

Thulé' ballad, but Botstein rushed her in the slow part of 'D'amour l'ardente flamme' blunting the necessary contrast in tempo. In Brander's brief duties, the bass Stefan Egerstrom—Peneios last year in Botstein's Carnegie Hall *Daphne*—again served notice of an outstanding talent.

DAVID SHENGOLD

## Aspen

Serious renovations have brought a youthful shine to the 135-year-old WHEELER OPERA HOUSE, one of the beloved landmarks in this charming ski town in the heart of Colorado. After four years without opera, the Wheeler welcomed the ASPEN OPERA THEATER, which returned with a superb *Le nozze di Figaro* featuring a fine cast of young professionals. From a series of relocated performances at the Aspen Festival's Music Tent, local opera fans had observed consistently high vocal standards—no surprise, considering that the respected opera programme has been co-directed since 2021 by Renée Fleming and Patrick Summers. Both worked individually with *Figaro*'s auditioned singers during the first month of this summer's festival. And it showed—thanks also, in no small measure, to the expert team of Sara Erde and Matthew Aucoin.

Erde's fearless direction and Aucoin's steady conducting never let things get out of hand in this uncut modern-dress staging (seen on August 17). For all of Mozart's silly runnings about, the singing remained the star. Where to begin? Ah yes, with the Countess of Caitlin Gotimer. What an entrance! Leaving the slapstick shenanigans behind, the Countess entered, regal, stoic. As she sat and sang a mournful 'Porgi, amor' she instantly owned the room. Later, there was 'Dove sono': Erde placed her in a tight armchair, as if imprisoned. The stage darkened, lit by a single spotlight (Josh Hemmo did the effective lighting). She sang gently, with a beautifully phrased, understated soprano. A triumph.

Equally engrossing was Magdalena Kuźma in the demanding role of Susanna. Whether in comic interplay with Figaro or with the master of the house, she showed a naturalness and impeccable timing. In her vocal turns, Kuźma displayed an effortless soprano, finally revealing her full dramatic range in an exquisitely unfolding 'Deh vieni, non tardar'. Her duet with Gotimer, 'Sull'aria', was playfully sweet and simple. Almost stealing the show, as always, was Cherubino, here sung and portrayed with just the right amount of spirit (without excess mannerisms) by Sophia Maekawa, who brought out the hormonal charm in her familiar arias.

The two major male roles were given to a pair of big men, each dominating the stage physically and vocally. Vinicius Costa's Figaro, tall and handsome, never hogged the action, wisely playing down the mugging, seemingly happy to have a supporting role in all the plotting antics. He sang in a consistently warm bass-baritone, exhibiting natural chemistry with Kuźma's Susanna and enunciating with clarity in 'Non più andrai'. Trevor Haumschilt-Rocha as the Count was an imposing figure in his three-piece suit, matched by an equally impressive baritone in the vengeful 'Vedrò mentr'io sospiro'. Separately, these principals were outstanding—in ensembles, they proved a marvel.

The supporting roles were flawlessly handled, with individual arias receiving sustained applause. Special praise must be given to Gabrielle Barkidjija (Marcellina), Jaemyeong

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Lee (Basilio) and Sashekia Brown (Barbarina); there was also fine work from Sunghoon Han (Dr Bartolo), Peter Barber (Antonio) and Moses Sunghyun Park (Curzio).

Michelle Harvey's brightly lit sets, consisting of short walls shifted about by cast members, added immeasurably to the fast-moving production. One more note: a programme insert warned that Act 4 was extended by two stand-alone arias, usually cut (for good reason, we discovered)—Barkidjija's Marcellina sang 'Il capro e la capretta,' the tale of a he-goat and a she-goat, followed by Lee's Basilio offering 'In quegl'anni in cui val poco', about how he saved himself from certain death by wearing a donkey skin. Cute, but ... well, it *is* Mozart.

MARC SHULGOLD

### Central City

Each summer, opera lovers head west for an hour-long uphill slog from Denver to this hilly former Colorado mining town to enjoy first-class performances in CENTRAL CITY OPERA's quaint 550-seat OPERA HOUSE. On weekends they're joined by thousands of city dwellers heading for the mountains to escape Denver's heat, creating a traffic jam that adds another hour to that drive to Central City. Were such challenges worth it to catch this summer's 92nd season?

Two of this year's stagings promised a novel look, courtesy of an inventive troupe called PAPERMOON OPERA PRODUCTIONS. Rather than building sets with lumber or other three-dimensional materials, their tools of the trade are large sheets of paper and cardboard. *The Pirates of Penzance* was colourfully painted, mounted and expertly lit

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