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The Many Disguises of Susanna: A Comparison of the 1786 Premiere and the 1789 Revival of Mozart's "Le nozze di Figaro"

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Abstract

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's opera buffa, *Le nozze di Figaro* features a strong, memorable female character named Susanna, who is the countess' maid. Mozart reworked and even changed much of Susannah's part, rewriting both of Susanna's arias for the Vienna revival production in 1789. Through particular study of "Al desio di chi t'adora," which replaced "Deh, vieni, non tardar," we can gain a better understanding of the evolution of this progressive, innovative character. I propose that the development of Susanna's character through this aria, as well as the opera as a whole, exemplifies the growing awareness of gender and class relations that finally came to fruition with the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789 (the same year as the Vienna revival of Figaro).

Introduction

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's 1786 *opera buffa*, *Le nozze di Figaro*, was the first of the composer's three collaborations with librettist Lorenzo da Ponte (1749-1838), and is monumental within the historical narrative of opera. In addition to developing the *buffa* as a legitimate art form, the work also features a strong, memorable female character: Susanna, the countess' maid. Many prominent sopranos of Mozart's time performed the role, which led Mozart to rewrite many of the musical materials to honor and capitalize on each soprano's abilities and personal wishes. As such, Mozart rewrote both of Susanna's arias for the Vienna revival production in 1789. Through study of "Al desio di chi t'adora," which replaced Susanna's final aria, "Deh, vieni, non tardar," we can gain a better understanding of Mozart's musical, political, and dramatic development of this iconic character.

History of the Opera and 1789 Revival

Lorenzo Da Ponte based the libretto on a French stage comedy by Pierre Beaumarchais, titled *La folle journée, ou le Mariage de Figaro* (1784). Mozart originally selected the play as his subject and brought the material to Da Ponte, who at that time held the post of court librettist for the Italian Theater in Vienna. Incidentally, *Le nozze di Figaro* was only the fourth libretto Da Ponte wrote, after an initial failure when working with Salieri in 1784.¹ Da Ponte wrote the *Figaro* libretto in six weeks, sending portions to Mozart as he completed them. Although there were some problems with censorship of the licentious and politically-controversial material in Beaumarchais' play, Mozart and Da Ponte soon received the approval of Emperor Franz Joseph and proceeded to complete the opera. Mozart conducted the first few performances from the keyboard, which was the custom of the time. The Vienna premiere in the spring of 1786 enjoyed moderate success, with an exceptionally positive reception in Prague later that year. In 1789, a revival production was staged in Vienna, at which time Mozart composed two new arias to replace Susanna's "Venite, inginocchiatevi!" and "Deh, vieni, non tardar;" "Un moto di gioia" and "Al desio di chi t'adora," respectively.

¹ Weiss, Piero. *Opera: A History Through Documents*. Oxford University Press: New York, 2002. Print.

Susanna's Character

Many of the women in Mozart's operas conflict with the traditions of female dramatic portrayal of the Classical Era, with fiery, independent women like Blondchen of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* and the Queen of the Night of *Die Zauberflöte*. Susanna also displays an intellectualism and spiritedness that many modern critics describe as "feminist." In a lecture given by Anat Sharon, it is maintained that

[The] social order [of the 18th century] outraged him not only with regard to what he considered his own servitude, but also with regard to women. Therefore, sometimes women in his operas work together to protect their interests against the joint 'enemy'—men. There is no doubt that the depictions of women in Mozart's operas are deeper, broader and more interesting than the depictions of men.²

Like many of his female characters, Mozart's Susanna is of the Italian *commedia dell'arte* tradition in which servants are more clever than their aristocratic employers. For example, in Act III of *Figaro*, Susanna and the Countess sing a duet ("Sull'aria...che soave zeffiretto"), planning to outsmart the unfaithful Count. In this scene, the alliance of the two women of different classes against a wealthy, powerful man illustrates the equality Mozart saw between the two, despite the disparity in their social circumstances. Additionally, the range of the duet is similar for both parts, with the melody being shared and intertwined with perfect balance. Thus, as Hyun Joo Yang states in a dissertation, "musically and dramatically they are equals."³ Anat Sharon suggests that Mozart's positive and progressive depictions of women in his operas are due to the strong women in his life: his mother, his sister and fellow composer Nannerl, and his wife Constanze Weber. Constanze was a singer, as were her two sisters, and all three of them made careers for themselves in Vienna. After Constanze married Mozart, she was a level-headed financial manager of her husband's often sporadic income.⁴

The Arias: Theoretical Analysis and Criticism

"Al desio di chi t'adora" replaced "Deh, vieni, non tardar," in the 1789 revival in Vienna. Mayer states that "most accounts of the composition of *Le nozze di Figaro* note that Mozart substituted Susanna's simpler, though very effective, fourth-act aria "Deh vieni, non tardar" (no. 9 in the edition, with opening recitative "Giunse alfin il momento"), for the partially completed dramatic showcase rondo "Non tardar amato bene," and that Mozart may have initially needed to convince Storage that his new conception merited forfeiting the opportunity to display her talents."⁵ Interestingly, the 1789 revival aria "Al desio di chi t'adora," which replaced "Deh, vieni..." is more virtuosic, requiring immense vocal flexibility and breath support for extensive phrases (See Fig. 1).

² <http://www-e.openu.ac.il/geninfor/openletter/ol20/12-13.pdf> (accessed 5/4/2014)

³ Yang, Hyun Joo. "Which Arias Better Represent Susanna's Character: the Original or Replaced Arias?" (DMA diss., University of Washington, 2005).

⁴ <http://www-e.openu.ac.il/geninfor/openletter/ol20/12-13.pdf> (accessed 5/4/2014)

⁵ Mayer, Constance. "Review of *Arias for Nancy Storage, Mozart's First Susanna*." Music Library Association, Inc., 2004. Web. Accessed 4/1/2014.

The image shows a page of a musical score for measures 89-93. The instruments listed are Coro di B.I. (in Fa), Fag., V.I., V.II, Va., S., and Vc. e B. The vocal line (S.) has lyrics: "mio pe - nar - sca il mio - pe -".

Fig. 1, mm. 89-93

Nancy Storage (1765-1817), who premiered the role in 1786, “was known as an excellent actress... but of somewhat limited vocal abilities.”⁶ This may account for the relative simplicity and limited range of the basic, ternary form *cabeletta*, “Deh, vieni, non tardar.” Paradoxically, this aria “sounds like a simple *conzonetta*, but... conveys a loving woman’s deepest feelings.”⁷ There is a kind of *double entendre* found at many levels of the piece: Susanna is dressed as the Countess, but sings of her feelings for her real husband, Figaro; meanwhile, Figaro is eavesdropping and jealously believes that Susanna is singing of the Count. Hyun Joo Yang states it best, that “this one aria stirs up the plot drama while simultaneously providing the audience with an insider’s perspective of the real situation. The song is “lyrical and sentimental,” a serenade uncharacteristic of a woman; yet the basic style is a light, dance-like *conzonetta*.⁸

Mozart created an entirely different dramatic effect with this serenade scene in the 1789 version. Although soprano Adriana Ferrarese del Bene (c. 1760-1800), who revived the role of Susanna, appears to have had a wider vocal range than Storage (if the range of “Al desio di chi t’adora” is any indication), her voice was not highly regarded in the musical world. In fact, it is speculated that Mozart may have been making fun of Ferrarese del Bene’s “awkward break between head and chest registers” when composing the more challenging revival aria.⁹ The highest note remains an A⁵, but the tessitura lies much higher than the original aria, seldom reaching below the staff (unlike the low A³ in “Deh, vieni...”), and often touching a G⁵ or A⁵ in the course of a phrase (see Fig. 2).

⁶ Kurey, Mary-Louise and Robert Croan. “The Two Faces of Susanna: An Examination of Mozart’s Substitute Arias for *Le nozze di Figaro*, K.492.” *Music Theory: Explorations and Applications* VII, 1999: 27-33.

⁷ LeVare, Sigmund. *Mozart’s ‘Le nozze di Figaro:’ A Critical Analysis*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1952. Print.

⁸ LeVare, Sigmund. *Mozart’s ‘Le nozze di Figaro:’ A Critical Analysis*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1952. Print.

⁹ Kurey, Mary-Louise and Robert Croan. “The Two Faces of Susanna: An Examination of Mozart’s Substitute Arias for *Le nozze di Figaro*, K.492.” *Music Theory: Explorations and Applications* VII, 1999: 27-33.



Fig. 2, mm. 39-44 (vocal line)

This aria is very uncharacteristic of Susanna (or any lower class character), and has far more in common with the music written for the Countess in a textual and formal sense; indeed, it is the same type of modified-sonata form found in the Countess' aria "Dove sono." Dramatically, this aria may be more appropriate, as Susanna is at the time masquerading as the Countess.¹⁰

Contemporary Recordings

Just as there was a change in the dramatic depiction of Susanna from 1786 to 1789, there was also a change in singers, and also, therefore, of voice types. While both the premiere and revival arias are performed with the same recitative ("Giunse alfin il momento..."), this introduction transitions into the two very different arias. The recordings studied here were chosen to reflect these differences in dramatization and vocal classification.

Barbara Bonney's recording of the original "Giunse alfin il momento... Deh vieni non tardar..." is authentically Classical in style, with a forward, bright vocal timbre and minimal vibrato. She executes typical Classical ornaments (e.g., appoggiaturas and cadenzas) with both precision and musicality. The recording does not feature period instruments, but is played stylistically by a modern orchestra under the baton of Arnold Östman. Bonney takes the recitative faster than is often heard, lending an excitement to the moment as Susanna sings hopefully of her future with her beloved. The aria itself is beautiful and sincere, which is appropriate because in the scene, Susanna sings knowing that her husband Figaro is listening to her.

Cecilia Bartoli's recording of the revival aria "Giunse alfin il momento... Al desio di chi t'adora..." is very different in mood to Barbara Bonney's recording of the original aria. The fast-moving coloratura makes this a showcase aria (see Fig. 1), heightening the sense of situational irony; Figaro, Susanna's husband, is hiding in the garden, simmering with jealousy because he believes Susanna is singing of the Count rather than himself. Bartoli takes the recitative much slower than Bonney, with a less strict rhythm. Bartoli's mezzo-soprano voice is warmer and darker in timbre than Bonney's light lyric soprano, and thus evokes a more mature and passionate Susanna who is in control of herself and the men in her life. The text of the revival aria is more passionate, the faster tempo signifying the haste with which Susanna wishes her beloved to come to her, and quench "the fire of love." She proclaims "Ah, I can no longer resist/ The passion that is burning in my heart!/ Let those who understand the pains of love,/ Have sympathy with my suffering."¹¹ Conversely, the original aria has a slower, lilting tempo and rhythm, and the text uses poetic images of nature of a less fervid type than the revival: "Here the river murmurs and the light plays/ That restores the heart with sweet ripples/ Here, little flowers laugh and the grass is fresh/ Here, everything entices one to love's pleasures"¹² (see Appendix for complete text and translations).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ http://www.recmusic.org/lieder/get_text.html?TextId=44488 (accessed 5/4/2013)

¹² <http://www.aria-database.com/search.php?individualAria=220> (accessed 5/4/2014)

Conclusion

These arias present two very different styles of voice as well as two very different concepts of Susanna's character. Although the revival arias are seldom performed in productions today,¹³ they have great merit in the context of historical study, and stand as a rare instance of Mozart reworking a finished composition and resulting in what is arguably a more believable dramatic narrative. The development of Susanna's character through these arias, as well as the opera as a whole, exemplifies the growing awareness of gender and class relations that finally came to fruition with the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789 (the same year as the Vienna Revival of *Figaro*); these themes would develop further and be brought to the forefront of 19th century Romanticism and the operas of the *bel canto* composers. Through Susanna and *Le nozze di Figaro*, Mozart offered a revolutionary critique of the status quo and an example of progressive, enlightened thought within opera composition, which resonates far beyond his time.

¹³ Kurey, Mary-Louise and Robert Croan. "The Two Faces of Susanna: An Examination of Mozart's Substitute Arias for *Le nozze di Figaro*, K.492." *Music Theory: Explorations and Applications* VII, 1999: 27-33.

Appendix

Text and Translations of Recitative

Giunse alfin il momento
Che godro senz'affanno
In braccio all'idol mio
Timide cure uscite dal mio petto!
A turbar non venite il mio diletto.
O come par che all'amoroso foco
L'amenita del loco,
La terra e il ciel risponda.
Come la notte i furti miei risponda
Come la notte i furti miei risponda
Come la notte i furti miei risponda

The moment finally arrives
When I'll experience joy without haste
In the arms of my beloved...
Fearful anxieties, get out of my heart!
Do not come to disturb my delight.
Oh, how it seems that to amorous fires
The comfort of the place,
Earth and heaven respond,
[Oh, it seems the earth, heaven and this place
answerer my heart's amorous fire.]
As the night responds to my ruses.

Text and Translation of Premiere Aria

Deh vieni, non tardar, o gioja bella
Vieni ove amore per goder t'appella
Finche non splende in ciel notturna face
Finche l'aria e ancor bruna,
E il mondo tace.
Qui mormora il ruscel, qui scherza l'aura
Che col dolce susurro il cor ristaura
Qui ridono i fioretti e l'erba e fresca
Ai piaceri d'amor qui tutto adesca.
Vieni, ben mio, tra queste piante ascose.
Vieni, vieni!
Ti vo' la fronte incoronar di rose.

Oh, come, don't be late, my beautiful joy
Come where love calls you to enjoyment
Until night's torches no longer shine in the sky
As long as the air is still dark
And the world quiet.
Here the river murmurs and the light plays
That restores the heart with sweet ripples
Here, little flowers laugh and the grass is fresh
Here, everything entices one to love's pleasures
Come, my dear, among these hidden plants.
Come, come!
I want to crown you with roses.

Text and Translations of Revival Aria

Al desio di chi t'adora,
Vieni, vola, o mia speranza!

Come, hurry, my beloved,
To the desires of the one who adores you!

Morirò, se indarno ancora
Tu mi lasci sospirar.

I shall die if you leave me
Still to sigh in vain.

Le promesse, i giuramenti,
Deh! rammenta, o mio tesoro!

The promises, and vows;
(Of) those! Remember, my darling!

E i momenti di ristoro
Che mi fece Amor sperar!

And those moments of solace,
Which love made me hope for!

Ah! ch'io mai più non resisto
All'ardor che in sen m'accende!
Chi d'amor gli affetti intende,
Compatisca il mio penar.

Ah, I can no longer resist
The passion that is burning in my heart!
Let those who understands the pains of love,
Have sympathy with my suffering.

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Recordings

- "Al desio di chi t'adora:" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XdDZQ9X1ue4> (accessed 5/4/2014)
- "Deh, vieni, non tardar:" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tlo9j39G3fw> (accessed 5/4/2014)