the Festival's new home at Morven Museum & Gardens.

Princeton Festival has always included opera as part of its month-long season of activities, and this year, there are two presentations — a double bill of two shorter operas and a full-length work by English composer Benjamin Britten. What has changed is the venue for these events; rather than being inside a large hall, the Festival constructed a 500-seat state-of-the-art performance tent at Morven Museum & Garden to create a “performing arts extravaganza.” With the singers, orchestra pit, and audience all under one tent, this is a new experience for Princeton Festival attendees.

The Festival's opera series opened this past Saturday night with a performance of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *The Impresario* and Derrick Wang's *Scalia/Ginsburg*, and although these two comedic operas may seem to be unrelated, they were tied together by plotlines involving very strong and influential personalities, both fictional and real. Mozart's 1786 *Der Schauspieldirektor* (*The Impresario*) has been described as a parody on the vanity of singers who argue over just about everything, but mainly money. This comic *singspiel*, with as much spoken dialog as sung music, may have only contained four arias, but the musical material was as technically complex as Mozart's more monumental works.

Featuring only five characters (one of which was a speaking role), *The Impresario* took place in a fictional theatrical office in Vienna, where a hapless opera producer struggled with a conniving stage manager, underhanded banker, diva well past her prime and scheming up-and-coming singer over the potential success of a

new opera. Princeton Festival's production, which opened last Friday night (with additional performances the following Sunday and this coming week), was presented in English, accompanied by the Princeton Symphony Orchestra led by Music Director Rossen Milanov.

By the time of *The Impresario*, Mozart's operatic reputation was well established, as was his approach to soprano characters. Soprano Aubry Ballarò, singing the role of the aging prima donna, possessed a lyrical and dramatic voice, but had no trouble with the coloratura passages in her aria of deceit. Her nemesis, an overly-ambitious soprano sung by Kelly Guerra, took the concept of the operatic *soubrette* to new levels. Where a Mozart *soubrette* would be harmlessly saucy and flirtatious, Guerra's Miss Sweetsong was positively ruthless in her quest to get ahead. Demonstrating a light and sparkly voice, Guerra ripped through coloratura passages with ease, portraying a character no doubt based on sopranos Mozart actually knew. Both Ballarò and Guerra well met Mozart's challenge of roles featuring large vocal ranges and obligatory racing up and down scales.

Nicholas Nestorak sang the role of the amorous banker playing both sides of the field with the sopranos, singing with a sharp-edged tenor voice carrying well over the Orchestra. The vocal surprise of this production may have been bass Cody Müller, playing what appeared to be a non-singing role of the stage manager until the last ten minutes, when he sang with a voice that could shake the rafters. The late entrance of Müller's vocal lines took the audience by surprise as the music had revolved around the other three singers for much of the opera. Princeton Symphony Orchestra was solid in its accompaniment, and Richard Gammon's stage direction well fit within the confines of Julia Noulín-Mérat's stage design under the performance tent.

Like many operatic "double bills," performers from *The Impresario* were recast in the second production of the evening — Derrick Wang's *Scalia/Ginsburg*. Wang's 2015 opera on the relationship between powerful Supreme Court Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Antonin Scalia placed two politically opposing and powerful public figures in comic settings with musical styles borrowed from operatic traditions which have come before. Inspired by Ginsburg and Scalia's divergent opinions and their shared passion for opera, Wang's opera proved to be riveting in its cleverness and ability to keep the audience on its toes waiting for what musical parody might come next.

Tenor Nicholas Nestorak came into his own as Scalia, animatedly professing his frustration with Ginsburg in the musical traditions of Handel, Mozart, and others. Kelly Guerra returned to the stage as Ginsburg, aging a good 40 years from her previous character and singing with the same vocal fierceness through parodies of Mozart's "Queen of the Night" aria and Bellini's *bel canto* style. Cody Müller commanded the stage as The Commentator, effectively bringing the

drama of *Don Giovanni* into a judge's chambers and showing his future as a solid operatic bass.

Princeton Symphony Orchestra continued its solid accompaniment despite the long stretches of dialog, maneuvering well through composer Wang's inventive orchestration. With a clear sky adding to the evening's atmosphere, Princeton Festival's launch of opera for the 2022 season was off to a great start.

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