

The Marriage of Figaro – Audio Introduction

February-March 2026

Introduction

Welcome to this audio introduction to *The Marriage of Figaro* by Mozart, performed by Opera North. My name's Alice and I'll be audio describing a performance in each of the touring venues. So in this introduction I'll tell you a bit about the opera's history, give you the synopsis, describe how it all looks, list the cast and creative team, and then give some practical information like the dates and times of the audio described performances and touch tours.

The Marriage of Figaro is based on the **Beaumarchais'** play *La folle journée, ou le Mariage de Figaro*, which opened in Paris in 1784 and caused an absolute sensation. Its subject matter - of servants rising up and outwitting their masters, foreshadowing the French Revolution which began just a few years later - outraged the aristocracy and caused the play to be banned in many cities, including Vienna, where Mozart was based at the court of **Emperor Joseph II.**

In order to get permission from the Emperor to use such a controversial subject, Mozart's librettist Da Ponte had to strip away the most provocative messaging, most notably replacing Figaro's Act

IV rant about the nobility with a tirade about the inconstancy of women instead! This was Mozart's first collaboration with Da Ponte with whom he went on to create Don Giovanni and Cosi fan Tutti.

The changes were deemed acceptable and Mozart set to work, completing the music in just six weeks. The Vienna premiere in 1786 was a moderate success, but the opera's popularity sky-rocketed after the Prague premiere a few months later. And to this day, *Figaro* is among the top 10 most frequently performed operas worldwide. The composer Johannes Brahms said "each number in Figaro is a miracle; it is totally beyond me how anyone could create anything so perfect".

Synopsis

ACT ONE

A room in the stately home of Count and Countess Almaviva.

Morning.

On the morning of their wedding, Susanna makes clear to Figaro the real reason for Count Almaviva's apparent generosity in offering them a room. The Count wants to revive the traditional feudal custom whereby a lord is permitted to sleep with any woman on his estate on her wedding night. Figaro resolves to outwit his master. Doctor Bartolo arrives with his former housekeeper Marcellina, eager

to settle old scores with Figaro, who has contracted to marry Marcellina if he cannot repay some money he owes her. Susanna can barely remain civil in the face of Marcellina's claims on her fiancé.

The Countess's godson Cherubino bursts in. At the mercy of his adolescent hormones, he fancies himself in love with every woman, but with the Countess most of all. Cherubino's amorous adventures have infuriated the Count, mainly because they've been pursuing the same women. The Count comes into the room unexpectedly. Cherubino hides, and overhears the Count pursuing his seduction of Susanna. Her singing teacher, Basilio, interrupts, Cherubino is discovered, and the furious Count sends the boy off to join the military. Figaro arrives and plays along, but secretly tells Cherubino he wants a word with him before he goes.

ACT TWO

The Countess's private room.

Later that morning. The Countess laments the loss of her husband's love. Figaro reveals his plan to send the Count an anonymous letter, implying that the Countess has taken a lover. At Susanna's prompting, the plan is developed further: she will agree to an assignation with the Count, but her place will be taken by Cherubino – who Figaro has told not to leave – in disguise. Susanna and the Countess start to disguise Cherubino as a girl, hiding him in the

cupboard when the Count, who has received the letter, knocks at the door. His suspicions are deflected by Susanna's quick thinking, which enables Cherubino to escape out of the window.

The women tell the Count that the anonymous letter was merely a ploy of Figaro's, but when Figaro returns he upsets the plot by denying all knowledge of having written it. The gardener Antonio arrives demanding to know who leapt from the window and flattened his carnations. Figaro pretends it was him, but this fails to explain why the papers for Cherubino's commission were found in the flowerbed. Catastrophe is temporarily averted when it is pointed out that the commission lacks an official seal. But when Bartolo and Basilio arrive with Marcellina, having concocted a lawsuit to advance her claim, Figaro and Susanna's wedding is thrown into jeopardy again.

Interval

ACT THREE

*The Count's and the Countess's private rooms, then the Great Hall.
That afternoon.*

In the aftermath of the failure of Figaro's plan, the Countess suggests to Susanna that they swap clothes with each other and, thus disguised, the Countess will take Susanna's place at the liaison with the Count that evening. The Count falls for Susanna's tempting

invitation, but almost immediately overhears her confiding her success to Figaro, which increases the Count's determination to uphold Marcellina's case.

The Count has employed a lawyer, Don Curzio, who insists that Figaro either pays up or marries Marcellina. But the case suddenly collapses when, to everyone's astonishment, it emerges that Figaro is the long-lost illegitimate child of Marcellina and Bartolo. Susanna is temporarily alarmed to find the newly reunited mother and son embracing, but once the confusion is cleared up the two couples look forward to a double wedding.

The Count's fury intensifies when it is revealed that Cherubino is still hanging around the house, disguised as a bridesmaid. But Antonio's daughter Barbarina reminds the Count in front of everyone, including his wife, that he has promised to grant her every wish in exchange for her affection – and what she wishes is to marry Cherubino. Susanna and Figaro are married, along with Marcellina and Bartolo, and the Count seems to have been thoroughly outmaneuvered.

Then Susanna surreptitiously hands him a letter, sealed with a pin, promising to keep their secret meeting after all.

ACT FOUR

The stables. That evening.

The Count uses Barbarina as go-between, but she loses the pin which she is to return to Susanna as the Count's token of their secret tryst. Figaro discovers her searching for it, and questions her about the illicit rendezvous. He immediately jumps to the conclusion that Susanna is unfaithful, and confides in Marcellina, who resolves to warn Susanna of his suspicions. Figaro rails bitterly about this supposed betrayal.

Susanna, aware that he can overhear, teases him with a sensual song anticipating the arrival of her lover. Cherubino arrives, looking for Barbarina. The Countess, disguised as Susanna, succeeds in fooling all the men. The Count is beguiled into seducing his own wife, believing her to be Susanna, but hearing Figaro's voice, she slips away from him. Figaro comes across Susanna disguised as the Countess. His anger evaporates when he recognises his wife's voice and, united again, the couple resolve to bring an end to the follies of the day.

Figaro pretends to woo 'the Countess' (Susanna) and the Count is furious to see 'his wife' in the arms of his servant. He calls upon the assembled company to witness her faithlessness, refusing all pleas for forgiveness. The real Countess appears and reveals herself. Humbled, it is now the Count's turn to beg forgiveness

The Sets

This brand-new production is set in a modern day, crumbling pile of an English country estate, described by **director Louisa Muller** as

“more of a liability than an asset”. We’re in a world — much like the original 1784 setting, where the Count’s power and privilege is in question. And **designer Madeleine Boyd**, cleverly uses locations which are recognisable as uniquely belonging only to large country houses.

The first scene is set in a large boot room – there are many coats on hooks on the wall, a freestanding low shelving unit for all the boots and shoes, and a bench over on the right you can sit on to pull your boots on and off. There’s a big chest on the left with bits of sports equipment poking out – tennis rackets handles, some cricket shin guards and a fishing net. Next to it stands a croquet set. And on far left, by the proscenium arch is a large green umbrella stand filled with lots of different length walking sticks, various bats and nets, and a couple of umbrellas.

At the back is a floor to ceiling wall of mottled greyish brown colour. The lower part of the wall has ornate dark wood panelling in diamond shapes and on the right is a dark wood door with stained glass panel at the top with some orange fruit and leaves on it – a nod to *The Barber of Seville*, Figaro’s back story. And just to the left of the door is a small table with a vase of flowers on it.

There’s also a high dark wood shelf running above the doorway across the full wall with a few trinkets on it – a couple of photos, candlesticks and a vase of flowers.

Above this shelf is a huge, mullioned window at top left made of small rectangles of glass, around 5 metres wide by 4 metres tall. And through this, a grand dark wood staircase is visible beyond with walls covered in large dark and olive-green striped wallpaper.

Also, along the back wall under the coat racks are several buckets – some silver, some white enamel – it's quite a scruffy, busy space. And the flooring is a rather worn wood parquetry floor of geometric rectangles, not on the diagonal. And this remains throughout.

Next, we're in the Countess's private bathroom. An elegant yellow bath with shiny white enamel and gold claw feet sits centrally. The wall behind it has a large, mullioned window, and to the right of it, the wall is covered in white wallpaper with small green trees on it and has a steep slope down towards the right. Under this slope, there's a small yellow door which most people have to bend almost double to fit through – so we're in a kind of attic/roof space. On the left, there's a long cream curtain at the back and in front of it the large dark staircase leads up out of the room. And under it is a cupboard full of old things like an ironing board, boxes and things.

Next to the bath sits an elegant chaise longue of dark wood with ivory brocade fabric, and a matching small stool.

For the opening of the second half, we're in two locations – on the left a games room, and on the right, a nursery. Both back walls are roughly torn in the middle leaving a gap where we can see the dark green and olive green striped wallpaper beyond – this is the hallway

where people encounter each other again. The games room on the left has deep burgundy wallpaper with a large map of the estate on it in wooden frame, a small table in front of it, and a large pool table in the centre with little nets at the pockets. There's a light with three cream shades in a line hanging low over the table.

On the right, the nursery is being decorated with lemon yellow wallpaper covered in tiny sheep – white with black heads, and black with white heads. This is clearly still in progress as a bit of paper hangs loose over an arched recessed bookshelf and the wall next to it is still a dark green. Also, on the one of the shelves is a roll of the yellow wallpaper alongside a few books and a couple of toys and a colourful abacus.

In the room is a bright blue rocking cradle which the Countess and Susanna are fixing up when the scene begins. And next to it, a chair and table on which sits a box full of clothing, toys and pictures that the Countess is sorting.

Then we move to the ballroom for the wedding. The stage is open except for the large dark wood staircase coming down from the left. On the right, some staff are busy trying to pull up a huge chandelier that has clearly seen better days – some of the lights are missing on one side and it's on a bit of a tilt. Also, several buckets are dotted around catching rainwater from a leaky roof.

And for the final scene, we're out in the stables. There are some stairs on the right with a slatted wall in front of them and various bits of riding and farm equipment stashed away underneath and a wheelbarrow filled with straw. On the stairs hang riding blankets and sacks and saddles.

Over on the left there's a wooden stall with arched doors that open at the back, filled with straw and a small bench. The light is a deep blue at the back with three small strip lights hanging at the back.

The Characters and Costumes

The costumes are very much modern-day country house estate style – barber jackets, jeans and jumpers, expensive dresses, and worker clothing for the estate staff.

In the opening overture, there's a whole stream of people walking through the boot room, mainly from the left and out through the door in the back wall on the right.

Gradually we work out that Figaro is the tall guy with brown hair wearing a purple jumper over a white shirt, soft dark blue trousers and slightly scruffy shoes. And Susanna is wearing a dark green jumper over a crisp white shirt tucked into tapered khaki trousers, brown belt and sensible brown brogues. She is quite a bit smaller than Figaro and her dark hair tied up into a neat bun.

The Countess Almaviva has dark wavy voluminous hair and is variously seen in jeans and a jumper, or dark purple dungarees over a stripey top and pink cardigan, or a selection of floaty expensive looking dresses with tropical or abstract patterns, ankle length with ballet pumps, or ankle boots with a little heel. She wears discrete gold jewellery – there’s a look of Kirsty Allsopp about her.

Count Almaviva wears burgundy corduroy trousers with a dark green jumper over a pale pink shirt - the jumper has dark leather patches at the elbows and shoulders – and brown suede loafers. He also has a full-length brown wax Barbour coat with cape over the shoulders. He has mid-brown hair in a side parting and a neat beard.

Marcellina, Dr Bartolo’s housekeeper, wears a cream fluffy gilet over flowery long top, tight jeans, short, heeled boots and brown fedora. She later changes into a bright apple-green suit of tapered trousers and fitted jacket that flares out at the waist, and a green fascinator. She has a deep red short curly bob with a white streak at the front, and an impish look.

Dr Bartolo is respectable in white shirt and tie, Fair Isle tank top, and brown Barbour jacket and he carries a brown leather briefcase. He has greying hair and a kindly air.

Basilio the singing teacher wears a rust-coloured cardigan over beige shirt and green tie, and beige slacks. He’s bald with a large grey moustache and a sprightly demeanour.

Cherubino first appears in pale denim jacket with a cream collar, patterned orange/brown Hawaiian shirt tucked into brown shortish trousers and chunky black loafers. When preparing for the army, he appears in dark navy uniform with gold trim and buttons, and a red stripe around the hat and down the outside leg of the trousers.

Cherubino is a trouser role so is sung by a woman who has shortish dark straight hair and is quite petite, so suits being dressed back up as a woman again!

The lawyer, Don Curzio, wears a black three-piece suit with black tie and carries a brown leather briefcase. He has dark blonde curly hair.

Antonio, the gardener wears full white beekeeper gear including large gauze hat over his face and comes in waving his smoker with smoke coming out of it. His daughter, Barberina, the maid, is in tight jeans, brown riding boots and dark green quilted Barbour gilet. She later changes into a puffy gold and pale green dress for the wedding.

Then there are various other staff and people one might expect find at a large country house: there are a couple of cleaners in blue smocks over their tops, grey trousers and sensible shoes, two groundskeepers in matching dark green polar fleece jackets, walking boots, flat caps, and one with a cocked shotgun over his arm. There are some kitchen staff in black and white checked trousers and starched white jackets, and a bunch of tourists on a walking tour – their leader wears a grey jacket and skirt and carries a little red flag for them all to follow, and some walkers with maps in plastic pouches

round their necks and walking boots. And finally, three women in matching long pale blue dresses, white gloves and straw boaters – these are nannies who are there for an interview - and a couple of workmen in high-viz orange jackets, one with yellow helmet.

Please note that for the main parts, I've described them as they look in the first cast run – the singers who take over later in the tour may look slightly different, but the costumes will be more or less the same.

The Cast and Creative Team

Figaro — the Count's estate manager (baritone) is sung by Liam James Karai, and Emyr Wyn Jones on 18 February, 19, 21, 26 and 28 March

Susanna — his fiancée and the Countess' lady-in-waiting (soprano) is sung by Hera Hyesang Park, and Claire Lees on 18 Feb, 5, 7, 12 and 14 March

Count Almaviva — the master of the house (baritone) is sung by James Newby and Hecktor Bloggs on 18 February

Countess Almaviva — his neglected wife (soprano) is sung by Gabriella Reyes, and Charlie Drummond on 18 February

Cherubino — her teenage godson (mezzo-soprano), is sung by Hongni Wu and Frances Gregory on 14, 18, 20 February and 26 and 28 March.

Doctor Bartolo — the Countess' former guardian (bass) is sung by Jonathan Lemalu and Jamie Wollard on 18 February

Marcellina — Bartolo's housekeeper (mezzo-soprano), is sung by Katherine Broderick, and by Olivia Rose Tringham on 18 February

Don Basilio — the music teacher (tenor) is sung by Daniel Norman and Cameron Mitchell on 18 February

Antonio — the gardener (baritone) is sung by Jamie Woollard and Ross McInroy on 18 February

and Barbarina — his daughter (soprano) is sung by Charlotte Bowden and Emily Christina Loftus on 18 February

The Director is **Louise Muller**

The Set and Costume Designer, **Madeleine Boyd**

The Choreographer is **Rebecca Howell**

The Lighting Designer is **Malcolm Rippeth**

And the conductor is **Valentina Peleggi**, with **Oliver Rundell** on 7 and 18 Feb, and 5 and 7 March

Further Information

The opera is sung in Italian with English surtitles. The performance is around three hours long including a 20-minute interval. The first half is 1.5 hours, and the second half is one hour and 10 minutes.

The audio-described performances are

- Leeds Grand Theatre on Saturday 14 February at 7pm
 - Nottingham Theatre Royal on Saturday 7 March at 7pm
 - The Lowry, Salford on Saturday 14 March at 7pm
 - Newcastle Theatre Royal on Saturday 21 March at 7pm
- and
- Hull New Theatre on Saturday 28 March at 7pm

All performances will be preceded by a touch tour at 6pm where you can come onto the stage and walk around the set and feel the costumes and props. Please book a place on this by calling the box office of your chosen venue.

You will also hear this audio introduction again through the headsets fifteen minutes before the performance starts so you can remind yourself of how the first half will look, plus check that your headset is working correctly. And I will also give a quick bit of information about the second half, five minutes before the end of the interval. The headsets at all the theatres are the Sennheiser stethoset type. You can also use a loop version that hangs around your neck if you wear a hearing aid that has a telecoil ('T' button). And you can use the loop version if you'd like to plug in your own headphones – they must have a standard mini-jack connection. At The Lowry and Nottingham Theatre Royal, they also have the MobileConnect system, so you can connect via the app on your phone if you prefer.

We really hope you enjoy the performance, and please do let us know what you thought. You can email Access Manager Alice Dowek on alice.dowek@operanorth.co.uk.

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