6 Opera buffa and the Classical style: the Act I trio

The fast-moving action of Beaumarchais's play made it an ideal source for a comic opera, and we have seen da Ponte's efforts to adapt his model to the needs of his composer. But all these efforts would have been to no avail were Mozart's musical style unable to cope with the demands of comedy. For example, a style best suited to the slow-moving presentation of rigorously ordered emotional states, as we find in Baroque opera seria, would scarcely have been right for *Le nozze di Figaro*. What are the characteristics of the Classical style, in particular Mozart's version of the Classical style, that made it so appropriate for *opera buffa*?[1]

It seems no coincidence that both the Classical style and *opera buffa* have their roots in Italy, and particularly Naples, in the first half of the eighteenth century. Just as the history of eighteenth-century *opera buffa* begins in Naples, so can we find stylistic features in the work of at least one Neapolitan composer, Domenico Scarlatti (1685–1757), that prefigure the Classical style adopted subsequently by other Italians and which eventually spread north to reach its peak in the works of the Viennese masters of the high Classical period. These features include a move away from the complex harmonic and contrapuntal textures of much Baroque music towards a simpler, melody-dominated style with clear-cut, regular phrase structures, more straightforward harmonies, and lighter textures. C. P. E. Bach (1714–88) deplored this shift in significant terms: 'I believe...that the present love for the comic accounts for this more than does anything else.'[2]

Charles Burney explained that these changes in style were the result of 'simplifying and polishing melody, and calling the attention of the audience chiefly to the voice-part, by disintangling it from fugue, complication and laboured contrivance'.[3] The Classical style, at least in its early stages, is essentially conceived in terms of melody and subordinate accompaniment. Melodies are made up of balanced

but varied rhythms – unlike the repetitive rhythmic patterns of much Baroque music – and strongly articulated phrases that each drive melodically, rhythmically and harmonically towards a goal, the cadence. These regular phrases become building-blocks in the construction of large-scale musical structures. The style also allows for the presentation of strongly contrasted musical, and therefore emotional, ideas in close succession, in contrast to the Baroque technique where a movement generally adheres to a single emotional affect by elaborating upon a single musical idea.

The early Classical style appears much simpler than that of the high Baroque. It is also prone to cliché. But this need not be a weakness. The clichés of the Classical style facilitate a familiarity with its musical processes that can be turned to the composer's advantage. In a musical style with a high level of predictability, the unpredictable becomes much more musically and emotionally effective. Mozart was to become a master at playing musical games, leading us to expect one thing only to do something else. Moreover, the simplicity of the style brings into the foreground the tensions that exist within it. Classical harmony is generally more straightforward than that of the Baroque: it relies more on simple primary chords and stock cadential patterns. However, these primary chords, and the hierarchy of relationships that by convention exist between them, create tensions that require resolution. The unstable dominant chord needs to resolve to the stable tonic chord, as in the simple perfect (V–I) cadence. By extension, a phrase based on dominant harmony will be resolved by a phrase based on tonic harmony, and so on through themes to larger formal units. Tonality becomes a potent means of generating musical structure.

The creation and resolution of tensions by means of tonal relationships is a basic element of eighteenth-century musical syntax. It is also the essence of sonata form – or perhaps better, the sonata principle – on which a majority of Classical movements are based. Briefly stated, this principle relies on the fact that the juxtaposition of one firmly established key with another generates a structural tension that can only be resolved by a return to the first. Of course, Baroque composers were well aware of the need for tonal balance, but in the Baroque style keys are not primarily established as dissonant poles that create tension and demand resolution. In the Classical style, however, this is precisely how composers articulated their musical argument.

Movements constructed according to the sonata principle are

usually divided into three broad sections: the Exposition, Development and Recapitulation. The Exposition establishes a large-scale dissonance by allocating distinct formal units to two different keys, normally the tonic and dominant in a major-key movement (for example, C major and G major), and tonic and relative major in a minor-key movement (for example, C minor and E flat major). These units may or may not be distinguished by contrasted thematic material in the form of first and second subjects, and the tonal polarities will be emphasised more or less strongly depending on the scale of the movement. The Development prolongs the tonal dissonance of the Exposition by itself exploring tonally unstable areas, often, but not necessarily, with some development of the thematic ideas presented earlier. The Recapitulation resolves the tonal dissonance of the Exposition, first by beginning firmly in the tonic, and second and most important, by matching the dominant (or relative major) material of the Exposition with equivalent material in the tonic. The dominant (or relative major) is thus subjugated to the tonic, and the movement can now end with or without an extended flourish of cadential tonic harmony in a coda.

This explanation of the sonata principle as essentially a tonal process rather than a thematic mould emphasises the fact that its procedures are extremely adaptable and can operate even in contexts where an overt adherence to a clear formal outline is not readily apparent. We are accustomed to analysing nearly all first, many last and some slow movements of Classical instrumental works in terms of 'sonata form'. However, the sonata principle governs nearly all Classical instrumental and vocal forms. Furthermore, this exploitation of tonal conflict is an overtly dramatic procedure.

The opening of Mozart's Piano Quartet in G minor, K478, composed in October 1785 when he was also at work on *Figaro*, is an excellent illustration of the above points on the Classical style. It also reveals a musical conception that might well be described as 'dramatic', 'operatic' or even, as we shall see, 'comic'. The first sixteen bars (Ex. 5) present five terse, well-characterised musical ideas (marked A, B, C, x, D) in dramatic succession. The stark unison statements of bars 1–2 and 5–6 (A, A') contrast with the smoother line and chordal accompaniment of the piano phrases in bars 2–4 and 6–8 (B, B'). The silences emphasise the disjunct phrases. In bar 9, the string instruments take the lead with a more lyrical idea (C) that is repeated in 11, while the piano adds interjections (x, derived from B). In bar 13, we return to stark unisons (based on x) and a forceful

Ex. 5 Mozart, Piano Quartet in G minor, K478, first movement

cadence on the dominant. This cadence is the focal point of the sixteen-bar period, and motion towards it is emphasised by the increasing compression of the phrases (four-bar groupings in 1–4, 5–8; two-bar groupings in 9–10, 11–12; and then one-bar patterns in 13–15). Thus although the separate musical events in the sixteen-bar period are sharply individuated, their succession works towards a clearly defined goal. However, this dominant cadence is itself unstable, creating a new set of expectations. We are left guessing what will happen on the first beat of bar 17.

Although the basic texture is one of melody and accompaniment, the inner parts are rich in interest. In bars 9–12, the four instruments each have material of a distinct character: the lyrical phrase in the violin, the vibrant chordal pattern in the viola, the sustained G in the 'cello, and the almost vocal interjections of the piano. As every player of Mozart's chamber music knows, each line in his textures has a shape and elegance that make it an individual entity while also being part of the whole. Such is the contrapuntal richness of Mozart's musical thought. Early Classical composers may have banished counterpoint, Burney's 'fugue, complication and laboured contrivance', for the sake of elegant melody and clear-cut harmony, but with Haydn and Mozart counterpoint is reintegrated into the musical design. This becomes even more apparent later in the first movement of K478. In Ex. 6, one idea is treated imitatively between the violin and viola, another between the upper and lower staves of the piano, and the 'cello has an independent line. Yet the contrapuntal writing remains bound by the Classical norms of regular phrase structures (two-bar patterns) and simple harmonic progressions (tonic–dominant, tonic–dominant).

This reintegration of counterpoint might be said to mark the appearance of the 'high' Classical style. Mozart may have learnt lessons both from Haydn and from his discovery of the music of J. S. Bach and Handel under the influence of Baron Gottfried van Swieten in 1782. Whatever the case, contrapuntal skill was crucial for Mozart as an opera composer. In an operatic ensemble, characters must sing together even if they hold very different views of the events taking place onstage. Only by combining individuated lines in a contrapuntal complex can disparate reactions be portrayed effectively. In Ex. 6, five 'characters' present three contrasted musical ideas. Four of the 'characters' are joined in pairs (violin/viola, upper/lower stave of the piano), while the fifth ('cello) is kept distinct. Compare this with Ex. 7, an extract from the Act III sextet in

Ex. 6

Ex. 7   *Le nozze di Figaro*, 'Riconosci in questo amplesso' (No. 18)

Figaro. Here, too, there are five characters, two pairs and one alone. Marcellina and Bartolo are united in having found their long-lost son, while the Count and Don Curzio are both amazed at the turn of events. The allied characters each have related material, while the pairs are musically contrasted. Figaro is kept apart. Not only does the setting preserve the individuality of the characters; it also emphasises their interaction. But again this is a regular (four-bar) phrase, and the harmony is simple (dominant–tonic over a dominant pedal). It is a remarkable musical technique.

The quoted passages from K478 might well be described as 'dramatic' in juxtaposing sharply contrasted musical events (as in Ex. 5), or 'operatic' in combining distinctive musical 'characters' in a single texture (as in Ex. 6). They might also be described as 'comic' both in terms of their pacing – in Ex. 5 much happens within only sixteen bars – and of the way in which Mozart plays on our expectations (what will happen in bar 17?). All these features are prominently exploited in *Figaro*. But there is another sense in which the musical processes involved in Ex. 5 might be termed 'comic'. The opening unison statement (A), on the tonic, is 'interrupted' by the contrasted idea for the piano alone (B), cadencing on the dominant. This pattern of proposition–interruption is then repeated (A', B'), moving from the dominant to the tonic. In bar 9, a synthesis of the two preceding ideas (C) is achieved. The first note of the violin in bar 9 continues the rising line initiated by A and A' (g', a', bb'), while the piano interjections (x) develop a motif from B and B'. Thus Mozart ensures a smooth transition between the successive events A, B, C, and later D. However, C also fuses the textural characteristics of A and B: all the instruments play, as A, but they do so in harmony, not unison, as B. This effect of synthesis is reinforced by the flowing quavers in the viola, which contrast with the preceding rhythmic disjointedness, and by the firm tonic pedal in the 'cello. Nevertheless, by bar 13, the texture has thinned out to bare unisons once more, leading to another interruption, the dominant cadence (D). These sixteen bars establish a process (proposition–interruption–synthesis–interruption) that operates throughout the movement. It is also a process that works on several levels. For example, bars 1–16 could themselves be seen as a 'proposition' that will be 'interrupted' by whatever happens in bar 17. On the highest level, of course, the process underpins the sonata principle: the first key area is the 'proposition' that is 'interrupted' by the second key area, and this interruption is resolved by the 'synthesis' of the Recapitulation.

In Chapter 3 we saw that Beaumarchais's play is organised as a series of episodes producing a chain of small-scale crescendos leading to successive climaxes. The comic rhythm is consistently created as follows: a balanced situation is presented (proposition), something occurs to upset the balance, causing disruption (interruption), and the characters react and strike a new balance (synthesis). However, this new balance is often only temporary and is soon disrupted by a new event, whereupon the cycle continues. A good example is provided by B:II.16–22, which became the Act II finale, where the entry of each new character destroys a previously established balance. This chain reaction works on the large scale as well as the small. Thus it governs the whole structure of the play (Figaro and Susanna wish to be married, the Count disrupts the situation by seeking to seduce Susanna, the Count is defeated and all the characters are duly reconciled), as well as the action in individual scenes. On the smallest scale, it is also one mechanism of the joke. There are clear parallels with the features noted in K478. The Classical style was ideally suited to *opera buffa* not only because of its pacing, contrasts, contrapuntal possibilities and musical 'jokes', but also because it involved processes that are fundamentally comic.

To see how Mozart exploits the Classical style in an operatic context, it is best to analyse one typical section of *Figaro* in depth. The Act I trio, 'Cosa sento! tosto andate' (No. 7), is a fine example of the dramatic ensembles which commentators rightly note as a hallmark of the opera. Without a secure technique of ensemble writing, Mozart would have been unable to present the rapid succession of events in Beaumarchais's play. However, ensembles are not easy to write. They pose at least three specific problems for the composer: first, he must establish sharply differentiated characters as efficiently and as quickly as possible; second, he must construct a musical argument that is flexible enough to cope with rapidly changing dramatic situations; third, this musical argument must retain at least some degree of structural coherence. How are these problems solved in the Act I trio?

Mozart makes full use of the clear-cut phrase structures and dramatic contrasts inherent in the Classical style to depict his characters. The trio begins abruptly as the Count suddenly appears from behind the chair. The preceding recitative does not end with the usual cadence in the continuo (see below, p. 106). Instead, a cadence (V–I in B flat major) is supplied by the orchestra as it bursts in *fortissimo* with furious semiquavers and emphatic chords. The Count

begins with a forceful rising line built up of fragmentary phrases that emphasise his rage (Ex. 8). In contrast, Basilio has an unctuous descending line, with chromatic harmonies, as he fawns on his master. Susanna appears (genuinely?) frightened, with a fluttering

Ex. 8 'Cosa sento! tosto andate' (No. 7)

melody that is again fragmentary and which also seems to get stuck on one note, c''. These contrasted periods capture the emotional states of the three protagonists. They are also progressively compressed (twelve bars for the Count, eight for Basilio, four for Susanna), which drives the setting forward. Throughout the rest of the trio, Mozart reveals the same ability to create vocal lines that capture the essence of a character at any given moment, despite the complexity and pace of the action. Moreover, he does so even when the characters sing together. In Ex. 9, from the end of the trio, Susanna's dotted rhythms suggest agitation, the Count's stentorian tonic-dominant leaps emphasise his pompous judgement of the maid, while Basilio crows out what he sees to be the moral of the episode, with a musical idea that returns in the overture to the opera that takes his maxim one stage further, *Così fan tutte*.

Ex. 9

Mozart's skill in musical characterisation is equalled by his ability to match the dramatic pacing of the trio in musical terms. The action of the trio reveals precisely the comic rhythm described above. It consists of a series of episodes that each shift from points of relative stability (the Count expresses anger, the Count and Basilio reassure Susanna, the Count narrates events in Barbarina's room the day before) to relative instability (Susanna 'faints', she hysterically orders the Count and Basilio to leave, Cherubino is discovered in the chair). These shifts are mirrored both by the orchestral accompaniment and by Mozart's use of tonality. Although the accompanimental patterns often seem repetitive and essentially neutral, they have a kinetic energy that maintains the momentum – note the predominant quaver motion – and they also underline the events onstage in supportive and sometimes revealing ways. One delightful example is the manner in which the orchestra mimics the discovery of Cherubino in the chair by reversing the Count's previous descending line just after the recitative interlude (see bar 139). Similarly, at the point where the Count and Basilio lead the 'fainting' Susanna to the chair, the orchestra takes Susanna's opening idea, turns it from the minor into the major, and makes it much more poised (see bar 57). Even if Susanna was genuinely frightened at the beginning of the trio, she

has now recovered control of herself and of the situation, as her expedient recovery reveals.

Points of dramatic stability are matched by areas of tonal stability (B flat major, F major, E flat major and various returns to B flat major), while dramatic instability is reinforced by tonal instability, whether by way of sudden modulations or, more frequently, dominant pedals (V/F, V/g, etc.). Sudden modulations are important: in particular, a move to G minor, the relative minor of B flat major, consistently matches disruptions in the dramatic action (see bars 16, 66, 112, 127), as indeed occurs throughout the opera. Even more significant is Mozart's use of the dominant pedal, a lengthy insistence on the dominant note, usually in the bass. Such pedals are generally reinforced by an elaboration of dominant harmony in the inner parts, often with rapid chord changes, chromaticism and minor inflections. In the Classical style, the dominant pedal is a standard means of generating harmonic tension because of its need to resolve to the tonic, and it is particularly suited to the presentation of unstable dramatic situations (Ex. 10).[4] Dominant pedals take up almost one-third of the trio.

There is no doubt that Mozart provides an appropriate musical response to matters of both characterisation and pacing in the trio.

Ex. 10

29

SUSANNA

BASILIO   che   ru - i - na,

COUNT   In   mal   pun - to   son   qui   giun - to,

[an-]da - te,   e scac - cia - teil se - dut - tor.

tutti

But the third of our problems remains. At the same time as supporting the forward-moving drama as situations develop and characters change, Mozart must also have care for the overall structure and balance of the trio. There is a potential conflict here that affects any operatic composer: if he veers too much in favour of dramatic momentum, the setting may lack coherence; if he concentrates instead on the musical structure, then he may not cope effectively with the ebb and flow of the action. It is a difficult balance to strike, and one that highlights the fact that the relationship between music and drama is not entirely free of tensions.

In the Classical style, structural coherence is normally achieved by thematic consistency (whether involving direct repetition or motivic variation) and tonal symmetry. Both, of course, are inherent within the sonata principle. Straightforward thematic repetition does occur in the trio. The Count's initial ascending line (Ex. 8) returns twice in a more compressed form (bars 101, 147, now in regular four-bar phrases) as his fury repeatedly breaks out. Basilio's opening idea (bar 16) appears four times in all. At its second and fourth appearances (bars 85, 175), Basilio transfers his excuses to a dismissal of his report on Cherubino as mere 'suspicion' on his part. At the third appearance (bar 129), the line (extended to five rather than four two-bar units) is given to the Count during his drawn-out narration of his earlier discovery of Cherubino, perhaps a hint that the Count is now descending to Basilio's level of intrigue. Repetition also occurs in the accompaniment. Bars 57–9 hark back to 23–5; the figuration in bar 60 recurs in 92, 103, 107–21, 149, etc. to 213–19; the pattern in bars 98–100 derives from 66; and the descending scales in the orchestral coda (bars 201–13) are perhaps related to the descending scales prominent earlier in the setting (see bars 26, 38, 48, 52). There are also motivic relationships between various musical ideas that appear on the surface to be quite dissimilar. Thirds are particularly prominent. The $f–d'$ of Basilio's opening idea (bar 16) refers back to the $f–d$ of the Count's first statement (Ex. 8, bars 4–5) and the falling thirds in his cadence in bars 13–15. Rising or falling thirds recur throughout the vocal parts of the trio and also permeate the accompaniment.

The Count's opening $f–d$ also has other implications. After this falling third, the Count begins a rising line from d to bb. However, the implication of the $f–d$ is that it will be followed by another falling third, $d–Bb$, to complete the triad. The Count's rising $d–bb$ is only a temporary solution. Indeed, the search for a strong Bb and for a fall-

ing motion from any D to any B flat dominates the trio. In the first sixteen bars, the Count's line ostentatiously avoids the low B♭. When Basilio enters, his $f\sharp$–$d\sharp$ is indeed followed by $a\sharp$–$b\flat$, although the harmony renders the progression weak. Successive leaps from D down to B flat (in whatever octave) are also weakened harmonically. The Count succeeds in gaining a B♭ in bars 101 and 105, but only on weak beats of the bar. He repeats his original $f\sharp$–$d\sharp$ at the beginning of the recitative section (bars 121–2), but once again he fails to go to B♭. Only from bar 147 onwards, as the trio reaches its conclusion, does the Count have a B♭ on a strong beat of the bar, and even the B♭ in bar 147 is marked *pianissimo*. Moreover, is it mere coincidence that D to B flat appears in various octaves in the final orchestral cadence?

This search for B♭ is as much a tonal problem as a melodic one, for it is rooted in the need for a complete tonic triad. Indeed, tonality serves a structural as much as a dramatic function in the trio according to the requirements of the sonata principle. The key of B flat major is strongly established in the first fifteen bars, emphasised by the Count's 'closed' phrase and strong cadence (the continuation of Ex. 8). We then move through a pedal (V/F, see Ex. 10) to a new area of tonal stability, the dominant key, F major (bar 43). Basilio and the Count's 'Ah già svien la poverina'), which is affirmed by a cadence (bars 56–7). The tonal conflict between tonic and dominant is now established. Susanna's shift to an unstable V of G minor (bar 66, 'Che insolenza, andate fuor') leads to a lengthy section in E flat major (bar 70, Basilio and the Count's 'Siamo qui per aiutarvi(-ti)' to the melody of bar 43), that ultimately moves onto another dominant pedal, V/B♭, in bars 92–100 (Susanna's 'È un'insidia, una perfidia'). The E flat major episode is curious. E flat major is the subdominant of B flat major and gives an impression of tonal relaxation. This is dramatically appropriate, for the Count and Basilio are attempting to defuse the situation after Susanna's 'faint'. However, if the E flat major section is not to sound out of place, it must also have a part to play in the overall musical structure. An examination of the large-scale bass progression from bars 1–100 reveals its musical, as opposed to dramatic, role in an ascending scale from the I in bar 5 to the V in bar 92 (Ex. 11).⁵

It does not seem contrived to view bars 1–100 of the trio as a sonata-form Exposition and Development. The Exposition contains two strongly established key areas based on the tonic (B flat major) and the dominant (F major), each articulated by well-structured thematic ideas, a 'first subject' group and a 'second subject'. The

Ex. 11
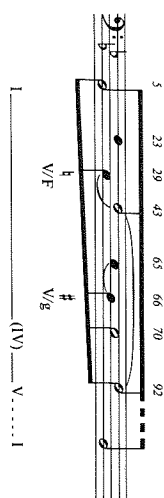
Development begins just before Susanna's shift to V of G minor and contains a lengthy subdominant episode. Even the dominant pedal that begins in bar 92 has its place in the scheme. In sonata-form movements, dominant pedals frequently appear in the bridge passage of the Exposition, preparing for the second key area (often a pedal on V/V), and in the retransition at the end of the Development, preparing for the Recapitulation (a pedal on V). The V/F pedal in bars 29–42 of the trio (including a diversion to D flat major) is clearly preparing for the Recapitulation. Similarly, the V/B♭ pedal which arrives in bar 92 signals that the retransition has begun. This is standard procedure in the Classical style. We are prepared for a return to B flat major in bar 101, where there is also a varied recapitulation of the Count's opening thematic idea (to 'Parta, parta il damerino').

Bar 101 has all the appearances of beginning a straightforward recapitulation: after all, the Count's decision to dismiss Cherubino could easily mark the conclusion of the action. But Mozart now plays a joke on our expectations. Another diversion through G minor leads to another V/B♭ pedal (bars 115–21) which indicates yet another retransition. The tonic returns in bar 122, as does the Count's $f\sharp$–$d\sharp$. But this is an unexpected recitative which again moves via G minor to the dominant as Cherubino is discovered in the chair. The V/B♭ pedal in bar 138 marks the beginning of a third retransition. Only with the return of B flat major in bar 147 (at the Count's 'Onestissima signora') does the Recapitulation proper begin. In retrospect, the return of B flat major in bar 101 seems a favourite trick of Classical composers, the false recapitulation. In addition to the dramatic reversals in the trio, Mozart also plays a game of musical reversals. It is a game that relies on our understanding of Classical procedures.

A Recapitulation must balance the Exposition in terms of length, match its thematic presentation at least to a significant degree, and

resolve the preceding tonal conflict by emphasising the tonic. If the dominant key was emphasised by new thematic material in the Exposition, that material, or at least a good part of it, should now return in the tonic. This is precisely what occurs here. The Recapitulation, excluding the coda, is more or less the same length as the Exposition (57 bars compared with 54); the main thematic ideas return (the Count's rising line and Basilio's descending line are repeated, and Susanna's agitated quavers find their reflection in Basilio's crowing 'Così fan tutte le belle', see Ex. 9); and much of the 'second subject' material is restated in the tonic (compare bars 168–75 and its repeat for emphasis in 191–201 with 47–57). However, the order of presentation is altered and Basilio's line comes only after the first restatement of the 'second subject', which is accordingly foreshortened. The fact that Basilio separates two statements of the 'second subject' allows for a more extended repetition of this material, thereby emphasising the tonic. It also makes the return of his line all the more surprising – we suspect at first that Mozart has left it out of the reckoning – and underlines its significance.

The tonal stability of this Recapitulation is justified dramatically: the situation may not be resolved but the characters are at the point of acknowledging their various reactions to the events of the ensemble. Similarly, the return to the home key, B flat major, emphasises the fact that despite all these events things have hardly changed – the trio scarcely advances the action of the opera – and that we are in effect back where we started in terms of the overall plot. However, to what extent is the repetition of thematic material in the Recapitulation related to the drama, necessary though it may be in terms of the musical structure? This highlights the problem of musical repetition for the composer of dramatic music. The sonata principle has considerable dramatic potential, but in order to employ it on the stage, the composer must be able to justify the reiteration of previously heard material. Musical repetition is possible in the static set-pieces of the Baroque *opera seria* (witness the da capo aria), where it does little damage to the slow-moving drama. In *opera buffa*, however, the comic pace requires that the characters look forwards, not backwards, and therefore that straightforward repetition be avoided.

One solution is to establish dramatic parallels between the opening and closing sections of the movement, even if the actual situation has changed. A straightforward example is provided by the trio in Act II, 'Susanna or via sortite' (No. 13). Here the action falls into

two parts: in the first ('Susanna or via sortite'), the Count orders Susanna to leave the dressing-room, the Countess forbids her to do so, Susanna (hiding upstage) reacts; in the second ('Dunque parlate almeno'), the Count orders Susanna at least to make herself heard, the Countess forbids her to do so, and Susanna reacts. These parallel sections form respectively the Exposition and Recapitulation of an abridged sonata-form movement (with a short dominant pedal substituting for a Development). The same occurs in the Act III sextet, 'Riconosci in questo amplesso' (No. 18), which is again in abridged sonata form. At the beginning of the Exposition, Marcellina and Bartolo are reconciled with Figaro; at the beginning of the Recapitulation, they are reconciled with Susanna. In this sextet, there are also further parallels between the Exposition and Recapitulation – compare the Count's and Don Curzio's reactions in the former with Susanna's in the latter – while the tensions between Susanna and Figaro in the dominant area of the Exposition are resolved in the tonic area of the Recapitulation.

Similarly, in 'Cosa sento! tosto andate' there are dramatic parallels to be reinforced by the thematic repetitions. The Exposition, false recapitulation and Recapitulation proper each begin with the Count's ascending line: first, he orders Basilio to search out Cherubino ('Cosa sento! tosto andate, e scacciate il seduttor'); second, he orders the youth to be dismissed from the castle ('Parta, parta il damerino'); and third, he accuses Susanna ('Onestissima signora, o capisco come va'). The repetition of the 'second subject', which was first presented when the Count and Basilio were commenting on Susanna's 'faint', is less obviously motivated by the action, although Susanna remains under stress and the material is still concerned with the effect of the situation upon her. But the return of Basilio's cringing opening line (to the words from the middle section, 'Ah, del paggio quel ch'ho detto/era solo un mio sospetto', 'Ah, what I said about the page was only my suspicion') is much more problematic. Although it may be necessary for musical balance, it finds no obvious justification in the action; nor is it indicated in da Ponte's libretto.

Mozart devises a glorious solution. Basilio's line may be unnecessary in terms of the drama, but its return is wonderfully ironic. It is clear that what Basilio said about the page is more than just 'my suspicion' – Cherubino now stands before them – but the music master can drive the point home 'con malignità', 'with malice', as Mozart's score is marked. Irony is exploited to make a virtue out of a

musical necessity. The effect is further emphasised by displacing Basilio's entry and therefore drawing our attention to it. This is marvellous comedy.

'Cosa sento! tosto andate' raises a number of important issues concerning Mozart's handling of characterisation and dramatic pacing, not to mention his use of the sonata principle in an operatic context. We have also seen how he exploits the Classical style to achieve true comedy through music. It may seem perverse to have devoted so much space to a piece that runs for less than five minutes in performance. Analysis, alas, always appears heavy-handed in its attempts to explain what both composer and listener take for granted. But if we are to participate in Mozart's game, we must first learn his rules.

7 *Music and drama in Le nozze di Figaro*

In our discussion of 'Cosa sento! tosto andate' (No. 7), we saw how Mozart uses specific musical techniques to pace the action, to depict the emotional states of his characters, and to provide structural coherence. It is worth taking some time to explore how Mozart responds to these three concerns – pacing, characterisation and coherence – in the opera as a whole.

There seems little doubt that Mozart and da Ponte were anxious to maintain the dramatic momentum throughout *Le nozze di Figaro*. The overture establishes a fast pace for the 'folle journée' and its impetus carries forward into the first act. We move straight into the action with two duets for Figaro and Susanna, and indeed Act I passes remarkably quickly, with only brief moments of repose. Of the nine numbers in Act I, eight are marked to be played 'Allegro' or faster (and the exception, Figaro's 'Se vuol ballare', No. 3, has two 'Presto' sections). Only at the beginning of Act II does the pace slow (No. 10 is marked 'Larghetto'; No. 11, 'Andante'; and No. 12, 'Allegretto'). As we have seen, the brake applied by the Countess's 'Porgi amor qualche ristoro' (No. 10) is important for the character, and even if the following 128 bars of recitative, which are needed to clarify the plot, seem to lose momentum, the trio 'Susanna or via sortite' (No. 13) and most especially the magnificent Act II finale (No. 15) restore the pace. Similarly, if the first part of Act IV, with its four full-scale arias for Marcellina, Basilio, Figaro and Susanna, seems to flag, the momentum is regained in the Act IV finale as the opera drives towards its conclusion.

Mozart's and da Ponte's achievement in maintaining the pace in *Figaro* is all the more remarkable given that a 'number' opera is prone both to lulls in the action and to segmentation as a result of shifting between recitatives, arias and ensembles. Da Ponte did his best to avoid such lulls by creating the opportunity for action-ensembles and even action-arias that make much play of stage busi-