

Shenanigans in the Seraglio



Picture: Mike Merchant

Kennet Opera: The Abduction from the Seraglio, in The Great Hall at Shaw House, Newbury, on Saturday, February 4. Review by LIN WILKINSON

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THE Great Hall at Shaw House was the perfect setting for Kennet Opera's production of one of Mozart's lesser performed operas, *The Abduction from the Seraglio*.

The hall is an intimate yet quietly grand room, with excellent acoustics and an imposing arched entrance through which stage exits and entries could be made.

The space echoed the setting in which the opera takes place, with the glimpsed area behind the arched door suggesting the hermetic confines of Pasha Selim's Turkish palace and harem.

Here Constanze and her maid Blonde are incarcerated, having been kidnapped by pirates and sold. (We'll pass over possible contemporary objections to the opera's Orientalising trope.)

The narrative unfolds as their respective partners, Spanish nobleman Belmonte and his servant Pedrillo, try to rescue them.

The production, directed by Susan Moore, was beautifully costumed, with minimally effective staging; a bench, topiary, pots of flowers and garlands.

Sung in English, the opera's singspiel form worked very well, with the part of the tetchy Pasha (Don Crerar) entirely spoken.

The form made the narrative crystal clear from the start.

The plot line is absurd, even by opera's standards, and the production reflected this in its spirited and comedic approach.

As Pedrillo remarks, when planning one of two highly unlikely escape strategies, "Anyway, this is opera" — one of the production's many enjoyable one-liners.

There are some very taxing vocal parts; a big and exposing ask for amateur singers. Tenor Ant Goffart brought his warm voice to a sympathetic portrayal of Belmonte.

Soprano Tamsin Slatter (Constanze), always a dignified and steadfast presence even when rebuffing the Pasha's advances, sang with pleasing vocal definition and ornamentation.

Bass Anthony Huggett (Osmin) was the Pasha's whip-wielding, suspicious and vengeful chief steward (never trust a man with a moustache like that).

He played the master-servant card with Blonde (lively, expressive soprano Rosy Robinson), but, using her English nationality as a literal badge of honour, her favours remained firmly with Pedrillo (tenor Duncan Powell).

He imbued his part with enjoyable humour. The small chorus added an extra dimension to the ensemble pieces.

In the end, of course, the two pairs of lovers are reunited and released, thanks to the Pasha's entirely self-interested clemency (how to get your own back on an enemy and look magnanimous in the process).

Music director was Jim Petts and Oliver Williams provided far more than piano accompaniment. He is a superb and sympathetically interpretive musician.