

'Barber of Seville' in 'toon

Florida Grand Opera stages Rossini crowd-pleaser as a madcap cartoon



Frederic Antoun, Roderick Williams and Sarah Coburn in Florida Grand Opera's "The Barber of Seville." (Gaston De Cardenas, courtesy)

By Bill HirschmanSun Sentinel
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It's apt that the [Florida Grand Opera's](#) "The Barber of Seville" uses inventive animated projections instead of extensive opulent sets as the backdrop for Rossini's crowd-pleaser. After all, the classic is being staged as a gloriously madcap cartoon.

The third offering in the FGO season at the Arsht and Broward Centers seems like a Restoration [comedy](#) directed by [Harpo Marx](#) and [Chuck Jones](#). It includes a chase scene in slow motion fitting Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd (who, of course, performed excerpts on celluloid in 1950).

But it doesn't shortchange music aficionados, not when the heroine Rosina is delivered with verve by the lovely Sarah Coburn who pops off ripples of high notes like champagne bubbles. Coburn dazzled audiences last season in a local concert and created the role of Kitty in FGO's 2007 world premiere of "Anna Karenina."

But she is nearly overshadowed by the full-stage rear projections, a technique FGO contends is its debut in a [Florida opera](#) and its most extensive use in a U.S. opera. Far from a stunt, set designer Andre Barbe and director Renaud Doucet joined with Miami's Lava Studio to create witty environments that morph in ways no one at La Scala ever imagined — and comment dryly on the action.

When the besotted hero hires a band to serenade his sweetheart-to-be, music notation emanates from their instruments to fly around the backdrop until they form a gushing fountain of music. When the often disguised hero Almaviva is revealed as our heroine's true love, a huge arrow with flashing lights appears above his head. In the finale, when the cast lines up on the heroine's balcony, it sprouts wings and flies heavenward a la Monty Python.

Humor aside, the score is in good hands. Rosina was initially written for mezzos, then kidnapped by envious sopranos and in recent years has returned as a staple for mezzos. So FGO gives it audiences something a little different this year by casting Coburn who has a classic soprano range. No worry. In one aria, the supertitles went blank for several minutes, but an audience mesmerized by her full, sparkling voice could care less what words she was singing.

The orchestra conducted by Gary Thor Wedow sounded perfectly competent although there seemed to be a brightness and punch missing other than the sound of a harpsichord.

Frederic Antoun not only had the handsome hero's requisite solid tenor, but genuine comic chops, such as substituting a reedy voice when disguised as a music teacher. Roderick William's American debut served a technically unassailable Figaro whose character was affable, but missing a roguish charisma. The delight of the evening was Bruno Pratico, a bass-baritone from Italy, who depicted the hapless guardian and would-be suitor, Dr. Bartolo. As delightfully silly as he made the villain with grimaces and a few asides in English, he nimbly skipped through the stunningly difficult patter aria, "A un dottor della mia sorte," although he was not audible enough in the cheap seats.

A final note of heresy: As funny — and often straightforwardly lovely — as the evening is, the 90-minute first act really could have been trimmed 10 minutes or so. They did it in Rossini's time, why not now?

If You Go

Florida Grand Opera performs Rossini's "The Barber of Seville" at 8 p.m. Feb. 23, 24, 26, 27 and 2 p.m. Feb. 28 at Arsht Center Ziff Ballet Opera House, 1300 Biscayne Blvd., Miami. Also 8 p.m. March 4 and 6 at Broward Center Au-Rene Theater, 201 SW Fifth Ave., [Fort Lauderdale](#). Tickets \$21-\$200; [fgo.org](#) or 800-741-1010

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