



Washington National Opera

In an act of selfless love, Violetta writes a farewell letter to Alfredo.

forgiveness for her past waywardness, but, as she says, “even if God should forgive her, mankind, to her, remains

implacable.”

When Alfredo finally returns to her, hours before she dies, he asks her to for-

give him and his father. She responds: “I should forgive you? It’s I who am guilty, but only love made me so.”

In the end, as she is about to die, this “woman who went astray,” gives Alfredo the most beautiful of gifts. She gives him a miniature portrait of herself and then in the second to last aria of the opera, *Prendi, quest’e l’immagine*, she sings:

And if a gentle maiden
In the flower of her youth
Should give you her heart,
Make her your wife, I wish it.
Then give her this portrait
And tell her it is a gift
From one, among the angels,
Who prays for her and for you.

So, although *La Traviata* ends in “bitter grief,” nonetheless Violetta’s last wish is an image of hope of future happiness.

— William F. Wertz, Jr.

So Close to Perfection: A Failed Effort At Mozart’s *Le Nozze di Figaro*

“In my opinion each number in Mozart’s Figaro is a miracle; it is totally beyond me how anyone could create something so perfect; nothing like it was ever done again, not even by Beethoven.”

—Johannes Brahms¹

While Brahms’ evident enthusiasm for Mozart’s opera, *Le Nozze di Figaro* (*The Marriage of Figaro*), may have led him to a slight overstatement, there is no doubt that this work is among the small number of compositions which qualifies for such accolades.

Mozart’s *Figaro* was a brilliant intervention into the cultural/political life of the Emperor Joseph II’s Vienna. With this work, he transformed opera, both in its form—“Figaro” fits neither the “opera seria” style of the so-called classical operas popular at the time, nor the



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Erwin Schrott as Figaro and Isabel Bayrakdarian as Susanna, in the Los Angeles Opera production of “*The Marriage of Figaro*.”

“opera buffa” type—and by his astonishing compositional virtuosity, in which a piece of more than three hours maintains a singular idea, applying the “*Motivführung*” principle of composition, which Mozart learned from his collaborator, Joseph Haydn.²

In its political polemic, the optimism about the nature of man which permeates the opera, with its theme of equality and justice, is a reflection of the enthusiasm for the American Revolution among republicans in Europe.

A servant, Figaro, and his bride-to-be, Susanna, are forced into a conspiracy, to thwart the intent of their master, the lustful Count Almaviva, to assert one of the most brutal practices of the nobility, the “*droit de seigneur*,” or “right of the first night” (which an oligarch exercised by sleeping with a newly-wedded bride on his domains, before permitting the bridegroom to do so).

The conspiracy widens, as the two bring in his neglected and forlorn wife, while the Count incorporates his lackeys into his scheme.

Dangerously Revolutionary

The “revolutionary” theme of the drama is evident at once, as Figaro responds to being told by Susanna that the Count wants to reassert his oligarchical rights with her, with a defiant cavatina, “*Se vuol ballare*”—If you want to dance, he sings, referring to the Count, I will play the tune; i.e., you will not get away with this. Imagine the response from the nobility seated in the audience, to the impudence of this mere servant, in challenging this previously enforced right!

In 1786, when this opera was first performed, there was no legal concept of justice for servants living in Hapsburg Austria. Servants, as well as most others who were not part of the nobility, lived at the mercy and “beneficence” of the oligarchy. The bestiality of this “*droit de seigneur*” shows the extent to which a large segment of the population was treated as property, no better than animals. Yet, the reaction to this challenge was tempered by the extraordi-



Susanna, Figaro, and Countess Almaviva conspire to teach the Count a lesson.

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narily beautiful music of Mozart, which adds to the drama on the stage. It becomes impossible for an audience not to recognize the human qualities of the servants, or to be moved by the haunting prayer of the Countess as she pleads, in “*Porgi, amor*,” for her lost love to return.

In the end, it is Susanna, the Countess, and Figaro who prevail, as the Count falls into their elaborate trap, and must plead for forgiveness from his wife, before everyone who lives on his estate. For the moment, it is a happy ending, as cunning has defeated brute force, and love has trumped lust.

Yet, the ending leaves one with an eerie, unresolved sense that all is not really well. Mozart demonstrates a prescience, through the development of his characters—who are not stereotypes, but real, live human beings, with fears and anxieties, and hopes for a better future—of the dangers lurking if Europe’s oligarchy rejected the notion of the inalienable rights of all the people, which was the driving force behind the American Revolution. The bloody chaos of the French Revolution, unleashed in 1789, three years after the premiere of Mozart’s opera, by Britain’s Lord Shelburne, to prevent the spread of the American Revolution to Europe, is a palpable threat, just

beneath the surface in the opera. It is foreshadowed in the revolt against the Count, whose unhappy capitulation to the plot was necessary to prevent a nastier conclusion.

It was for this reason that the play from which the opera was adapted, written by Pierre Augustine Beaumarchais—who was a leading organizer in France of support for the American Revolution—was a matter of controversy at Joseph II’s court. The play had been banned by the Emperor’s decree, but Mozart and his librettist, Lorenzo Da Ponte, convinced Joseph that the opera was unlikely to lead to riots, as the play had when it opened in Paris.³

Historical Specificity

In numerous writings and statements on the method of Classical composition, Lyndon LaRouche has emphasized the importance of “historical specificity.” By this, he means that the intent of the author or composer is to choose an historic moment of crisis in order to provide, to the audience, an insight into their own thinking and behavior, through a self-conscious reflection on the actions of those on the stage. To accomplish this, great dramatists, on the level of Shakespeare and Schiller, picked specific historical

events or personalities, as in Shakespeare's *Richard III* or Schiller's *Don Carlos* and *The Maid of Orleans*, to take the audience beyond "the facts" of historical developments, to a deeper level of truth.

This Classical method forces members of the audience to confront their own fears, to reflect on their own axioms, as they watch the struggles, failures, and successes of those on stage, so they may locate their own sense of identity in history, and find the courage to act against the wrongs they face in their own times. This succeeds in art, not in the literal and didactic way pushed by modernists such as Bertolt Brecht, who reject the Classical form, but through use of metaphor and irony, so that viewers may discover, in their own imagination, what the dramatist or composer has discovered about the potential to transform them, by making them self-conscious.

For this reason, it is both wrong and immoral for modern producers to take a Classical work and change it, to make it more "relevant" to the modern audience, by such tricks as moving the setting. This is commonly done with Beethoven's great opera *Fidelio*, which was written about the jailing of the Marquis de Lafayette. It is often re-set, in either Nazi Germany or a Central American dictatorship, thus robbing it of its real, rich historical context, that of the battle to bring the American Revolution to Europe. Similarly, the recent staging in Berlin of Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio*—which was composed with the intent of dampening the enthusiasm of some Viennese oligarchs for war with the Turks—was set in a Twentieth-century bordello and drug den.

'Figaro' in Los Angeles

In June 2004, the Los Angeles Opera presented *Le Nozze di Figaro*. The first act was a complete joy, as the story literally leapt off the stage. The singing was excellent, the playing of the orchestra was crisp. A particular standout was Erwin Schrott, a baritone from Uruguay, who played

Figaro. In addition to a rich voice, Schrott's athletic cavorting and expressive acting made him a highly sympathetic character, in sharp contrast to David Pittsinger's effective performance as the Count, whose plaintive request that Susanna meet him for a tryst, in Act III's "Crudel," combined a seductive sweetness with more than a hint of menace.

Yet, despite an overall superlative cast, there was one huge problem. No, the setting was not Hollywood, but a recognizable Segovia in 1780—true to both Beaumarchais and Mozart, with one glaring exception. As the curtain opens on Act II, with the Countess singing "Porgi, amor," we first see her on the bed, on the *telephone*! This seemingly minor contrivance—which was completely incongruous, serving no function whatsoever—was repeated in the beginning of Act III, when the Count is seen at the opening of the curtain, also on the phone! In both cases, nothing was said by the characters, who hung up the phone, and then began singing.

However, that one directorial indulgence (or, perhaps, act of temporary insanity), destroyed the historic specificity of the whole performance. Instead of leaving the theater exhilarated and uplifted, those who really

know Mozart walked away with a dull ache, saddened that, once again, a great moment had been ruined by an impulsive act of ego, as a conceit of Brechtian *Regietheatre* destroyed what was otherwise a nearly perfect performance.

—Harley Schlanger

1. Quoted in Wolfgang Hildesheimer, *Mozart* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1982).
2. For a discussion of Mozart's development of Haydn's "Motivführung" principle, see Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., "Mozart's 1782-1786 Revolution in Music," *Fidelio*, Winter 1992 (Vol. I, No. 4). See also David Shavin's accompanying "Mozart and the American Revolutionary Upsurge," for a detailed presentation of Mozart's involvement in the republican movement of his time.
3. One Mozart scholar, Volkmar Braunbehrens, goes so far as to argue that Joseph II approved of a performance of the opera as a "political calculation." He writes that Joseph, who was a reformer and had taken steps to limit the near-absolute power of the Austrian oligarchy and the Church, "was creating a political issue [by approving of performing the opera]. . . . From his viewpoint, the servant who defends his rights was only of minor interest; it was far more important to hold a mirror up to the nobility." [From Volkmar Braunbehrens, *Mozart in Vienna* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1986).]



Count Almaviva, Figaro, Countess Almaviva, and Susan—and in the middle of everything, a bizarre, anachronistic telephone!

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