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Michaels stunning in diva tribute

By Ted Shen
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Like playwrights and choreographers, composers are known to custom-fit their music to the strengths of performers. In opera, Handel and his contemporaries penned florid display vehicles for the castrati of their day. The practice reached another height in late 18th-Century Vienna when a pool of celebrated singers, conversant in Italian and German, inspired a new generation of composers. Mozart created memorable roles for some of them.

While Mozart's operas have stood the test of time those stars have largely been forgotten. Sunday night at a recital in Pick-Staiger Concert Hall, soprano Patrice Michaels did her bit to draw attention to five divas who were in their prime during the 1780s and figured prominently on Europe's opera scene.

For Mozart, Catarina Cavalieri played Constanze in the premiere of "The Abduction from the Seraglio," Nancy Storace was the first Susanna, and Luisa Laschi-Mombelli, the first countess, in "The Marriage of Figaro." Adriana Ferrares as Fiordiligi was paired with Louise Villeneuve as Dorabella in the debut of "Cosi fan tutte."

The sections were prefaced with commentary by Northwestern music historian Thomas Bauman.

The selections ranged from pleasant fluff ("How Mistaken is the Lover" by Stephen Storace, Nancy's brother) to graceful apostrophe ("Serenio raggio" by Martin y Soler) to heartrending lament ("Alfin son sola.." by Salieri) and sublime character portrayal (Mozart's "Ch'io mi scordi di te").

Michaels was in top form – her voice luminous, diction clear and phrasing exquisite. She negotiated the octaves with deceptive ease and her acting was bewitching.

A highlight – in an evening of many – was the duet "Restati qua..." between Zerlina and Leporello from "Don Giovanni" tailored to Laschi-Mombelli's comedic wiles. Michaels, fittingly coquettish, was steamed with bass-baritone Peter Van Der Graff in a skit of utmost hilarity and expressive vocalism.

The accompaniment was provided by Classical Arts Orchestra, a pickup ensemble of area period instrumentalists. Under Stephen Alltop's guidance, it played with spirit and finesse.