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Soprano Berneche finds 'Figaro's' Susanna intense

By David Lewellen, Special to the Journal Sentinel

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Skylight Opera

Alicia Berneche will sing Susanna in Skylight Opera's upcoming production of Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro."

Sometimes the onstage stress of plotting, planning and dodging sexual harassment is almost too much for Alicia Berneche.

Berneche, who will sing Susanna in Skylight Opera's upcoming production of Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro," says that although it's "the greatest role ever on the planet, period," it's also long and intense.

As the clever maid tries to get men out of her room, fend off the advances of her employer and subdue the jealousy of her fiancé Figaro, "my shoulders start creeping up with the tension," Berneche said. "If I let it, it could be physically demolishing, so I have to plan moments to relax."

During the character's rare offstage time, Berneche will do breathing and stretching exercises - and sometimes onstage, when the action is focused elsewhere, she'll turn away from the audience and break character for a moment.

"I don't like to do it," she said, "but you need to hit the reset button every now and then."

Berneche, appearing in her eighth role at Skylight, has sung Susanna regularly elsewhere.

"She's me," she said, "but better, smarter, more passionate."

And she's found a true partner in her Figaro, Andrew Wilkowske: "Andy and I are like peas in a pod. I've never worked with a Figaro I'm so compatible with."

Wilkowske also sang Figaro in Skylight's "Barber of Seville" last fall, part of a rare pairing of the two well-known operas based on Beaumarchais' Figaro plays.

"Alicia is . . . an incredible team player and the ideal person to have in a cast - always positive and generous to all of her colleagues," Skylight artistic director Bill Theisen said in an e-mail. "She is one of the hardest-working and most fearless singing actresses I have ever worked with."

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