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Tim Carter

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W. A. Mozart

Le nozze di Figaro

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CAMBRIDGE OPERA HANDBOOKS

General preface

This is a series of studies of individual operas written for the opera-goer or record-collector as well as the student or scholar. Each volume has three main concerns: historical, analytical and interpretative. There is a detailed description of the genesis of each work, the collaboration between librettist and composer, and the first performance and subsequent stage history. A full synopsis considers the opera as a structure of musical and dramatic effects, and there is also a musical analysis of a section of the score. The analysis, like the history, shades naturally into interpretation: by a careful combination of new essays and excerpts from classic statements the editors of the handbooks show how critical writing about the opera, like the production and performance, can direct or distort appreciation of its structural elements. A final section of documents gives a select bibliography, a discography, and guides to other sources. Each book is published in both hard covers and as a paperback.

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Preface

Le nozze di Figaro (1786) was Mozart's first mature *opera buffa*. It was also the first of his three major collaborations with the librettist Lorenzo da Ponte. Unlike *Don Giovanni* (1787) and *Così fan tutte* (1790), *Figaro* has few obvious problems, and even if it is not without flaws, it nevertheless contains a remarkable mixture of all those elements that go to produce a good opera: a sound plot, a well-structured text and fine music. Moreover, by being an adaptation of a pre-existing play, *Figaro* allows us to explore fundamental issues concerning the nature of opera and the various roles of a playwright, librettist and composer in producing a true *commedia per musica*.

Mozart and da Ponte based their opera on a recent play by the French playwright Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, *La folle journée ou Le mariage de Figaro* (written by 1781, performed 1784). There was nothing new in adapting a play for an opera: indeed, in 1782 Giovanni Paisiello had done the same for Beaumarchais's first 'Figaro' play, *Le barbier de Séville ou La précaution inutile* (written 1772, performed 1775). However, *Le mariage* was a daring choice: it had created a scandal in Paris and across Europe because of its apparently subversive political content. Nevertheless, Beaumarchais's play had several advantages – strong issues, clear-cut characters and a fast pace – that made it an ideal subject for an *opera buffa*: his contribution to *Figaro* should not be underestimated.

Da Ponte's task was to rework the play to suit the requirements of sung rather than spoken drama. He was a good librettist with a fine sense of the stage and could produce well-crafted verse that captured a dramatic situation with economy and wit. Moreover, he seems to have known full well the capabilities of Mozart's music. If anyone can counter the tendency of current operatic criticism to devalue the librettist, it is da Ponte. Indeed, his importance for the success of *Figaro* is one of the major points to emerge from this study.

Five years before *Figaro*, Mozart had moved from a provincial

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town, Salzburg, to a cosmopolitan capital, Vienna, that was perhaps the centre of the current musical world. The musical excitement of Vienna and Mozart's own increasing emotional and compositional maturity are felt in many of the works composed during his early years in the city: witness the first 'mature' piano concertos or the six 'Haydn' quartets. However, his letters to his father make it clear that he was drawn first and foremost to opera, and in particular *opera buffa*. Laying aside the mixed experiences of *Idomeneo* (1781), he searched avidly for a good libretto, produced a fine if idiosyncratic German Singspiel, *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (1782), and made at least two false starts on an Italian *opera buffa* before settling down to work on *Figaro*. The sheer joy of having found a subject and a librettist to match his talents is apparent throughout Mozart's score.

The layout of this study needs little explanation. Chapter 1 places *Figaro* in the context of Mozart's early years in Vienna, and in Chapter 2, Michael Robinson ventures into the hitherto little-explored terrain of *opera buffa* from the 1760s onwards to give the opera an all-important historical perspective. Chapter 3 discusses the way in which Beaumarchais's play was turned into an opera, and Chapter 4 gives a detailed synopsis with commentary. Chapter 5 deals with an aspect of da Ponte's libretto which is often ignored, its poetic structure and the way in which this structure might be said to have influenced Mozart's setting. Chapters 6 and 7 are concerned with the music, looking at specific features of the score in detail as well as offering an overview of what I deem to be the most important musico-dramatic considerations in the opera. Chapter 8 surveys some performances of *Figaro* in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, partly to illuminate particular performing traditions and partly to examine how these traditions cast light on the work itself. The Handbook concludes with a discography, and a Select Bibliography that aims to be useful rather than exhaustive.

Three points remain before concluding on procedural matters. First, I have been unable to discuss an important new trend in Mozart scholarship, the use of manuscript studies to illuminate the compositional process. The autograph manuscripts of *Figaro* are not easily accessible (Acts I and II are in the Deutsche Staatsbibliothek, East Berlin, and Acts III and IV in the Biblioteka Jagiellońska, Kraków). Some questions on the order of numbers in the opera and the revisions that occurred in the course of its composition are raised here at the end of Chapter 4 and in Chapter 8, but the broader issues are best left to the major study of Mozart manuscripts (including a discus-

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sion of *Figaro*) by Alan Tyson that is to appear shortly. Second, it has been impossible to cover every aspect of *Figaro*, or to discuss every note of Mozart's music. Nor was I interested in providing just a narrative account of the opera. Thus I have had to be selective, if only to be able to go into the kind of detail that this rich opera demands. Third, it is only fair to warn the reader that some parts of the Handbook are more technical than others. It is entirely possible to talk seriously about music without lapsing into high-flown analytical jargon, but to ignore the deeper levels of the opera is to do Mozart an injustice. Chapters 5 and 6 in particular may seem 'difficult' at first. However, the issues should be clear, even if the detail is not.

Three editions of the opera have been used (see the Select Bibliography): the full score edited by Ludwig Finscher as part of the *Neue Mozart-Ausgabe*, the miniature score edited by Rudolf Gerber (published by Eulenburg Editions), and the vocal score, with a splendid English translation, edited by Edward J. Dent (published by Boosey & Hawkes). Finscher's edition is the most scholarly and reliable, but Gerber's and Dent's will be more generally available and reference is made to these whenever possible. Bar numbers are taken from Gerber: readers wishing to make detailed reference to the vocal score will need to add bar numbers themselves (each aria or ensemble should have its own set of numbers extending into the succeeding recitative; in the case of Nos. 17, 19, 26 and 27, the bar numbers should start at the preceding accompanied recitative). Pitches given in roman capitals as C, D, etc., are to be understood as having no reference to a particular octave: pitches given in italics as *C* (*D*, etc.), *c*, *c'*, *c''*, etc., use the Helmholtz system whereby *c'* = 'middle' C. Keys are generally stated in full (F major), although sometimes in examples it has been useful to abbreviate them according to convention (F=F major, f=F minor). The standard roman numerals are used for chord and key relationships (I=tonic, IV=subdominant, V=dominant). Quotations from the libretto are taken from the edition by Lecaldano (see the Select Bibliography), although I have sometimes added punctuation and made other editorial changes to clarify the sense. Music examples from Mozart's operas are adapted where possible from the editions in the *Neue Mozart-Ausgabe*. All translations are my own unless indicated otherwise.

It gives me great pleasure to thank my contributors, Michael Robinson and Malcolm Walker. I am grateful to Rosemary Dooley, formerly of Cambridge University Press, for her help in the initial

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stages of this project, and to Penny Souster and Michael Black for bringing it to fruition. Eric Cross, Nigel Fortune, Denis McCaldin, Anthony Pople and Julian Rushton made perceptive comments on my early drafts; Frederick Sternfeld generously shared his notes on *Figaro* with me; I have benefited from contact with Daniel Hertz and Alan Tyson; Alejo Gonzales Garaño provided helpful amendments to the discography; and Robert Meikle is owed my deep gratitude for our long conversations on Mozart, *opera buffa* and the Classical style. I must also point out a reference inadvertently omitted from the notes: my comments on dance elements in the Act II finale (p. 58) owe an obvious debt to Wye Allanbrook (see p. 152, n. 4). Present and former music students of the University of Lancaster will no doubt realise the extent to which they have been treated as guinea-pigs for most of the ideas presented here. This book is dedicated to them.

TIM CARTER

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