

AN EVENING AT THE OPERA

By Frank B. Edwards

Notes for Steven Page

**Black and White Gala for the National Arts Centre Orchestra and Opera Lyra
National Arts Centre, Ottawa**

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Introduction

Michael Slade:

...Now every gala needs a co-host of national proportion and we are no exception. Our program is filled with wonderful operatic classics – arias that speak of love, power, betrayal, deception, greed, sacrifice and forgiveness.

When the committee asked who should share the stage with me, I thought, “No problem – we’ll be in Ottawa... Parliament Hill is just down the street....”

But then I thought of a dear friend of mine who is in another part of the music business – a guy who gets more radio play than me – on stations some of you have probably never listened to. But like the composers we will celebrate here tonight, he is a clever lyricist and a talented musician – a man who would have been writing operettas instead of rock tunes if he had been born two centuries earlier. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Steven Page of the Barenaked Ladies.

Steven Page:

Thank you. It’s wonderful to be here and it is an honour to support Opera Lyra and the NAC Orchestra. I’ve been an opera fan for years – and now that I can finally afford the tickets, they invite me for free – as long as I promise not to sing. Go figure.

The fact is that as much as I love the music and the stories of opera, it’s the costumes that really appeal to me. The women wear gorgeous gowns. Sometimes the men also wear gorgeous gowns. And sometimes the women take off their gorgeous gowns and wear pants. Being a Barenaked Lady in Vienna never would have worked. None of the plots could have worked. Course, we would have just called the group The Cross Dressers

Part II:

Michael: *The Barber of Seville is Rossini’s classic tale of just how complicated a barber’s life can be. [French]*

Figaro is not only a barber but also a meddler who engineers a complicated plan to help the wealthy Count Almaviva win the heart of Rosina, a rich and beautiful music student.

Steven: But, of course, the scheming Dr. Bartolo wants Rosina all to himself and tries to keep her locked away. Which requires a series of disguises assumed with Figaro’s help. In his attempt to woo her, the Count pretends to be a starving student, a drunken soldier

and a singing tutor... the sort of disguise we've all tried at one time or another in our quest for love.

Michael: In Act One, The Count serenades his beloved Rosina, pretending to be a poor man so that she won't marry him just for his money.

Steven: Makes sense to me... *[unconvinced]*

Michael: And then, in a clever duet, the Count offers Figaro money for his assistance in his romantic scheme. [Switch to French] Ladies and gentlemen, the love ballad "Se il mio nome saper" from the Barber of Seville. Followed by the duet, "All idea di quel metallo."

Part III

[STEVEN walks on stage playing guitar]

Steven: It is one of the strange but appealing traditions of opera that women occasionally get to pull on a pair of pants in order to play the role of a young man. Not surprisingly, this is called a "pants role." Now it is important to understand that the character is really supposed to be a man – if she is just a woman pretending to be a man, that is called something else but I don't know the name for it because I'm only on page 39. And, of course, if a man plays the part of a woman, that is called a "skirt role" but we don't have any of those tonight so I'm not going to get into that at all. Although I will say that to my mind, a woman in a pants role is way more attractive than a man in a skirt role.

Just believe me when I say that for more than two centuries, audiences have pretended not to know that certain male roles are really filled by mezzo sopranos who can reach the high notes without resorting to... well let's just call it surgery.

In Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro," the barber Figaro has become a valet in the household of his friend the Count. And in that household there is a love struck teenage page – no relation to me at all – named Cherubino who is love with the Countess, Rosalina. And so he, who is really a she, sings a beautiful aria which translates to "You ladies who know what love is, see if I have it in my heart."

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