role, Figaro himself. Renato Girolami has a firm, darkish baritone, and he knows how to colour it to good effect: you hear his offended masculinity in the second duet and especially in his pared-down tone in ‘Se vuol ballare’, and you feel his pain and bitterness, too, in ‘Aprite un po’ quegli’occhi’. The voice, a big one, opens up well in ‘Non più andrai’, taken quite steadily.

The male side is altogether strong. Bo Skovhus, too, uses his words and their sound well, and has plenty of tonal variety – amorous, proud, resentful. Basilio’s aria is elegantly sung by Michael Roieder, and Janusz Monarcha copes pretty well with Bartolo’s, though he hasn’t quite the necessary verbal athleticism.

I was slightly less enthusiastic over the female side of the cast. Judith Halász sings Susanna neatly enough, with a spirited ‘Venite inginocchiati’ and considerable delicacy in ‘Deh vieni’, but the voice is a shade slimmer, almost an operetta sound, and ably though it is all sung there isn’t much sense of character. Marina Mescheriakova has a big, glowing soprano, and brings some passion to the Countess’s music, but the voice seems to be produced far back and is apt to harden, with a marked vibrato. The Cherubino, Michelle Breedt, is much more persuasive in her light yet impassioned ‘Non so più’ than in an over-sophisticated ‘Voi che sapete’. There is a capable Marcellina and a pretty, young Barbarina.

What is lacking about this performance, however, is real sparkle. Michael Halász favours restrained, measured tempi. Too often, when the music needs to move on, he keeps it on a tight rein. An exception is the Act 1 trio, which is very much alive, but much of Act 2 is decidedly steady – there is no sense of urgency, of alarm, about the trio where Susanna is supposedly in the adjoining dressing-room, for example, and tension flags during several sections in the finale, such as the Count’s quizzing of Figaro. Parts of Act 3, and the Act 4 finale, suffer the same way. Too often the fizz goes out of the champagne. The rather heavy, undershaped bass line doesn’t help. And the recitative, too, is taken carefully, at quite a leisurely pace: it needs more sense of the undercurrents of intrigue and excitement.

The orchestral balance, with nicely forward woodwind, is exemplary, although you of course hear less detail with modern instruments than you would with period ones. There are a few points where the acoustic seems to alter between recitative and aria. The two arias that Mozart provided for the 1789 revival, with a different Susanna, are given in an appendix: I never fail to be astonished that Mozart could do such violence to the work as he did with that new final aria, beautiful piece though it is.

Stanley Sadie