

Tales from the Stave: *Il barbiere di Siviglia* at the Edinburgh Festival

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Von [David Smythe](#), 06 August 2018

A music quiz about disastrous openings that time proved wrong might ask what Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* have in common. The link is the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, venue for the riotous Stravinsky first night and originator of [Laurent Pelly](#)'s stylish and amusing period instrument production of Rossini's comic masterpiece, the opening opera of the 2018 Edinburgh Festival.



Guillaume Andrieux (Figaro)
© Ryan Buchanan

The whole opera takes place on an ingenious musical stave set designed by Pelly and Cléo Laigret, all giant curly ivory coloured manuscript which the singers walked across, peered round, hid under and clambered over. The overall colour palette, like the notes on a piano, was black and white though hints of steely blue crept into the striking monochrome costumes, also by Pelly and Jean-Jaques Delmotte.

A blank canvas of musical staves on the front cloth awaited its notes as period band Le Cercle de l'Harmonie under conductor Jérémie Rhorer struck up the overture, an enthralling sonic surprise. Period instrument performances can be excitingly spiky and angular, yet while this performance fizzed and sparked with energy as it should, the overall sound was astonishing, suffused with a delicate mellow softness like a gentle breeze swaying a field of meadow grass. The assortment of period percussion produced extraordinary sounds, the crescendo beginning with the barest of featherlight touches to a full range of peculiar crashes and bangs.

A stylish minimal set with few props threw the storytelling firmly on the shoulders of the uniformly strong cast who not only sang and acted superbly, but also made complicated stage chaos look easy with deftly agile moves. With no choreographer or movement director credited, there was nevertheless a natural dancer's poise throughout the cast along with some entertaining mime thrown in.



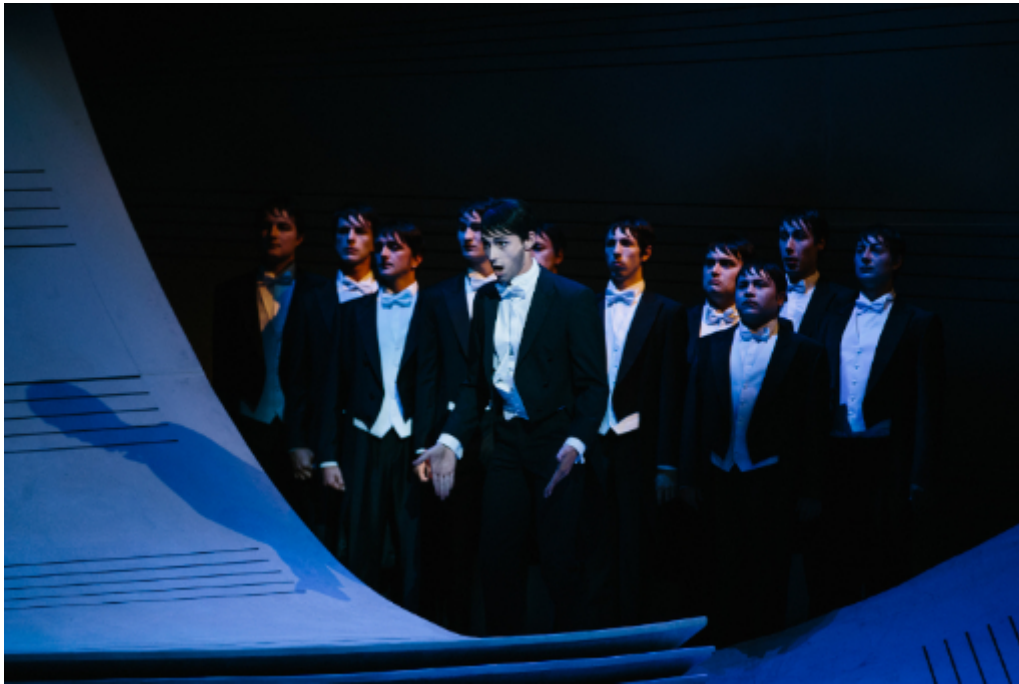
Il barbiere di Siviglia

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Providing the chorus, Unikanti, picked mostly from the Children's Choir of the Opéra National de Paris chorus under chorus master Gaël Darchen were pinpoint accurate and made a splendid noise. As musicians in white ties and tails, soldiers brandishing not guns but music stands and armed with sheet music, they executed their styled choreography perfectly, adding spectacular movement and energy to the final scenes in particular, their quirky shiny black hats providing amusement.

Guillaume Andrieux was a likeable fixer Figaro with a warm baritone, though occasionally overwhelmed in fast patter sections by the orchestra. Flown down from on high in a chair for his "Largo al factotum", he owned the stage in his black cut-off frock coat and commando trousers and boots, with no nonsense tattoos on his arms. I felt this production benefited enormously from his dance training.

Catherine Trottmann's youthful Rosina with her strong rich mezzo captured the balance of vulnerable ward and feisty young lady, appearing high up on her balcony within the staves, dodging the hazardous opening and shutting doors as fierce as Symplegades clashing rocks. It is a part with a huge range and I wondered if the period tuning was down a pitch, as she softened her lowest notes, but was bright as button in the mid and upper range. She dramatically cast her black tulle dress and bodice aside to reveal skinny black trousers and a black and white stripy top for her aria "Una voce poco fa" sung within a huge curved manuscript with walls like a skatepark. Her performance was so playful I was half-expecting her to produce a board and try some flips.



Il barbiere di Siviglia

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Hungarian bass-baritone Peter Kálmán was as gruff a Dr Bartolo as you could wish for, a dynamic strong-voiced buffo, leeringly slippery and giving one of the best ever performances of a man in a suit falling asleep on a tiny stool. Canadian bass-baritone Robert Gleadow brought wonderfully warmly sung full character role to Basilio, all perched spectacles and oily long hair, with a battered briefcase and dirty old man mac. There was strong support too from Louis de Lavignère's sprightly Fiorello, Julie Pasturaud as a despairing housekeeper Barta and Stéphane Facco as an amusing deadpan Ambrogio.

Making an already good production special was American tenor Michele Angelini as Count Almaviva, his ringing classical Italinatone cutting right across the orchestra, clear as a bell and making it all look easy. He threw himself wholeheartedly into the role of many disguises, memorably as the drunken soldier climbing up a ladder out of the orchestra pit in steel blue and black army camouflage and shades.

While there were strong individual performances, what really pulled everything together were the ensemble pieces with blended singing and stage movement. It is a good sign when the directors and designers receive as much applause as the cast on opening night. Amusing, witty and full of French charm, it won the hearts of the Edinburgh Festival's opening opera crowd in a shower of crotchets.