

Motivated by Mozart

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by Jessica Novak

Four organizations combine to celebrate Syracuse Opera's The Marriage of Figaro

The word of the day is "collaboration," when it comes to the first-ever Central New York Mozart Festival happening throughout this month. The fest, inspired by the upcoming Syracuse Opera production of The Marriage of Figaro, will feature four very different organizations with a common goal to improve the economic and cultural health of Central New York and to celebrate the work of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Lovers of opera, history, chamber music, weddings and even parties, will all have the opportunity to join in the celebration.

The festival includes a wedding-themed Love and Marriage exhibit running through July 28 at the Onondaga Historical Association Museum; "Figaro & Susanna's Engagement Party" on Friday, April 12; a special concert by the Syracuse Friends of Chamber Music on Friday, April 19; and finally, Mozart's classic comic opera, The Marriage of Figaro, on Friday, April 26 and Sunday, April 28.

"A huge part of our business is collaborative," says Greg Tripoli, executive director of the OHA. "It's important that people understand that we {arts organizations} do work together frequently and think of ourselves as brother/sister organizations within an industry that not only adds tremendous value to the quality of life, but also to the economic value of the community. I don't know of any other organization or industry where the presidents of the companies meet on a regular basis to talk about how we can advocate for our industry and work together to build each other up."

It's this attitude that sparked the idea for the festival. Tripoli started asking Catherine Wolff, the general and artistic director of Syracuse Opera, how the two could collaborate years ago. It was a difficult task to find overlap between international operas and local history, but the two finally found some common ground with Figaro.

"I love Mozart, and we were going to do a wedding dress exhibit before, but somebody scooped us," Tripoli says. "Munson-Williams-Proctor Museum of Art, in Utica, had a great exhibit, but that was a few years ago, so I thought it was safe enough to do it now, and I thought it would be great. It was a natural fit {with the opera}."

Then, the other pieces started falling into place.

Each day when Wolff walked to the Syracuse Opera offices, she'd pass the Wedding Studio, at 224 Harrison St. Finally, the connection dawned on her, and she brought it to the attention of Douglas Kinney Frost, Syracuse Opera's director of music, who immediately offered an idea.

"Lots of cities do engagement parties," he says. "To talk about a figure in western music who was as prolific—it all comes down to Mozart. Lots of places have one {festival}, and we didn't. I thought it would be fun to collaborate with as many organizations as possible, so we went to pretty much all the arts organizations in town to see who'd be interested."

Nicole Smalls—president of the Events Company, a partner of the Wedding Studio—was contacted and began planning the chic cocktail engagement party. Tom McKay, vice president of Syracuse Friends of Chamber Music, noticed the organization's season programming just happened to line up with the Mozart-themed event.

"We planned the season about a year ago," McKay says. On the schedule: A Harlem String Quartet program April 19 with works from Mozart, Beethoven, Chick Corea and Wynton Marsalis.

"We were glad to see there was some Mozart tie-in with the festivities. It's a great span of music, from Mozart to Chick Corea," he says. "It should be really exciting for people."

The engagement party should also provide some excitement, according to Smalls.

"Everybody loves a wedding," she says. "The party will let people experience what wedding professionals offer without being a bridal show. There will be music from Maria DeSantis, a swag bag to walk away with, the cast from The Marriage of Figaro, a champagne toast, great food and 100 percent of the ticket price goes to the Syracuse Opera. It's going to be a very fun event."

And at the conclusion of the monthlong Mozart celebration, Syracuse Opera will dazzle audiences with one of the most well-known and culturally embedded operas performed today.

"It's instantly fun from the minute it starts until the end," Kinney Frost says. "Incredibly beautiful music, passionate, but mostly fun and lighthearted. And our cast is phenomenal, truly worldclass. If someone said to me, 'Here's a piece of paper. Write down anybody you would want for these roles,' we have every one of the people I'd imagine."

Many of the performers have been with Syracuse Opera in the past and enjoyed the experience enough to go on to perform around the world at opera houses as prestigious as the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City and still come back to Syracuse.

This includes soprano Danielle Pastin, who will perform the part of the Countess Almaviva. Pastin joined Syracuse Opera as a last-minute replacement for La Traviata in October 2011, but left as a show-stealer.

"This woman's voice is incredible," Tripoli says. "I remember her from La Traviata and couldn't believe she was a replacement. I could listen to her forever. I was so happy to hear she's coming back."

Although this is the first time this particular collection of organizations have collaborated, it doesn't appear that it will be the last. Each director is optimistic that this will help introduce audiences to other local organizations and, they hope, motivate people to pursue and revisit these organizations in the future.

At the very least, it provides lovers of all interests and arts the chance to fill a rainy April with bright events. o



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