

CAMBRIDGE OPERA HANDBOOKS

W. A. Mozart

Le nozze di Figaro

TIM CARTER

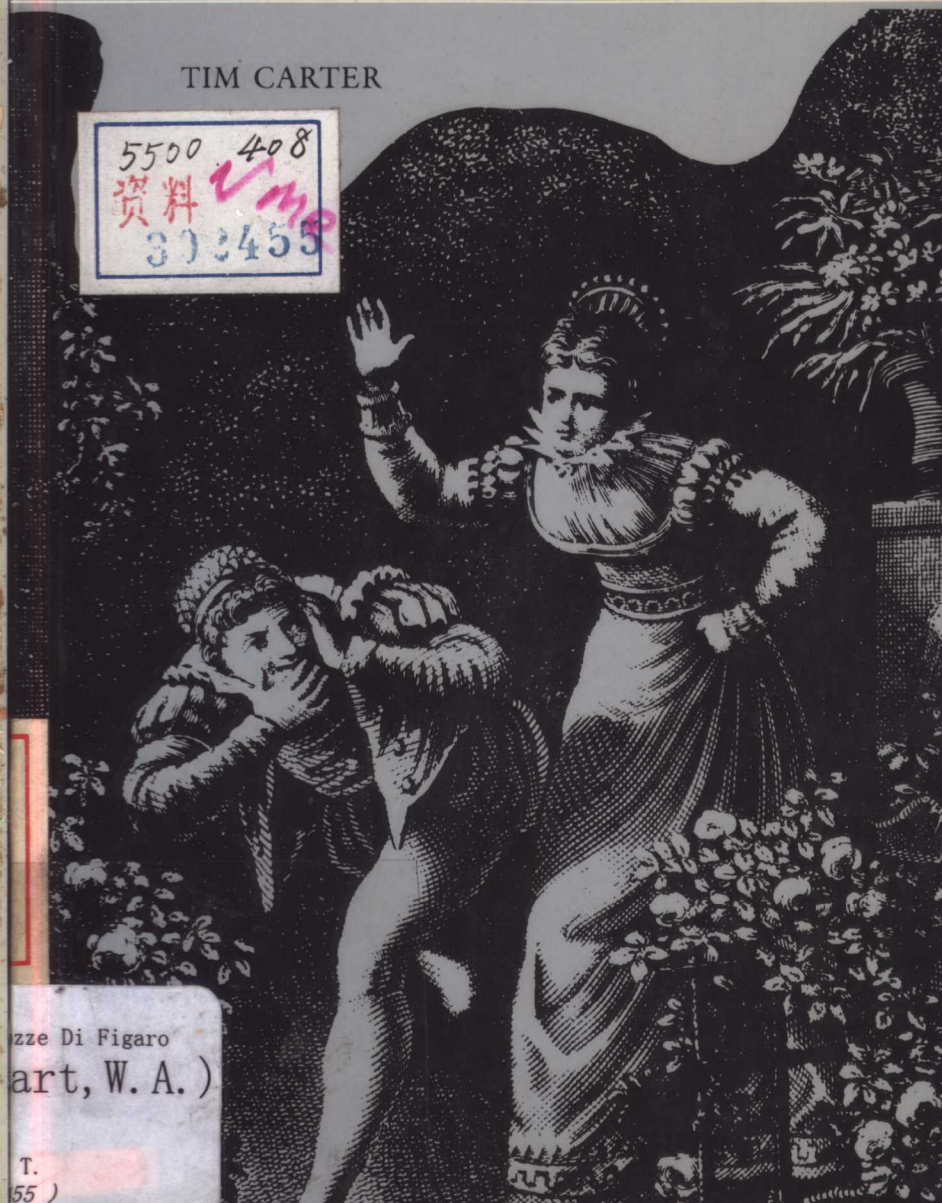
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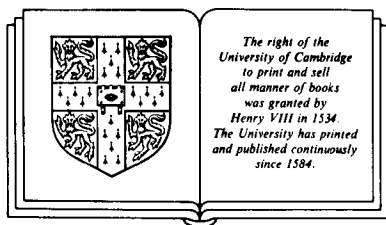
Le nozze di Figaro
(Mozart, W. A.)

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W. A. Mozart

Le nozze di Figaro

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.

CAMBRIDGE OPERA HANDBOOKS

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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

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-

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

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; and Robert Meikle is owed my deep gratitude for our long conversations on Mozart, *opera buffa* and the Classical style. 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

Lancaster
Summer 1986

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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:

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

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

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,

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 1792, cliques forced da Ponte to leave Vienna: he moved first to