

Wolf Trap Opera Company resurrects Wolf-Ferrari's 'The Curious Women'

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What is it that the men are doing at their exclusively male club? Enjoying the attentions of beautiful women? Gambling away the family fortunes? Turning lead into gold? A quartet of two wives, a sweetheart and a chambermaid ponder these questions obsessively. They act on them, and this, in a nutshell, is the plot of Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari's comic opera "The Curious Women," which the [Wolf Trap Opera Company](#) has resurrected (its last U.S. performance was in 1912 when the Met did it) and is staging at the Wolf Trap Barns, where it opened Friday.

Wolf-Ferrari was a turn-of-the-20th-century composer whose heart remained with 19th-century romantics. "The Curious Women," which premiered in 1903, is a product of that romantic age, with its lush orchestration, lyricism oozing from every line and lighthearted melodies. Conductor Gary Thor Wedow led a small orchestra of fine freelancers in a performance that was a little fuzzy around the edges but gave the singers all the considerate support they could have asked for.

The plot's substance may be thin, but its inanity offers a good director the space to play with the exaggerations, caricatures and busyness that make a farce funny and not just silly. And Patrick Diamond is a good director, indeed. He has set the story, based on a 250-year-old play by Carlo Goldoni, in the mid-20th century and, with Goldoni's help, has created vivid characters we all know —

the cool, stylishly upper-class matron, Beatrice, and her self-centered, melodramatic daughter, Rosaura; the petite, hyperactive social busybody, Eleonora; and Colombina, the determinedly upbeat servant. Their spouses are less colorful, but Pantalone, the club's organizer, and his sidekick, Arlecchino — as well as Rosaura's intended, Florindo, and a number of minor club members — all strut familiar personalities.

The pace is quick but not frantic, and from time to time a photographer freezes the motion as characters rush about changing sets or when a particularly telling interchange (a slap, a faint) occurs.

The action takes place on a splendidly simple but flexible set, designed by Erhard Rom, that is like a page of a book that swings from one side, revealing the men's clubhouse in its masculine blue and gray stripes, to the other, disclosing a home with its feminine splashes of reds and pinks.

All of this provides fertile ground for this year's Filene Young Artists, who make up the cast. It is a remarkably balanced group, vocally strong and dramatically compelling.

Contralto Lindsay Ammann is an elegantly calm Beatrice, wife of Kenneth Kellogg's Ottavio, who looks down on her from his intimidating height and stonewalls her questions. Ammann has a big, luscious voice, beautifully under control, and Kellogg's smooth and resonant bass is a good match. Ashlyn Rust's soprano has just the brittleness that the character of Eleonora needs, and baritone Michael Sumuel as Lelio, her husband, offered a fine, mellow contrast.

Marcy Stonikas sustained lovely, long soprano lines as a determinedly histrionic Rosaura, and tenor Eric Barry's Florindo

succumbs to her entreaties with a vocal ease that never sounded strained. Angela Mannino sang and danced through Colombina's antics with inspired wit and panache, and Ryan Kuster as Pantalone, Craig Irvin as Arlecchino and the rest of the men's-club members handled their roles admirably.

The final performance of "The Curious Women" will be Saturday.

Reinthal is a freelance writer.