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978-0-521-31606-4 - W. A. Mozart: Le Nozze di Figaro

Tim Carter

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 *Introduction*

Mozart arrived in Vienna from Munich on 16 March 1781 to take his place in the entourage of Archbishop Colloredo of Salzburg, who was on an official visit to the city. His position as the Archbishop's court organist was a respectable one, but he complained of being ranked only just above the cooks and below the valets,¹ and he was clearly dissatisfied with his lot. One can see why. During his precocious childhood he had been fêted throughout Europe. But now he was no longer a novelty, and despite the staunch efforts of his father he felt that he had not yet found a post to match his abilities. Attempts to secure a position at Munich and Mannheim had failed, and his recent trip to Paris was fraught with personal sadness – the death of his mother – and professional neglect. Even the success of *Idomeneo*, K366, in Munich (it was staged there on 29 January 1781) was scant compensation for his uncertain prospects.

Above all, Mozart could not bear the thought of spending any more time in his native Salzburg. Not only did he dislike working for the Archbishop, but he also loathed what he felt was the provinciality of this small city in northern Austria. Even amid the disappointments of Paris he could not see himself returning there. In mid-1778 he wrote to the Abbé Bullinger that 'Salzburg is no place for my talent':

In the first place, professional musicians there are not held in much consideration; and, secondly, one hears nothing, there is no theatre, no opera; and even if they really wanted one, who is there to sing? For the last five or six years the Salzburg orchestra has always been rich in what is useless and superfluous, but very poor in what is necessary, and absolutely destitute of what is indispensable. . . .²

A lack of respect for musicians, the absence of a theatre and opera, and a poor-quality orchestra scarcely made Salzburg attractive to a young composer for whom so much had been promised. It is small wonder, then, that Mozart seems to have been thoroughly seduced by the bright lights of Vienna. According to Michael Kelly:

Cambridge University Press

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Tim Carter

Excerpt

[More information](#)2 *Le nozze di Figaro*

the Court of Vienna was, perhaps, the most brilliant in Europe. The theatre, which forms part of the Royal Palace, was crowded with a blaze of beauty and fashion. All ranks of society were doatingly fond of music, and most of them perfectly understood the science. Indeed, Vienna then was a place where pleasure was the order of the day and night.³

Things came to a head for Mozart in Vienna when the Archbishop prevented him from playing before the Emperor and moreover from earning the equivalent of half his Salzburg salary in one evening. On 9 May Mozart asked for his dismissal, and it was eventually granted a month later 'with a kick on my arse'. He was now on his own.

Mozart was optimistic about the possibilities of earning a living in Vienna by teaching, playing and the support of noble patrons, and his early years in Vienna were indeed successful. Moreover, he was able to hear the music of and meet the leading composers of the age, such as Joseph Haydn, and to take advantage of the interests of noble dilettantes to explore the music of the past, as with Baron van Swieten's taste for the music of J. S. and C. P. E. Bach and Handel. Mozart also fell in love and married. But above all he felt that here in 'the land of the clavier'⁴ he was among people who could appreciate his talents.

Mozart's repeated complaints about the lack of a theatre in Salzburg emphasise just how much he valued sung and spoken drama. Opera, in particular comic opera (*opera buffa*), was especially close to his heart. One can see why Mozart liked *opera buffa* – his first full-length work for the stage, *La finta semplice* (1768, composed at the age of twelve), was a comic opera – for even if he was able and willing to write *opera seria* ('serious' opera) when required, both his musical style and his own inclinations leant towards comedy. The stereotyped characters and fixed, static forms of late Baroque *opera seria* may have held the stage for almost a century, but *opera buffa* was a rising star, a true product of the Age of Enlightenment. Italian composers of the early eighteenth century had begun to turn away from the epic heroes and the plots concerned with honour, virtue and glory typical of *opera seria* to focus on real people with human needs and emotions from all levels of society. These composers were inspired by contemporary developments in spoken comedy, in particular under the influence of the *commedia dell'arte*, with its fast-moving, improvisatory plots, its slapstick comedy, and its down-to-earth humour. Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's famous *La serva padrona* (1733) was just one of many works that reflected this new spirit of comedy, and the new genre reached its first

Cambridge University Press

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Tim Carter

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

peak in the operas of Baldassare Galuppi to the libretti of that great comic writer of the eighteenth century, Carlo Goldoni.

These new comic plots inevitably affected the musical forms and styles available to the opera composer. The static *da capo* (ABA) aria, with its emphasis on vocal display, no longer reigned supreme, and composers were free to explore, indeed invent, musical processes that would match this new kind of drama. First Pergolesi and Galuppi, and then Niccolò Piccinni, Domenico Cimarosa and Giovanni Paisiello, were all composers who forged new musical techniques in their attempts to come to terms with the demands of *opera buffa*. They had to develop a kind of music that would match the wit and pacing of the drama, and express the human emotions of the characters. Mozart was eager to follow their example.

He had already cut his teeth on both comic and serious operas, and *Idomeneo* had allowed him to prove what he could do with opera as a mature composer. It is not surprising that his thoughts soon turned to writing an opera for Vienna. But if he was to do so, then it would have to be in German rather than Italian, for in 1776 the Emperor Joseph II had dismissed his Italian opera company at the Burgtheater and replaced it with a German company in a move to develop a German-language Nationaltheater.⁵ From 1778, the sung offerings of the Nationaltheater consisted of so-called *Singspiels*, spoken plays with songs, many of which were translations of French *opéras comiques*. As Mozart's later letters reveal, he was not averse to opera in German, indeed he sometimes claimed to prefer it, and by the end of July 1781 he had received a libretto by Gottlieb Stephanie Jr., *Belmonte und Konstanze* or *Die Verführung* [later *Entführung*] *aus dem Serail*. Mozart's setting was eventually performed on 16 July 1782.

Mozart's correspondence on *Die Entführung*, K384, like that on *Idomeneo*, suggests just how well-formed his operatic instincts now were. It also reveals how much he liked writing opera, and he bubbled with enthusiasm to tell his father exactly what he was planning to do:

Osmin's rage is rendered comical by the use of the Turkish music. In working out the aria ['Solche hergelauf'ne Laffen', No. 3] I have . . . allowed Fischer's beautiful deep notes to glow. The passage 'Drum beim Barte des Propheten' is indeed in the same tempo, but with quick notes; and as Osmin's rage gradually increases, there comes (just when the aria seems to be at an end) the *allegro assai*, which is in a totally different metre and in a different key; this is bound to be very effective. For just as a man in such a towering rage oversteps all the bounds of order, moderation and propriety and completely

Cambridge University Press

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Tim Carter

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Le nozze di Figaro*

forgets himself, so must the music too forget itself. But since passions, whether violent or not, must never be expressed to the point of exciting disgust, and as music, even in the most terrible situations, must never offend the ear, but must please the listener, or in other words must never cease to be *music*, so I have not chosen a key foreign to F (in which the aria is written) but one related to it – not the nearest, D minor, but the more remote A minor. Let me now turn to Belmonte's aria in A major, 'O wie ängstlich, o wie feurig' [No. 4]. Would you like to know how I have expressed it – and even indicated his throbbing heart? By the two violins playing octaves. This is the favourite aria of all those who have heard it, and it is mine also. I wrote it expressly to suit Adamberger's voice. You see the trembling – the faltering – you see how his throbbing breast begins to swell; this I have expressed by a crescendo. You hear the whispering and the sighing – which I have indicated by the first violins with mutes and a flute playing in unison.⁶

All this reflects important preoccupations of Mozart the opera composer: the importance of writing with the capabilities of particular singers in mind and with an eye and ear for stage effect, and the dramatic and expressive possibilities of tonality and of instrumental writing. They have a bearing on all his subsequent dramatic works, and not least, as we shall see, on *Le nozze di Figaro*.

The success of *Die Entführung* in Vienna in 1782 opened up other possibilities, as Mozart wrote to his father on 21 December:

On the 10th my opera was performed again with the greatest applause. It was the fourteenth time and the theatre was as full as on the first night, or rather it was as packed as it has invariably been. Count Rosenberg himself spoke to me at Prince Galitzin's and suggested that I should write an Italian opera. I have already commissioned someone to procure for me from Italy the latest opere buffe texts to choose from, but as yet I have not received any, although I myself wrote to Ignaz Hagenauer about it. Some Italian male and female singers are coming here at Easter.⁷

These plans for an Italian, not German, opera, and the reference to the imminent arrival of Italian singers, suggest that something new was in the air. Indeed, Joseph II must have finally realised that his experiments with a German theatre had failed, largely, it seems, through a lack of good poets and musicians willing to write for it. His ambassador to Venice, Count Giacomo Durazzo, was asked to recruit singers, and Durazzo in turn approached Michael Kelly, an Irish tenor currently working in Italy. According to Kelly:

One morning I received a message from His Excellency the Austrian Ambassador, desiring me to go to him in the evening. I waited on His Excellency, who informed me that he had received a letter from Prince Rosenberg, Grand Chamberlain of His Majesty Joseph the Second, Emperor of Germany, directing him to engage a company of Italian singers for a comic opera to be given at the Court of Vienna; that no expense was to be spared,

Cambridge University Press

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Tim Carter

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

so that the artists were of the first order; that no secondary talent would be received among them, and that characters were to be filled by those engaged, without distinction, according to their abilities; and the will of the director appointed by the Emperor.⁸

The new Italian *buffo* company was established in the Burgtheater by April 1783. As well as Kelly, it included Stefano Mandini (baritone), Francesco Bussani (bass) and, as the 'stars' of the group, the bass Francesco Benucci (the first Figaro) and the soprano Nancy Storace (the first Susanna). According to Johannes Pezzl, writing in 1787:

The singers at the opera are select and well paid. Mandini and Benucci are the most accomplished *buffo* actors one can see. The chief idol in this comic Pantheon was, up to the present, La Storace, of Italian descent, but born in London. She earned over 1000 ducats yearly. To tell the truth, she sang very well but her figure was not advantageous: a thick little head, without any feminine charm, with the exception of a pair of large and nearly expressionless eyes.⁹

The company made its *début* with Antonio Salieri's *La scuola degli gelosi* (first performed in Venice in 1778), revised by the composer, the director of the new company, and by the newly appointed poet to the Italian theatre, Lorenzo da Ponte.

Da Ponte's rather chequered career had led him to Vienna by a roundabout route. Born Emmanuele Conegliano at Ceneda (now Vittorio Veneto) in Italy on 10 March 1749, he had taken the name of the Bishop of Ceneda, Lorenzo da Ponte, when his father, a Jewish tanner, converted to Christianity in 1763. Da Ponte's early training at seminaries in Ceneda and Portogruaro had prepared him either for the priesthood or for teaching – he was subsequently employed in both capacities – although his penchant both for liberal and politically suspect ideas and for married women subsequently led to a ban on teaching in the Veneto and then enforced exile from Venice. Like his friend Casanova, he was something of a rake and fortune-hunter. A visit to Dresden as a guest of the librettist Caterino Mazzolà encouraged him to foster his talent for dramatic poetry, and Mazzolà's recommendation to Salieri gave him an entrée to Vienna, where he arrived by 1781. He seems to have quickly attracted the favour of Joseph II more through his good manners than his achievements to date, and as poet to the Italian theatre he worked with all the leading opera composers in Vienna – including Salieri, Vicente Martín y Soler and, of course, Mozart – whether adapting pre-existing libretti or writing them anew. After the death of Joseph II in 1790, cliques forced da Ponte to leave Vienna: he moved first to

Cambridge University Press

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Tim Carter

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Le nozze di Figaro*

London, where he was employed as poet of the King's Theatre, Haymarket, and then to America, where he spent his last years as a grocer and then as a teacher of Italian, most notably at Columbia College, New York. He died on 17 August 1838.¹⁰

Mozart repeatedly reminded his father about his requests for opera libretti, despite his apparent doubts about the likely success of the new company: 'I do not believe that the Italian opera will keep going for long, and besides, I hold with the Germans.'¹¹ But after the company's *début* Mozart seems to have been more convinced of its potential, and on 7 May 1783 he asked his father to approach the Salzburg poet, Giambattista Varesco, who had provided the libretto of *Idomeneo*:

Well, the Italian opera buffa has started again here and is very popular. The buffo is particularly good – his name is Benucci. I have looked through at least a hundred libretti and more, but I have scarcely found a single one with which I am satisfied; that is to say, so many alterations would have to be made here and there, that even if a poet would undertake to make them, it would be easier for him to write a completely new text – which indeed it is always best to do. Our poet here is now a certain Abbate da Ponte. He has an enormous amount to do in revising pieces for the theatre and he has to write *per obbligo* an entirely new libretto for Salieri, which will take him two months. He has promised after that to write a new libretto for me. But who knows whether he will be able to keep his word – or will want to? For, as you are aware, these Italian gentlemen are very civil to your face. Enough, we know them! If he is in league with Salieri, I shall never get anything out of him. But indeed I should dearly love to show what I can do in an Italian opera! So I have been thinking that unless Varesco is still very much annoyed with us about the Munich opera, he might write me a new libretto for seven characters. Basta! You will know best if this can be arranged. In the meantime he could jot down a few ideas, and when I come to Salzburg we could then work them out together. The most essential thing is that on the whole the story should be really *comic*; and, if possible, he ought to introduce *two equally good female parts*, one of these to be *seria*, the other *mezzo carattere*, but both parts equal in *importance and excellence*. The third female character, however, may be entirely buffa, and so may all the male ones, if necessary. If you think that something can be got out of Varesco, please discuss it with him soon. . . Tell him too that his share will certainly amount to 400 or 500 gulden, for the custom here is that the poet gets the takings of the third performance.¹²

Benucci does indeed seem to have been the mainstay of the company – certainly Joseph II regarded him as perhaps the most valuable member of it – and operas to be performed in Vienna were chosen at least partly with him in mind. His presence was surely one reason why Joseph II was so eager to perform Paisiello's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* at the Burgtheater (it was premièred on 13 August 1783), and

Cambridge University Press

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Tim Carter

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

of course Benucci's talents must have been responsible to no small degree for Mozart's idea of setting Beaumarchais's sequel to *Le barbier de Séville*, *Le mariage de Figaro*.

Mozart's specification for the cast of a new libretto from Varesco presumably reflects the composition of the new company in 1783, and his request for two equally good female parts, one *seria* and the other *mezzo carattere* (a 'mixed' character, see below, pp. 14–15), and a third perhaps *buffa*, naturally makes one think of the Countess, Susanna and Marcellina in *Figaro*.¹³ He kept reminding his father about an approach to Varesco in his letters of May and early June ('the chief thing must be the comic element, for I know the taste of the Viennese'),¹⁴ and by mid-June the poet seems to have sent at least an outline of a possible opera, *L'oca del Cairo*. Its rather improbable plot turns on an old fool of a father, his daughter and her companion locked in a tower, and an ingenious mechanical goose to smuggle in the inevitable star-crossed lovers. However, Varesco seems to have had unspecified doubts about the opera. Moreover, if he feared a repetition of the trouble he had experienced with Mozart over *Idomeneo* – the composer had incessantly requested alterations and revisions – he did so with good cause:

Why, I consider it a great insult to myself that Herr Varesco is doubtful about the success of the opera. Of one thing he may be sure and that is, that his libretto will certainly not go down if the music is no good. For in the opera the chief thing is the music. If then the opera is to be a success and Varesco hopes to be rewarded, he must alter and recast the libretto as much and as often as I wish and he must not follow his own inclinations, for he has not the slightest knowledge or experience of the theatre. You may even give him to understand that it doesn't much matter whether he writes the opera or not. I know the story now; and therefore anyone can write it as well as he can. Besides, I am expecting today four of the latest and best libretti from Italy among which there will surely be one which will be some good. So there is plenty of time.¹⁵

Mozart worked slowly on the opera. Perhaps he did so because he wanted to do his best in his first *opera buffa* for Vienna – he was careful to assure his father that 'in all the operas which are to be performed until mine is finished, not a single idea will resemble one of mine'¹⁶ – but he also seems to have been less than enthusiastic about the plot. It is clear, too, that Mozart had other irons in the fire and was working on at least one other libretto as well as considering others. He continued to set parts of *L'oca del Cairo* until the end of 1783 – in December he reported that he was three arias short of finishing the first act and that he was pleased by a *buffo* aria, a

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31606-4 - W. A. Mozart: *Le Nozze di Figaro*

Tim Carter

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *Le nozze di Figaro*

quartet and a finale – but he must have abandoned the project soon thereafter.¹⁷

Seven pieces for *Loca del Cairo*, K422, survive in sketched-out form (the vocal line, bass line and some indications for the accompaniment). The opening duet for Aretta and Chichibio is, as Alfred Einstein says, ‘worthy, in its freshness and charm, of Susanna and Figaro’.¹⁸ This is followed by an aria for Aretta with shades of Donna Anna’s ‘Or sai chi l’onore’ in *Don Giovanni*, the *buffo* aria for Chichibio which pleased Mozart, another duet for Aretta and Chichibio, and an incomplete aria for Don Pippo (which hints at Bartolo’s ‘La vendetta, oh la vendetta!’ in Act I of *Figaro*). Then there is a fine quartet in two sections, which again contains ideas to be developed in *Figaro*. The last piece to survive is a large-scale sectional finale. It is carefully judged both in terms of contrasts in tempo and of tonal structure and is full of the musical gestures that Mozart was to put to such effect in the magnificent finales of *Figaro*, *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte*. It is not surprising that *Loca del Cairo* remained unfinished – the plot is far too trite to merit serious consideration – but there is no doubt that working on the opera gave Mozart the chance to come to terms with the comic techniques of his contemporaries and to explore how to give them an individual voice.

At the same time as Mozart was working on *Loca del Cairo*, he also had plans for another opera. On 5 July 1783 he wrote to his father: ‘An Italian poet here has now brought me a libretto which I shall perhaps adopt, if he agrees to trim and adjust it in accordance with my wishes.’¹⁹ Presumably this was *Lo sposo deluso*, K430/424a, and it is generally assumed that the librettist was Lorenzo da Ponte, who had promised to write a libretto for Mozart (see Mozart’s letter to his father of 7 May 1783 quoted above) and who had probably completed the libretto ‘per obbligo’ for Salieri, *Il ricco d’un giorno* (first performed on 6 December 1784). Of *Lo sposo deluso*, only an overture leading to a quartet, two arias and a trio survive. The overture is designed as if in ternary form with a slow middle section (like the overture to *Die Entführung* and the planned overture to *Figaro*, see below, p. 49), and the quartet begins at the return of the opening section. The second aria has shades of Fiordiligi’s ‘Come scoglio immoto resta’ in *Così fan tutte*, while the trio is another fine ensemble that would not be out of place in one of the three later da Ponte operas.

As well as these two abortive attempts at full-length operas, Mozart put his foot in the door of the Burgtheater, as it were, by

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31606-4 - W. A. Mozart: *Le Nozze di Figaro*

Tim Carter

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

composing three arias (K418, 419, 420) to be inserted in Pasquale Anfossi's *Il curioso indiscreto* (staged on 30 June 1783; only two of the added arias were performed). But in the absence of a viable libretto to set himself, and perhaps possible complications from the rivalry of more established opera composers in Vienna, Mozart was forced to bide his time. Of course, he was still composing instrumental music that would stand him in good stead for the experience of *Figaro*. No doubt he also had the opportunity to get the measure of the modern *opere buffe* performed at the Burgtheater and learn accordingly. There seems little doubt that the works of one such modern composer, Giovanni Paisiello, were to have a great influence on *Figaro*: Paisiello's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* was first performed there on 13 August 1783, and his *Il re Teodoro in Venezia* on 23 August 1784. According to Einstein, *Il re Teodoro*, with its real, human characters instead of *commedia dell'arte* stereotypes must have struck Mozart and da Ponte 'like a bolt of lightning'.²⁰

During 1785 and early 1786 Mozart continued to flex his operatic muscles in public. For Francesco Bianchi's *La villanella rapita*, performed at the Burgtheater on 28 November 1785, he composed a quartet, 'Dite almeno in che mancai', K479, and a trio, 'Mandina amabile', K480. 'Mandina amabile' is in large part a 'seduction'-duet in the manner of 'Crudel! perchè finora' in *Figaro* and 'Là ci darem la mano' in *Don Giovanni* (Act I, No. 7) – all three share the key of A major – while the quartet is almost a study in the comic techniques to be found in the ensembles of *Figaro*. Then in early 1786 Mozart produced a brief entertainment, *Der Schauspieldirektor*, K486 (performed on 7 February), with a splendid overture, two arias, a trio and a final *vaudeville*, and a plot that pokes fun at opera singers and impresarios.

But by now *Figaro* was well in hand. Although we lack documentary evidence on the early stages of the opera, it seems clear that Mozart and da Ponte were at work on it by mid-1785, if not before. In early November, Mozart was, according to his father, 'up to the eyes' in composing the score, although 'no doubt according to his charming habit he has kept on postponing matters and has let the time slip by. So now he must set to work seriously, for Count Rosenberg is prodding him.'²¹ Rumours of its composition had reached Paris by late December, and it is possible that the first performance was planned for after Christmas during the Carnival season.²² In the end, however, the new opera in Carnival was Martín y Soler's *Il burbero di buon cuore* (performed on 4 January; the libretto was by

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31606-4 - W. A. Mozart: *Le Nozze di Figaro*

Tim Carter

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 *Le nozze di Figaro*

da Ponte). In February and March Mozart was occupied first with *Der Schauspieldirektor*, and then with a revival of *Idomeneo* (performed on 13 March), for which he had to revise the score and compose a new duet and aria (K489, 490). *Figaro* was now planned for the end of April, or so Mozart's father thought:

'*Le Nozze di Figaro*' is being performed on the 28th for the first time. It will be surprising if it is a success, for I know that very powerful cabals have ranged themselves against your brother. Salieri and all his supporters will again try to move heaven and earth to down his opera. Herr & Mme Duschek told me recently that it is on account of the very great reputation which your brother's exceptional talent and ability have won for him that so many people are plotting against him.²³

In the event, however, the dress rehearsal was held on 29 April in the presence of the Emperor, and the first performance on 1 May. The cast was: Count Almaviva, Stefano Mandini; Countess Almaviva, Luisa Laschi; Susanna, Nancy Storace; Figaro, Francesco Benucci; Cherubino, Dorotea Bussani; Marcellina, Maria Mandini; Bartolo and Antonio, Francesco Bussani; Basilio and Don Curzio, Michael Kelly; Barbarina, Anna Gottlieb.