

Somarone, the pedantic composer of minimal gifts; Robert Honeysucker was benevolently expansive as Don Pedro; and David McFerrin was every bit the romantic ideal as Claudio, fiancé to Héro.

Director David Kneuss moved the action to 1950s Sicily, thereby giving designer Robert Perdziola the opportunity to create colorful day dresses for the women, sharp suits and uniforms for the men, and a romantic seaside setting for everyone. Boston continues to be fortunate in conductor Gil Rose, who simply never disappoints his audience. Here, he led the orchestra in a performance that was sensitive to the nuances of Berlioz's masterful orchestration and captured the intelligence and wit of his score.

KALEN RATZLAFF

DALLAS

A thoroughly decent, though conventional, *Lucia di Lammermoor* was the opening production of the Dallas Opera season, eliciting whoops and hollers from appreciative listeners on October 23, at the second performance of the run at the Winspear Opera House. During the summer, as a cost-cutting move, Dallas Opera canceled its planned production of Janáček's *Kat'a Kabanová*, which would have run in repertory with the Donizetti. The decision to eliminate a twentieth-century work, albeit a masterpiece, and to stick with a tried-and-true bel canto crowd-pleaser, made sense, given the basically conservative tastes of Dallas audiences. Although this *Lucia* produced moments of pleasure, it did not generate sufficient fireworks to guarantee a total success.

Garnett Bruce's stage direction was fairly static, but it allowed Alexander Rom to get the best results from the Dallas Opera Chorus, which delivered the goods. Henry Bardon's sets — centered on movable Gothic columns, with a cloudy loch on the back wall — depicted a gloomy Scotland enlivened by the sumptuous costumes designed by the late Peter J. Hall and the brilliant lighting of Marie Barreth. Dallas Opera's music director Graeme Jenkins kept control over the orchestra; the mournful horns in the prelude sounded especially powerful. But by favoring *forte* sounds and fast tempos over softer and slower ones, the maestro may have robbed the performance of musical variety.

On the vocal scene, the results were decidedly mixed. As Lucia, Elena Mosuc took time to warm up; at her weakest, least interesting moments she sang with an unchanging volume, and her trills and other ornamentation were mostly tepid in the second scene of Act I. She had lovely high notes, however. At some magical moments she held and then released them slowly and expressively, as an exhalation or an afterthought.



Mosuc and Hymel, Dallas Opera's Lucia and Edgardo

Mosuc rose to the demands of the role by the mad scene, which was shaped more in the waif-like mode of Natalie Dessay than in the heroic manner of Maria Callas. When Mosuc reached the theme and variations with the flute obbligato (excellently played by Helen Blackburn) in her cadenza, her voice sounded like a woodwind instrument. This was the best duet in the opera: the flute truly sounded like a human voice. The normally cough-prone Dallas audience held its collective breath for much of the scene, a testimony to Mosuc's vocal and dramatic power as her unhinged Lucia maintained courageous determination before collapsing at the end.

Mosuc's dramatic interpretation of Lucia wasn't fully formed: although she showed an interesting, kittenish petulance with her brother in Act II, she did not achieve full presence until the last act. Her Edgardo, Bryan Hymel, was even less vivid. He had excellent diction, but his characterization lacked dramatic vitality. His singing voice often sounded pinched,

forced and metallic (and the metal was neither gold nor silver). "Sulla tomba" seemed to come from a voice within a voice, and the Act I duet, "Verranno a te," produced no subtle blending of the voices, in spite of the pleasant dramatic touch of letting the two lovers walk downstage hand-in-hand like teenagers.

Luca Grassi — the singer in this cast most capable of switching gears between emotions, colors and speeds — made audible Enrico's selfishness in his demand that Lucia sacrifice herself for the honor of the family, by which he means only himself. The estrangement of brother from sister, the conflict between an enforced duty and a hoped-for fulfillment through love, was delivered powerfully by both singers in their Act II confrontation.

Scott Quinn, as Normanno, the Captain of the Guard, and especially Jordan Bisch, as the chaplain Raimondo, both sang with finesse as well as power; Aaron Blake, in the small but important role of sacrificial lamb Arturo Bucklaw, did not.

WILLARD SPIEGELMAN

HOUSTON

Houston Grand Opera's inspired and zesty production of *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* — a coproduction with Canadian Opera Company, Opéra National de Bordeaux and Opera Australia — showcased endlessly inventive stage action, minimal but cartoon-like sets and, not least, tour-de-force singing. At the heart of this new production lay the well-integrated efforts of four Spanish artists who had also collaborated on the 2007 HGO performance of Rossini's *La Cenerentola* — director Joan Font, set and costume designer Joan Guillén, lighting designer Albert Faura and choreographer Xevi Dorca. Their madcap comic style offered up farcical varieties of Bozothel-Clown hairdos among several of the male principals, Picasso-esque guitars for the banda that accompanies Count Almaviva's opening serenade (including a gigantic version that the Count climbed during his song) and, for Don Basilio, a monstrous nose and chin that recalled the slapstick of commedia dell'arte skits.

Throughout the opera, a constant supply of quirky side-gags, usually involving servants, complemented the main action — a desperate, circus-like chandelier-cleaning; a bizarre and incompetent whitewashing of a tree; and a superannuated, shuffling and

decrepit widow in traditional dress, ever silent but always underfoot. The sets, which were structures of mostly two-by-fours with translucent fabric walls, didn't seem like they would amount to much at first glance; however, done in solid colors and with all angles askew to create oddly shaped doors and windows, they heightened the screwball comedy of the stage action. More than that, during Figaro's "Largo al factotum," the effect of light showing through one of these stage structures ingeniously revealed hazy, doppelgänger Figaros performing his various services while the actual singing Figaro boasted of his many talents. The set, lighting and stage action thus created a filmic flashback or cutaway effect, but better than the movies for not actually cutting away.

As Figaro, baritone Nathan Gunn played a swaggering but graceful and quick-witted factotum, all the while mastering the rapid-fire buffo patter of Rossini's score, even at the brisk tempos maintained by the HGO Orchestra under the baton of Leonardo Vordoni in his HGO debut. Soprano Ana



Martínez and Brownlee in HGO's new Barbieri

María Martínez delivered an extraordinary Rosina. There is, first, her voice — warm, powerful, richly sustained, but also as agile as any bel canto aria might require. Then there was the way she gracefully stepped, twirled and pranced throughout the night

as the pert, lovestruck and scheming young girl. No less satisfying was tenor Lawrence Brownlee's Count Almaviva, with his supple legato and master-of-disguises comic high jinks. Bass-baritones Patrick Carfizzi (Dr. Bartolo) and Kyle Ketelsen (Don Basilio) were, like Gunn, assured virtuosos of lightning declamation. Carfizzi summoned up a risibly stiff-jointed, bad-tempered and clueless geezer. Ketelsen, with his vocal power and richness, was especially good when intoning Basilio's sententious pronouncements. Mezzo-soprano Catherine Cook, as Berta, captured the non-nonsense, bustling housemaid's nature that occasionally gives in to a yearning for youthful passion.

In sum, it was a triumphant performance. The production deserves praise not only for maximizing the opera's musical/comic possibilities but for imaginatively renewing a canonic work.

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