

The Sarasota Opera falls for Figaro

The clever servant is a pivotal player in two productions for its 2025 winter festival.

By [Monica Roman Gagnier](#) | 5:00 a.m. February 12, 2025



Sarasota Opera will present Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro" March 8-28 during its 2025 Winter Opera Festival.

Courtesy image

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“ I see a little silhouetto of a man
Scaramouche, Scaramouche, will you do the Fandango?
Thunderbolt and lightning, very, very frightening me
(Galileo) Galileo, (Galileo) Galileo, Galileo Figaro, magnifico

In the 2018 biographical film, "Bohemian Rhapsody," when a member of the band Queen hears the words to lead singer Freddie Mercury's new song, he asks, "Who is Galileo?"

A better question might have been: Who is Figaro?

It's one that Sarasota audiences soon will have the pleasure of pondering. The character shows up in two operas — “The Barber of Seville” and “The Marriage of Figaro” — in the 2025 Sarasota Opera Winter Festival, which begins Feb. 15.

Figaro, a cunning servant, barber and all-around “fixer,” first came to life in the plays of French dramatist Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais. Figaro was the inspiration for Rossini's comic opera, “The Barber of Seville” (1816), considered a prequel to Mozart's masterpiece “The Marriage of Figaro” (1786), even though it was written afterward. Got that? “Stars Wars” fans will understand.

The idea that a servant could outwit his well-born masters was considered so dangerous in monarchist France that Louis XVI banned both Figaro operas from his court. He still ended up losing his head to revolutionaries in 1793, despite bowing to popular opinion and moving his household from Versailles to Paris.

The splendor of French royalty can be enjoyed today by tourists at the dazzling Versailles Palace, and the operas about Figaro, who helps Count Almaviva win the hand of his beloved Rosina, and then gets to marry his fellow servant Susanna, entertain those from all ranks of life more than two centuries after their debut.

Talk about “legs” — the term used in theater for plays with long runs.

Victor DeRenzi, maestro of the Sarasota Opera, knows a little bit about staying power. He's been in his job since 1982. Among leaders of Sarasota's arts institutions, DeRenzi's tenure is only exceeded by that of Florida Studio Theatre Producing Artistic Director Richard Hopkins, who joined FST in 1980.

Despite the rarified reputation of his metier, DeRenzi's life story is an operatic Horatio Alger tale. Recalling a teacher who encouraged him and some of his elementary school classmates to go see their first opera, DeRenzi says, “I probably would have been a garbageman if it weren't for him.”

Hyperbole perhaps, but fact is, DeRenzi's hometown of Staten Island, New York, is home to many commercial carting firms, some of which allegedly have ties to the mafia. But it wasn't DeRenzi's fate to become a garbageman or a mobster, due to the guidance of his teacher and his seemingly innate love of opera.



Victor DeRenzi, artistic director of the Sarasota Opera, and Richard Russell, general director, at a recent black tie event.

Photo by Lori Sax

Although some middle-class Italian families in New York City had opera playing in the background or made excursions to the Metropolitan Opera, DeRenzi's kin was not of that ilk.

“My father was a dock worker and my mother was a mother. My grandparents had some Caruso records as Italian immigrants did in that time, but ours wasn't a musical family,” he says.

For DeRenzi, it was love at first sight (sound?) when he first saw Verdi's "La forza de destino" as a youth.

While still a student, DeRenzi joined his teacher at a small Staten Island opera called the Matinee Players, where DeRenzi sang in the chorus and built sets.

His love of opera propelled him to major in music theory at Queens College, part of City University of New York.

DeRenzi also privately studied theory, piano and conducting before landing a job when he was just 20 as the conductor of a chorus at Wagner College on Staten Island made up of students, faculty and community members.

"In my day in New York, you started out in a lousy company. Then you worked in a less lousy company before you moved to a better company and continued to move up from there," he says.

DeRenzi says he got an interview in Sarasota through a "friend of a friend of a friend." He joined the Sarasota Opera in its last season performing at the Historic Asolo Theater in The Ringling before moving to its current historic building downtown.

When he joined the Sarasota Opera, DeRenzi says it wasn't "well-established. It wasn't a matter of fitting into a mold. It was a matter of making the mold," he says.

Although Mozart and Rossini's interpretations of Figaro cut a fine figure in this year's Sarasota Opera Winter Festival, it is through producing the works of Verdi that DeRenzi has made a name for himself and his company.

Thanks to DeRenzi, the Sarasota Opera is the only company in the world to have performed all of Verdi's music. The opera began its 28-year Verdi voyage in 1989 with "Rigoletto" and completed the Verdi Cycle in 2016 with "Aida" and "The Battle of Legnano."

If you think Italian opera aficionados eagerly welcome new devotees, guess again. Just one example: Membership in the all-male Club dei 27 of Parma, Italy, is restricted to 27, the same number of operas generally believed to have been written by Verdi. (Some people think the number is 26, but we'll leave that debate to scholars.) In other words, a member must die before someone new can join the club. No Welcome Wagon here.

Giving the devil his due

Talking with Maestro DeRenzi can be a bit like a verbal fencing match. When a reporter prefaces a question with, "To play devil's advocate," DeRenzi interjects, "The devil is doing just fine, by the way." One might be tempted to reply, "Touché!"

Even though Sarasota Opera's Verdi Cycle has been completed, the composer continues to be a mainstay of the Sarasota Opera's winter festival and its fall concerts.

This year's selection is "Stiffelio," one of Verdi's lesser-known operas. It tells the tale of a Protestant minister torn between the Christian forgiveness he preaches and his desire for revenge after he discovers his wife's infidelity.

Rounding out the Sarasota Opera's winter festival is "Cavalleria Rusticana" and "Pagliacci," on a single bill. The two operas, which open the festival, are often performed in tandem because they are similar in theme and style. Both are 75 minutes long.

If you want to show off around opera buffs, casually refer to the adulterous double feature as "Cav" and "Pag."

Written by Pietro Mascagni, "Cavalleria" takes place on Easter Sunday in an Italian village when Alfio discovers his wife Lola has reunited with her old flame, Turiddu.

Ruggero Leoncavallo's "Pagliacci" ("Clowns") tells the story of Canio, an actor in a commedia dell'arte troupe who murders his wife and her lover on stage.

Today, we have so many play-within-a-plays that the "meta" format threatens to become a trope. However, "Pag" got in on the ground floor.

For those short on time and who want to come to town specifically for the Sarasota Opera's winter festival, there are Opera Lovers packages that allow patrons to see all four shows ("Cav"/"Pag" counts as one) in as little as three days.



Verdi's "Stiffelio" plays from March 15–30 at the Sarasota Opera's 2025 Winter Festival.

Courtesy image

Asked whether attendance levels at the Sarasota Opera have rebounded since COVID, DeRenzi responds, "I don't think that's a subject worth discussing. It's a non issue."

Pressed further, he says some performing arts organizations are using the pandemic as an excuse for their creative failings. Audiences go to the theater when there's something they want to see, according to DeRenzi.

Asked whether Sarasota's generous donors allowed the opera to reach artistic heights not usually seen in a small city (Santa Fe notwithstanding), DeRenzi says that patrons offered their support after seeing high-quality productions.

It's all about excellence, he says. Instead of the "Field of Dreams" mantra of "If you build it, they will come," DeRenzi's maxim seems to be, "If you build a great one, they will come."

If it isn't evident by the Sarasota Opera's dedication to Verdi, preserving tradition is paramount to DeRenzi. "We perform operas as they were originally performed, as they are meant to be performed," he says.

You're not going to find Figaro on a motorcycle or Susanna wearing a leather miniskirt as long as Maestro DeRenzi's calling the shots at the Sarasota Opera. Long live Maestro!

If You Go

"**Cavalleria Rusticana/Pagliacci**," Feb. 15 through March 29. "**The Barber of Seville**," Feb. 22 through March 29. "**The Marriage of Figaro**," March 8-28. "**Stiffelio**," March 15-30. \$39-\$162 at Sarasota Opera House, 61 N. Pineapple Ave.

Visit SarasotaOpera.org.



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