

Pittsburgh CLOs *Sound of Music* proves sweet sassy and surprising

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Kate Luce Angell, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

It's easy to assume we already know what we're getting with "The Sound of Music" -- familiar and family-friendly entertainment that's as sweet as apple strudel.

But the CLO's production has altered the recipe a bit, resulting in a confection that's surprisingly crisp and has bite while preserving the show's wholesomeness.

A fresh-faced would-be nun, Maria, brings singing back into the Von Trapp household, wins the love of her seven motherless charges and the seemingly stern Captain, and escapes the Nazi invasion of Austria by hiking over the mountains with her new family.

Jennifer Hope Wills as Maria is an accomplished vocalist and also brings a charming gracelessness to the role. This Maria is a bit of a nerd: awkward, overeager, bursting into song at inappropriate moments and climbing over furniture in her efforts to engage the children.

And while the plot calls for Maria to be petrified at the thought of the Captain in love with her, Ms. Wills plays these scenes as a woman whose own life-loving nature is what truly scares her.

Not surprising, considering his Tony-nominated performance in "Jekyll & Hyde," Robert Cuccioli's Captain Von Trapp is another character whose conflict makes him more than expected.

As with Maria, his sense of discipline and honor are tested by a passionate re-engagement with life. During "No Way to Stop It," in which his fiancée Elsa Schraeder and friend Max try to convince him to welcome the Nazis, we see his revulsion for a world in which expediency is a cardinal virtue. Mr. Cuccioli's rich voice is another treat that lends gravity and savor to the proceedings.



As Captain Von Trapp Robert Cuccioli center shares music with the Von Trapp children in Pittsburgh CLOs *The Sound of Music*
(Photo by Matt Polk)

Another standout performer is Lisa Howard as the Mother Abbess. The Broadway veteran is younger than the role typically calls for, and the result is almost a doubling between her and Maria. When they sing "My Favorite Things," their mirrored dance moves show what could have been had they each chosen different paths. And Ms. Howard's "Climb Ev'ry Mountain" produces pleasant chills.

As the promoter and sponge Max Detwiler, Jim Brochu says, "I'm lovable," and he's right. He and Donna English, as the fashionable Elsa Schraeder, could be unlikable characters, but both come off as real, complex people in a difficult situation. Ms. English has an especially hard task, as Baroness Schraeder is a Nazi sympathizer and a competitor with Maria for the Captain's love, but she still makes us sorry to see her go gracefully in Act II.

All seven Von Trapp children emerge as real people, a difficult trick and one that speaks volumes about the talent of the young local performers. Hannah Kwiecinski's Brigitta is especially winning. (My 8-year-old companion dubbed her her favorite character.)

As Liesl, Kirsten Hoover -- a recent North Hills High School graduate who just won this year's Gene Kelly award for Best Actress -- makes a nice pair with Aaron Young as Rolf.

Also of note are Gene A. Saraceni and Terry Wickline -- as Franz the butler and Frau Schmidt the housekeeper, respectively -- whose comic performances help lighten the later scenes, and the Nonnberg Sisters, especially Robin Lounsbury, Kara Mikula and Amanda Serra. The ensemble and sisters who sing the Prelude and closing hymn are perfect.

Director James Brennan clearly has benefited from his excellent cast, but the uniformly good performances and the show's sprightly pace owe a debt to his leadership, and he's helped deliver a production that surprises but satisfies the sweet tooth of any diehard "Sound of Music" fan.

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