

The Marriage of Figaro

English National Opera at the London Coliseum, October 23

The first time round (in 2011), Fiona Shaw's production of *The Marriage of Figaro* seemed top-heavy with interpretation and neat observation. Those elements are still here in this first revival, but the pace is such that they don't scream self-consciously at you. Shaw's insanely inventive designer Peter McKintosh whips up the piece's Spanish flavour from a flag and bulls' skulls, the latter both real and as mysterious bull-fighting

■ *ENO's 'Marriage of Figaro': (l. to r.) Mary Bevan (Susanna), Samantha Price (Cherubino) and Sarah-Jane Brandon (Countess)*

video projections, conjuring an atmosphere of thrusting macho sexuality that the Count is having good reason to be wistful about. The revolving, Escher-like maze set springs its trap of hierarchy and intrigue with minimum fuss and maximum elegance, and the lurking, spying servants add a dark edge to the anarchy. It's still a very busy staging, but one that aerates the music.

The incidental joke about the buzzing insect trapped inside the harpsichord must be baffling to those in far-away seats, the drunk Barbarina's silent preamble to her aria goes on far too long, and I don't



understand why Basilio is blind. The outwitted Count, though, clutching his childhood toreador rag-doll at the start of Act 3, is a wonderful character sketch; and Figaro shaving Cherubino deftly reminds us that the servant comes with a lot of history.

The cast was one of ENO's strongest ensembles. David Stout's Figaro was assertive, quick-witted and warmly sung, an impressive role debut given an extra dimension by the chemistry he had with Mary Bevan's Susanna (an upgrade from her Barbarina in 2011 and another role debut). Bevan guided the evening with an affectionate, light touch, dispensing with Susanna's traditional pertness in favour of charm, intelligence and comic flair in a performance capped by her spontaneity as a notable actor-singer.

Benedict Nelson (also in a role debut) kept a firm hand on the Count's sense of entitlement, crumbling authority, roving eye and increasing bafflement. Nelson's agile baritone has filled out a lot, with no loss to its lyricism, and he summed up the Count's frustration in a finely-sung Act 3 aria. Sarah-Jane Brandon provoked a tear or two in 'Dove sono' and she was equally memorable in the ensembles—in general another of the staging's trump cards. Samantha Price (another role debut) relayed Cherubino's erotic complications in vividly-characterized acting, while producing a beautifully controlled line in her two arias. Lucy Schauer was a subtle, sly Marcellina, interestingly with youth still on her side, and there was a nicely fussy Bartolo from Jonathan Best. It's easy to imagine Ellie Laughtarne's delightful Barbarina leading to greater things.

Jaime Martin's well-paced conducting, the ENO orchestra's stylish playing and Jeremy Sams's inspired translation complemented Shaw's perceptive, often dark deference to Mozart and Da Ponte's comedy.

PETER REED