

THE THREE PROGENITORS OF FIGARO

Program notes by Paul Zweifel

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The Marriage of Figaro was the first of the three operas Mozart wrote to librettos by Lorenzo da Ponte; it premiered in Vienna in 1786. The other two operas, *Don Giovanni* (1787) and *Così fan tutte* (1790) comprise the triumvirate of Mozart's best-known and best-loved Italian operas. Stanford University's opera website actually lists 20 Mozart operas. Five of these are in German, including the ever-popular *Magic Flute* and the less popular but still frequently-heard *Abduction from the Seraglio*. Of the Italian operas, two have only fragments remaining (*L'oca del Cairo* and *Lo sposo deluso*); two are performed occasionally at major opera companies (*La Clemenza di Tito* and *Idomeneo*); and a few are heard on special occasions. For example *Il rè pastore* is being performed at Covent Garden this year, celebrating Mozart's 250th birth year while last year my wife and I had the pleasure of doing supertitles for a performance of *La finta giardiniera* at the Cleveland Institute of Music. Most of Mozart's other Italian operas are seldom if ever heard, for example *La finta semplice*, written when he was 13, and *Lucio Silla*, when he was 16. In case anyone thinks that Mozart's youth was responsible for operas like *Silla* rarely being heard, remember that one of Mozart's most popular compositions *Exultate, jubilate*--a motet that every soprano worthy of her vitamin C has sung repeatedly--also was composed when Mozart was 16.

The librettist Da Ponte lived to a ripe old age, surviving Mozart by almost 47 years. (He emigrated to the U.S. where he eventually became Columbia University's first professor of Italian.) To learn more about this fascinating man visit http://pzweifel.com/music/lorenzo_da_ponte.htm.

The third person intimately related to *Figaro* is the Parisian playwright Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais (1732-1799) who wrote the play on which the opera is based. (The honorific "de Beaumarchais" was added to his birth name through marriage.) Augustin was born in Paris as *fils Caron*, the "son of Caron," pronounced "ficaro" in the argot of the day. So in his

play, *Le Mariage de Figaro*, we see that the hero is Beaumarchais himself. Further the sex-crazed adolescent Cherubino (Cherubin in the play) represents the young Beaumarchais, whose youthful nickname was Cherubin (“Little angel”), an ironic reference to his precocious sexuality. Beaumarchais was much more than an author. He was an inventor (of the pedal harp and the escapement mechanism which made portable watches feasible): a diplomat (he had a great deal to do with the financing of the American revolution); an entrepreneur and even a composer. (*Le Barbier de Seville*, another of his plays on which two operas were based,¹ was originally conceived as an opera.) He was even the music teacher of *Mesdames*, the two daughters of Louis XVI. Later in life he wrote the third play of the Figaro trilogy, *La Mère Coupable* (“The Guilty Mother”) on which the American composer John Corigliano based the 1991 American opera *The Ghosts of Versailles*. To learn more about Beaumarchais, visit http://pzweifel.com/music/figaro_prog_notes.html. (Program notes I wrote for the 1994 Opera Roanoke production of *Figaro*.)

Those who saw the movie *Amadeus* learned a little of the genesis of the opera. Emperor Joseph, we remember, objected to it at first on the basis that it had “too many notes.” But although the play had been banned in Vienna, the Emperor did not openly object to the opera’s subject matter. (Even though *droit de seigneur*--the right of the lord of the manor to sleep with every working-class woman on the night before her wedding--plays an important role in the plot). Furthermore, the story portrays servants getting the better of a nobleman.

Similar considerations delayed the opening of the play in Paris for six years, from 1778 until 1784, while five different boards of censors studied its orthodoxy before finally allowing it to be performed. The censors soon had reason to regret their decision: many people (most notably, Napoleon) have credited the play as being a harbinger of the French revolution (which began only five years later with the storming of the Bastille.) It is difficult for us to imagine that a play could be powerful enough to cause a revolution, but in those days lack of mass communication gave plays, theatricals, pamphlets and the like the political power

enjoyed today by cable TV networks. And remember, the French revolution was a revolt not of the peasants but of the bourgeoisie, the people most likely to attend plays. (The America revolution, which was the inspiration for the French, was fomented to a considerable extent by the pamphleteering of Thomas Paine.)

Da Ponte and Mozart apparently had managed to slip *Figaro* past Joseph and the Viennese censors by toning down the play's social satire. Beaumarchais' bitter attacks against the privileges of the wealthy were reduced to the single *droit de seigneur* mentioned above, one that the Count has already renounced anyway before the curtain rises. (He has come to regret his decision because of his infatuation with the beautiful Susanna, so he resorts instead to attempted seduction.) And the clever Figaro of the play, who shows his mental superiority to the Count, is changed into a bumbler who is tricked by his girlfriend and the Countess. Putting it succinctly, da Ponte changed Beaumarchais' attacks into satire.

We can see just one example of the changes from play to opera (there are many) if we compare Figaro's fourth-act aria, *Aprite un po quegl'occhi*, with the long Act V soliloquy of the play from which it is derived. In the play Figaro lashes out against the Count:

Because you are a great Lord, you think your talents are infinite!...Nobility, fortune, rank, influence: they all make a man so proud! What have you ever done to earn such wealth? You took the trouble to be born, and that's the sum total of your efforts. Whereas me, my God! Lost in the obscurity of the herd, I needed more skill and know-how even to exist than it's take to govern the Spanish empire for the last hundred years...²

Later in the same soliloquy Figaro complains about the lack of freedom of the press:

...Madrid has set up a system of free trade on all products, even extending to the press. Provided my writings avoid all mention of authority, religion, politics, morals, people in high places, influential institutions, the Opera, any other public entertainment, or anyone who has any interest in anyone, I can freely print whatever I wish, subject to the inspection of two or three censors.

The aria derived has none of this social context; it is nothing more than a complaint about the inconstancy of women in general and of Susanna in particular. This latter sentiment is present also in the soliloquy, but is overshadowed by the social satire.

So da Ponte knew what he was doing when he wrote the libretto; he produced a text that the establishment could accept. And Mozart, who “put in too many notes” must have had confidence in his ability to convince the Emperor otherwise. It is likely, however, that Beaumarchais had no idea when he wrote the play that it would foreshadow a revolution in which, incidentally, Emperor Joseph’s sister, Marie Antoinette, would perish.

My thanks to David Bamberger for valuable comments on these notes.

1. Rossini’s *Barber of Seville* as well as an earlier opera of the same name, by Paisiello.
2. Translation by Graham Anderson. *The Figaro Plays*, Absolute Classics. (1993).