

layout of the autograph score precludes the possibility of there having been a late change in the order due to particular problems in casting.<sup>18</sup> This seriously undermines the case for reorganising the present Act III, however attractive it may seem.

## 5 *Verse and music in Le nozze di Figaro*

Leopold Mozart had been wary of his son's plans for *Le mariage de Figaro*:

I know the piece; it is a very tiresome play and the translation from the French will certainly have to be altered very freely if it is to be effective as an opera. God grant that the text may be a success. I have no doubt about the music. But there will be a lot of running about and discussions before he gets the libretto so adjusted as to suit his purposes exactly.<sup>1</sup>

As we have seen, the play was not altered quite as freely as Mozart's father feared. Much of the play remains intact, and it is clear that the dramatic strength of *Le nozze di Figaro* is due in no small part to the taut construction of its model. In fact, although da Ponte had a fine sense of what would work on the operatic stage, he was probably better at adapting pre-existing works than writing new ones. His first stage efforts (in 1779) included translations of a German tragedy, a French tragedy (J. F. de la Harpe's *Le comte de Warwick*), and portions of Philippe Quinault's *Alys*. Many of his libretti for Vienna were also adaptations, including *Il burbero di buon cuore* (1786, after Carlo Goldoni's *Le bourru bienfaisant*), *Una cosa rara o sia Bellezza ed onestà* (1786, after Luis Vélaz de Guevara's *La luna della sierra*), *Gli equivoci* (1786, from Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*), and *Il dissoluto punito o sia il Don Giovanni* (1787, after Giovanni Bertati's libretto *Il convitato di pietra*).<sup>2</sup> The fact that da Ponte was more gifted at adaptation may partly explain why *Figaro* seems to falter in the later acts as the libretto deviates increasingly from the play, whether to compress the action, to have an appropriate number of arias, or to accommodate the changes made to the characters.

No doubt there was 'a lot of running about and discussions' between da Ponte and Mozart before the final text of the libretto was prepared. No details of these discussions survive, but presumably they did more than cover the treatment of the plot. Mozart would

also have been concerned with how da Ponte cast his verse: convention decreed that a librettist should employ different types of verse at various points in a libretto depending on whether the text was for a recitative, aria or ensemble. Recitative texts are normally in free-rhyming seven- and eleven-syllable lines, while texts for arias and ensembles have more regular metrical and rhyming structures, with a wider choice of line-lengths and some measure of strophic organisation. Thus the librettist's use of verse, whether or not pre-arranged with the composer, will influence the musical structure of the opera and even the fine detail of the setting. As we shall see, da Ponte's carefully crafted text makes skilful use of poetic procedures that have clear musical implications. An examination of these procedures reveals a remarkable interaction between verse and music throughout *Figaro*. It also suggests an approach to opera that may have considerable potential for future analytical enquiry.

It may be useful to review some basic principles of Italian versification. The quality of Italian verse is dictated by line-length (number of syllables) and accentuation. A line of verse may be one of three types according to the position of the main accent. The *verso piano*, the most common, has its main accent on the penultimate syllable, producing a feminine (trochaic) ending to the line:

Vedrò mentre io sospiro

The *verso tronco* has its main accent on the last syllable, producing a masculine (iambic) ending to the line:

ei posseder dov'è?

The *verso struciolo* has its main accent on the antepenultimate syllable, producing a dactylic ending to the line:

e forse ancor per ridere

In counting up the syllables of a line, it is necessary to take into account elisions and diphthongs. Diphthongs may be counted as one or two syllables depending on their context. Thus 'Ve/drò/ men/tre io/ so/spi/ro' is a seven-syllable line, with an elision between 'mentre io' and the diphthong 'io' counted as one syllable.

The immediate benefits of paying close attention to the verse structure of da Ponte's libretto are best demonstrated by analysing his handling of one scene. In Act I scene 2, Figaro is left alone onstage to muse over Susanna's revelation that the Count's intentions towards her are less than honourable. His speech divides into a recitative and an aria (called a 'cavatina' in the score): in the former,

Figaro thinks through the problem; in the latter, he resolves upon a course of action:

Bravo, signor padrone! Ora incomincio a capir il mistero. . . e a veder schietto tutto il vostro progetto. A Londra, è vero? Voi ministro, io corriero, e la Susanna. . . secreta ambasciatrice. Non sarà, non sarà: Figaro il dice.	Bravo, my lord and master! Now I begin to understand the mystery. . . and to see clearly your whole scheme. To London, is it? You as minister, I as courier, and Susanna. . . private attaché. It shall not be, it shall not be: Figaro says so.
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Se vuol ballare, signor Contino, il chitarrino le suonerò.	If you wish to dance, my dear little Count, the guitar will I play for you.
---	--

Se vuol venire nella mia scuola, la capriola le insegnerò.	If you wish to come to my school, the capriole will I teach you.
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Saprò. . . ma piano, meglio ogni arcano dissimulando scoprir potrò.	I'll know. . . but soft, better every secret by dissembling can I discover.
--	--

L'arte schermendo, l'arte adoprando, di qua pungendo, di là scherzando, tutte le macchine rovescierò.	Acting by stealth, acting openly, thrusting here, teasing there, all your plans will I overthrow.
--	--

(Se vuol ballare, signor Contino, il chitarrino le suonerò.)	(If you wish to dance, my dear little Count, the guitar will I play for you.)
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For the recitative, da Ponte provides appropriately weighty eleven-syllable lines: the one seven-syllable line ('secreta ambasciatrice') is carefully placed, with an ironic hesitation, to underline Susanna's 'position' in London. However, given Figaro's anger, one would not expect him to speak in elegant verse. Thus da Ponte exploits enjambement in the first lines of the speech, and internal rhymes ('mistero. . .

vero. . . corriero', 'schietto. . . progetto') mark caesuras and break up the text into fragmentary phrases. The elisions between these phrases are in effect ignored, precisely as occurs in Mozart's setting. The aria consists of five-syllable *versi piani*, with rhymed *versi tronchi* to mark off the strophic divisions. The structure of the text matches its content, where fury is first contained and then released. The first three quatrains suggest a regular strophic pattern only to have this pattern destroyed by the succeeding sestet, which also delays the arrival of the *verso tronco*. The rhyme-scheme established in the first two quatrains (*ABBC*) is altered in the third (rhyming *AABC*) and gives way to alternating rhymes in the sestet. Similarly, in terms of the syntax, the two-line groupings of the first two quatrains are avoided in the third (where the strophe divides into one plus three lines) and are replaced by one-line groupings in the sestet. By manipulating metre, rhyme and syntax, da Ponte drives forward to the last line of the sestet, 'rovesciero'. This *verso tronco*, one word instead of two as in the other *versi tronchi*, is rendered all the more forceful by the immediately preceding *verso sdrucciolo*, 'tutte le macchine'. All these poetic devices emphasise the cumulative fury of Figaro's ejaculations.

There is a close relationship between the text of 'Se vuol ballare' and Mozart's music. The accentuation of da Ponte's five-syllable lines (1 2 3 4 5) strongly suggests the minuet pattern adopted by Mozart. Divisions in the musical structure correspond to the strophic divisions of the text, and the *versi tronchi* become significant cadence points for the composer (the iambic endings of *versi tronchi* are more suited to cadences from weak to strong beats than the trochaic endings of *versi piani*). Furthermore, Mozart responds to the contrasts in content and structure of the sestet by changing tempo and metre. However, there are some aspects of Mozart's setting that do not seem attributable to da Ponte, including Figaro's assertive 'sì' in the first and second strophes, and the pointed repetitions of individual words ('Sapriò', 'piano') in the third. Nor is it clear who decided to end the aria with a sardonic repeat of the text and music of the first strophe before the final burst of fury in the orchestral postlude.

This discussion has established some useful lines of enquiry upon which any further analysis of the libretto can be based. The free-rhyming seven- and eleven-syllable lines that constitute recitative verse admit a flexibility that befits its dramatic and musical function. However, although recitative texts are relatively unstructured, da

Ponte often carefully exploits line-length and rhyme for comic effect. A fine example occurs in Act I scene 7 after the trio 'Cosa sento! tosto andate' (No. 7), where the Count questions Cherubino discovered hiding in Susanna's chair:

- Count:* Ma s'io stesso m'assisi  
quando in camera entrat!  
But if I sat there myself  
when I came into the  
room!
- Cherubino:* Ed allora di dietro io mi  
celai.  
And then I hid myself  
behind it.
- Count:* E quando io là mi posi?  
Allor io pian mi volsi e qui  
m'ascosi.  
And when I moved there?  
Then I softly crept round  
and hid here.
- Count:* Oh ciel! dunque ha sentito?  
Heavens! Then he has  
heard
- Cherubino:* quello ch'io ti diceai!  
Feci per non sentir quanto  
potea.  
what I said to you!  
I did as much as I could  
not to hear.

Here da Ponte's witty rhymes are complemented by the careful juxtaposition of seven- and eleven-syllable lines, with short lines for the Count's exclamations and long lines for the replies of the precocious page. Similarly, single lines of verse are often subdivided between one or more characters to point up fast-moving dialogue, the comic effect of which can again be enhanced by rhyme, as in this extract from Act III scene 5:

- Marcellina:* Una spatola impressa al braccio  
destro. . . ?  
A spatula on your  
right arm. . . ?
- Figaro:* E a voi chi 'l disse?  
And who told you  
that?
- Marcellina:* Oddio,  
è egli. . .  
Oh Lord,  
it is he. . .
- Figaro:* È ver, son io.  
It's true, I am me.  
Who?
- Don Curzio:* Chi?  
Who?  
Who?
- Count:* Chi?  
Who?  
Who?
- Barolo:* Chi?  
Raffaello.  
And robbers  
kidnapped you. . . ?
- Marcellina:* Raffaello.  
And robbers  
kidnapped you. . . ?
- Barolo:* E i ladri ti rapir. . . ?  
Near a castle.
- Figaro:* Presso un  
castello.  
Behold your mother.  
Nurse?
- Barolo:* Ecco tua madre.  
Balìa?  
No, your mother.  
No, your mother.
- Figaro:* Balìa?  
No, tua  
madre.
- Barolo:* Balìa?  
No, tua  
madre.
- Count, Don Curzio:* Sua madre!  
His mother!

*Figaro:* Cosa sento!  
*Marcellina:* Ecco tuo padre. What do I hear!  
 Behold your father.

This careful use of poetic techniques becomes even more important in the arias and ensembles, where the metre and rhyme-scheme of da Ponte's texts often have quite specific musical implications. Different line-lengths can be exploited for dramatic or rhetorical effect: note the gushing ten-syllable lines of the first part of Cherubino's 'Non so più cosa son, cosa faccio' (No. 6) as the page blurts out his adolescent cravings, or the frequent *versi sdruccioli* in the middle section of Bartolo's 'La vendetta, oh la vendetta!' (No. 4) to point up the doctor's blustering invective. These various line-lengths also limit the melodic patterns available to the composer, as we have seen with the five-syllable lines of 'Se vuol ballare', and it seems possible that Mozart may sometimes have requested lines of a particular length to match a musical idea.<sup>4</sup> The regular masculine endings, which are often rhymed, have a bearing on the structure of both the text and the music: witness their importance for the cadences. They may also have some significance in terms of characterisation. In 'Aprite un po' quegli'occhi' (No. 26), the masculine rhyme changes from the soft '-on' through '-ar' to the harsh '-à' to match Figaro's increasing anger as the aria progresses. On the other hand, Susanna's 'Deh vieni non tardar, oh gioia bella' (No. 27) is exceptional in being entirely without *versi tronchi*. Here the flowing *versi piani*, in luxurious eleven-syllable rhyming couplets, give the text a rhapsodic quality that was to be matched by the music.

Da Ponte's aria texts range from single stanzas (Nos. 10, 23) through regular strophic groupings (Nos. 11, 19, 24) to more complex structures. Many of the larger-scale arias are variants of the format already seen in 'Se vuol ballare'. Two quatrains, each with similar metre and rhyme-scheme, lead to a section (often employing a contrasted line-length and rhyming couplets or alternating rhymes) ranging from six to seventeen lines. This middle section ends with a *verso tronco* and may be followed by a final envoi (often a couplet or quatrain) with the same line-length and masculine rhyme as the middle section. A good example is provided by Cherubino's 'Non so più cosa son, cosa faccio' (No. 6, compare Nos. 4, 9, 12, 17, 25, 26; a translation is given on p. 44):

Non so più cosa son, cosa faccio,  
 or di fuoco, ora sono di ghiaccio,  
 ogni donna cangiar di colore,  
 ogni donna mi fa palpitâr.

Solo ai nomi d'amor di diletto,  
 mi si turba, mi s'altera il petto,  
 e a parlare mi sforza d'amore  
 un desio ch'io non posso spiegar.

Parlo d'amor vegliando,  
 parlo d'amor sognando,  
 all'acque, all'ombre, ai monti,  
 ai fiori, all'erbe, ai fonti,  
 all'eco, all'aria, ai venti,  
 che il suon de' vani accenti  
 portano via con se. . .

E se non ho chi m'oda,  
 parlo d'amor con me.

This format is well suited to the lively exhortation or vengeance aria, where the quatrains set the scene and the middle section contains quick-fire comments or accusations, leading to a climax in the envoi.

Mozart clearly responds to the formal and stylistic implications of these aria patterns, just as we have seen in 'Se vuol ballare'. 'Dove sono i bei momenti' (No. 19) and 'Il capro e la capretta' (No. 24) each have three quatrains, and in both cases the third quatrain is set to a faster tempo. A close correlation between verse and music is equally apparent in the larger-scale arias structured as 'Non so più cosa son, cosa faccio'. All these arias (Nos. 4, 6, 9, 12, 17, 25, 26) begin with two quatrains. In each case, the end of the first quatrain (often the first *verso tronco*) marks a significant point in the musical structure, with a firm cadence in the tonic (Nos. 6, 9, 12, 25, 26) or on the dominant (Nos. 4, 17). With the second quatrain comes a new section in the dominant or, in the case of Nos. 4 and 17, on the dominant of the dominant. This similarity between No. 4 (Bartolo's 'La vendetta, oh la vendetta!') and No. 17 (the Count's 'Vedrò mentre io sospiro') is striking given that they are both 'revenge' arias (and see below, pp. 113–15). Since the middle sections of all these arias are often contrasted in content and line-length, Mozart normally changes his style of delivery accordingly, sometimes moving into more declamatory 'patter'. The *verso tronco* at the end of the middle section is generally emphasised by a firm cadence, leaving the setting of the envoi to act as a coda. If reference is made to the opening musical material in this coda, the music designed for the line-length of the first quatrain must often be adapted to the new line-length of the middle section and envoi (Ex. 4).

Only rarely does Mozart deviate significantly from the structural implications of da Ponte's aria texts, and when he does so it is

## Ex. 4 'La vendetta, oh la vendetta!' (No. 4)

a) **Allegro**  
BARTOLO

La ven - det - ta, oh la ven - det - ta!

b)

Tut - ta Si - vi - glia co - no - sce Bar - to - lo.

presumably for a reason. In Figaro's 'Non più andrai farfallone amoroso' (No. 9), Mozart repeats and reorders parts of the text to produce an extended rondo with a long coda: perhaps he wanted an emphatic conclusion to Act I.<sup>5</sup> In Cherubino's 'Voi che sapete' (No. 11), the text consists of seven four-line stanzas (plus a repeat of the first) with a regular rhyme-scheme. This simple structure matches that of the song's equivalent in the play, 'Mon coursier hors d'haine', and it is clearly appropriate for a set-piece canzonet. One would expect Mozart's setting to be strophic, with the same music repeated for each stanza. Instead, it is through-composed: the page is more artful (or just confused?) than the naïve text suggests.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the organisation of the text clearly influences the musical structure (with successive strophes beginning in bars 9, 21, 29, 37, 45, 52, 56, 62).

Da Ponte's ensemble texts emphasise still further the importance for the composer of regular line-lengths, carefully managed rhyme-schemes and recurring masculine endings. Giving each character lines of the same length encourages balanced phrase structures and allows these lines to be presented simultaneously when necessary, the presence or absence of rhyme can indicate agreement or disagreement, and the masculine endings, which again are often rhymed, serve a structural function.

Perhaps the simplest example is the duet 'Crudeli, perchè finora' (No. 16):

<i>Count:</i>	Crudeli! perchè finora farmi languir così?	Cruel one, why have you so far caused me to languish?
<i>Susanna:</i>	Signor, la donna ognora tempo ha di dir di sì	My lord, a woman always takes time to say yes.
<i>Count:</i>	Dunque in giardin verrai?	Then you will come to the garden?

<i>Susanna:</i>	Se piace a voi, verro.	If it pleases you, I will come.
<i>Count:</i>	E non mi mancherai?	And you will not fail me?
<i>Susanna:</i>	No, non vi mancherò.	No, I will not fail you.
<i>Count:</i>	Mi sento dal contento pieno di gioia il cor.	At this delight I feel my heart full of joy.
<i>Susanna:</i>	Susatemi se mento, voi che intendete amor.	Forgive me if I lie, you who understand love.

The text (in seven-syllable lines) consists of three quatrains, each with its own masculine rhyme ('-i', '-ò', '-or'). This matches the three stages of the action: interrogation, arrangement of assignment, and reaction. The line-endings help to characterise the comments of the protagonists. For example, in the second quatrain, where the Count and Susanna have alternate lines, the feminine endings of the Count's questions are firmly answered by Susanna's masculine '-ò' endings. Furthermore, the insinuating '-ai' rhymes well match the Count's intentions and are complemented by the suave melodic lines of Mozart's setting. However, at least one feature of this setting does not seem attributable to da Ponte. Mozart indulges in a delicious 'yes-no' game as Susanna muddles her answers to the Count. This lies outside the metrical scheme of the verse and thus is probably Mozart's invention. There are other examples in the opera of phrases which, for the same reason, may have been additions by Mozart: we have already noted the assertive 'sì' in 'Se vuol ballare' (No. 3), and see also 'Riconosci in questo amplesso' (No. 18, the 'figlio amato'/'parenti amati' interchange between Marcellina, Bartolo and Figaro) and the finales to Acts II and IV (Nos. 15, 28).

The procedures adopted in No. 16 are flexible enough to be worked on a larger scale, as for example in the Act I trio 'Cosa sento! tosto andate' (No. 7). Here the text consists of eight-syllable lines. Each of the three characters has an opening couplet in which to establish a position. Thereafter the verse falls into loosely organised two-, three- and four-line strophes each set off by rhymed *versi tronchi* ('e scacciate il seduttore', 'perdonate, o mio signor'... 'ma da me sorpreso ancor'). Lines are sometimes subdivided between the characters in the manner already seen in the recitatives. At the point where the Count narrates his earlier discovery of Cherubino in Barbina's room ('... Da tua cugina'), da Ponte uses *versi piani* alone, delaying the arrival of a *verso tronco* for some ten lines (until 'or capisco come va'). This enhances the suspense of the Count's narration and sets it apart. Mozart acts accordingly and treats these lines in a manner approaching accompanied recitative. Once Cherubino has been discovered in the chair, the masculine rhyme changes

('or capisco come va', 'giusti dei, che mai sarà', 'non c'è alcuna novità') as each character has a concluding couplet to express a reaction to the situation.

The change of masculine rhyme here is significant. In da Ponte's ensemble texts, such changes frequently occur at significant points in the action. So, too, do changes of line-length. The Act III sextet, 'Riconosci in questo amplesso' (No. 18), is a good example of how such shifts can relate to the prevailing dramatic situation:

- (1) Reconciliation of Marcellina, 8-syllable lines; masculine rhyme '-ir' Bartolo and Figaro
- (2) Susanna's entrance and anger 8-syllable lines; masculine rhyme '-à'
- (3) Explanation to Susanna and 6-syllable lines; masculine rhyme '-à' universal reaction

As we shall see, in the finales a change of line-length generally prompts Mozart to move into a new musical section with a change of tempo and/or metre. It would be intriguing if da Ponte similarly intended the Act III sextet to be in two musical sections. If so, Mozart overruled him, taking advantage of the dramatic parallels between the first and third sections (in the first, Marcellina explains the situation to Figaro, and in the third to Susanna) to create a single movement in sonata form (see Chapter 6). As a result, some of the musical material of the first section must be adapted to the new line-length of the third (compare Marcellina's melody and accompaniment in bars 1-5 with 74-80).

Of the three finales in *Figaro*, the one to Act III (No. 22) is unusual: the verse is in free-rhyming seven- and eleven-syllable lines, and only the duet and chorus 'Amanti costanti' has a regular metre and rhyme. It would appear that da Ponte intended the bulk of his text to be set as recitative, and that it was Mozart's decision to deliver this verse above the march and fandango suggested by the play. Recitative over a march has a precedent in *Idomeneo* (Electra's 'Odo da lunge armonioso suono' in Act II scene 5, No. 14), and recitative over a dance anticipates the first finale of *Don Giovanni*.<sup>7</sup> In the Act III finale of *Figaro*, Mozart transforms what seems to be a recitative-chorus-recitative scene in the libretto into a continuous musical whole.

For the finales to Acts II and IV (Nos. 15, 28), da Ponte provided texts more like those of the other ensembles. In Chapter 3 (pp. 43-4) we saw da Ponte's views on the dramatic problems posed by such finales and how Beaumarchais provided ready-made solutions. However, sectional finales also created difficulties in terms of versifica-

tion, for the text had to be cast in a manner flexible enough to respond to changing dramatic situations while retaining some measure of structural integrity. The various sections of da Ponte's finales, as well as being marked out by the action and the number of characters onstage, are also distinguished by contrasts in metre and masculine rhyme. In moving from one musical section to another, Mozart was influenced by a change in verse structure as much as by dramatic considerations.<sup>8</sup>

The Act II finale is a fine example of da Ponte's technique (Table 3). The text is no less tautly conceived than Mozart's music. It falls into sections distinguished by line-length and/or masculine rhyme, and in those sections which have more than one masculine rhyme, the change marks a new direction in the action. Whether coincidentally or not, the final section also has the same line-length and masculine rhyme as the first. However, Mozart once again appears to override da Ponte in particular instances. For example, neither the verse nor the number of characters onstage justify the new start in sections 3 and 7. Here, Mozart seems to be reacting on his own initiative to changes in the dramatic situation.

It should now be apparent that da Ponte's verse shows a skilled hand and has clear musical implications. Some of these implications were followed by Mozart, and others were not. Whatever the case, an analysis of this verse illuminates, if not explains, a number of compositional decisions made by the composer. Two further points must be made. First, most of the techniques used by da Ponte in his libretto were the stock-in-trade of the eighteenth-century librettist. All the devices discussed here have clear precedents in the *opera buffa* libretti of Carlo Goldoni, and indeed many go back to the *opera seria* libretti of Metastasio and beyond. Second, as I have already suggested, it is quite possible that some of the examples of musical implications in da Ponte's verse are in fact attributable to the composer himself. The surviving correspondence concerning *Idomeneo* and *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* makes it clear that Mozart often harassed his librettists with detailed specifications (see above, p. 7), even, significantly enough, to the extent of requesting certain line-lengths and rhymes at particular points in the work.<sup>9</sup> Da Ponte also complained of similar, and in his view unreasonable, demands made upon him by some composers with whom he worked.<sup>10</sup> We have little information on the genesis of *Figaro*: one can only assume that Mozart's treatment of da Ponte was little different from that meted out to his earlier collaborators.

Table 3 'Esci omai, garzon malnato' (Act II finale, No. 15)

Section	Characters	Time signature	Tempo mark	Key	Line-length	Masculine rhyme
1	Count, Countess	C	Allegro	E flat major	8	-ar
2	Count, Countess, Susanna	$\frac{3}{8}$	Molto andante	B flat major	6	-à
3	Count, Countess, Susanna	C	Allegro	B flat major	6	-à -ar -à -ir
4	Count, Countess, Susanna, Figaro	$\frac{3}{8}$	Allegro	G major	6	-ir
5	Count, Countess, Susanna, Figaro	$\frac{2}{4}$	Andante	C major	8	-ò -ir
6	Count, Countess, Susanna, Figaro, Antonio	C	Allegro molto	F major	10	-ù -i -à -è -è
7	Count, Countess, Susanna, Figaro, Antonio	$\frac{6}{8}$	Andante	B flat major	10	-è
8	Count, Countess, Susanna, Figaro, Marcellina, Bartolo, Basilio	C	Allegro assai- Più allegro- Prestissimo	E flat major	8	-ar

But my aim has not been to stake a claim for da Ponte's originality in handling the libretto of *Figaro*. Nor do I assert his precedence over Mozart in determining the opera's musico-dramatic structure. Instead, I have sought to illustrate the benefits of an approach to opera that pays close attention to all aspects of the libretto. Much recent operatic criticism has tended to devalue the role of the librettist, emphasising instead the primacy of the composer. This stance has a long historical tradition, from Mozart's own comment 'in an opera the poetry must be altogether the obedient daughter of the music' (1781) to Joseph Kerman's claim that 'in opera, the dramatist is the composer' (1956).<sup>11</sup> Even da Ponte complained that 'in comic operas, the words are generally reckoned only as the frame of a beautiful picture which supports the canvas'.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, a librettist has a clearly defined task and, in a given period, particular techniques with which to fulfil that task. To ignore his contribution to an opera is to ignore the crucial interaction of word and music that distinguishes the best *dramme per musica*.