

Comic Opera

On November 12, 1778, Mozart wrote to his father from Mannheim about a new kind of drama with music that was being produced there, and about the invitation extended to him by the producer to compose one: 'I have always wanted to write a drama of this kind. I cannot remember whether I told you anything about this type of drama the first time I was here? On that occasion I saw a piece of this sort performed twice and was absolutely delighted. Indeed, nothing has ever surprised me so much, for I had always imagined that such a piece would be quite ineffective. You know, of course, that there is no singing in it, only recitation, to which the music is like a sort of obbligato accompaniment to a recitative. Now and then words are spoken while the music goes on, and this produces the finest effect. . . . Do you know what I think? I think that most operative recitatives should be treated in this way—and only sung occasionally, when the words *can be perfectly expressed by the music*.¹ The letter ought not, perhaps, to be taken at face value: Mozart's attempt to conquer the musical world of Paris had failed miserably, and he now faced what he most hated and dreaded, a return to Salzburg and the Archbishop's service once again. How much of his enthusiasm is genuine, and how much only an effort at persuading his father, who was waiting impatiently in Salzburg, that it was practical to put off the return for the moment, and that there were other prospects in view? Nevertheless, Mozart's attitude, his experimental approach, is revealing. He is delighted with the possibilities of what is called 'melodrama' (spoken dialogue accompanied by music), and his feeling for theatrical effect is by no means centered upon vocal music. On the contrary, he assumes a clear distinction between music that is an equivalent for dramatic action and music that is the perfect expression of the words.² It is the first concept that has priority, and he is willing to abandon sung words for spoken ones when the action can be made more telling this way.

Zaïde has some splendid effects of melodrama which look forward to the second act of *Fidelio*, but we have lost everything else that Mozart wrote in

¹ Mozart's own emphasis, cited from the *Letters of Mozart and his family*, ed. Emily Anderson, London, 1966.

² In a letter of November 8, 1780, he objected to the idea of an aside in an aria: 'In a dialogue all these things are quite natural, for a few words can be spoken aside hurriedly; but in an aria where the words have to be repeated, it has a bad effect, *and even if this were not the case I should prefer an uninterrupted aria*' [my emphasis, C. R.], *ibid.*, p. 659.

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this form that so interested him for a moment, unless one counts the interruptions of Pedrillo's serenade and Osmin's song by spoken dialogue in *Die Entführung*, or the moment in *Die Zauberflöte* when Papageno counts three before preparing to commit suicide. Yet Mozart never lost his desire to experiment or his sense that, in opera, music as dramatic action takes precedence over music as expression. This is not to deny Mozart's skill at writing for the voice, or his love for elaborate vocal coloratura. Nevertheless he was not always tender with the vanity of singers who wished to show off the beauty of their voices. Particularly in ensembles, like the great quartet in *Idomeneo*, he insisted that the words should be more spoken than sung.¹ Mozart's brief interest in 'melodrama' while in Mannheim is the enthusiasm of a young composer who has just discovered that music on the stage can do more than meet the requirements of singers or express sentiment, but can become one with plot and intrigue as well. This was an idea that he had only half understood when writing the beautiful and little-known *La Finta Giardiniera*.

The style of the early eighteenth century had been equal to any demands that words alone could make. The operatic music of Handel and Rameau could transfigure the sentiment and the situation at each moment, but it left untouched the action and the movement—anything that was not static, in short. To say that the sonata style provided an ideal framework for the rendering of what was most dynamic on the stage is to oversimplify only insofar as it does not take account of the important role that opera itself played in the development of the sonata style. *Opera buffa*, in particular, was influential, and the classical style moves with the least strain in its depiction of comic intrigue and comic gesture.

The three points that made the new style so apt for dramatic action were: first, the articulation of phrase and form which give a work the character of a series of distinct events; second, the greater polarization of tonic and dominant, which allowed for a much clearer rise in tension in the center of each work (as well as more specifically characterizing the significance of related harmonies, which could then also serve a dramatic meaning); and third, by no means the least important, the use of rhythmic transition, which permitted the texture to change with the action on the stage without endangering the purely musical unity in any way. All these stylistic characteristics belong to the 'anonymous' style of the period; they were the common currency of music by 1775. There is no question, however, that Mozart was the first composer to comprehend, in any systematic way, their implications for opera. In one sense, Gluck was a more original composer than Mozart, his style was much more personally forged by a stubborn act of will rather than by an acceptance of the traditions of his age. But this very originality barred the way to that ease and facility with which Mozart mastered the relation of music to drama.

¹ Letter of December 27, 1780, *ibid.*, p. 699.

Mozart

The adaptability of the sonata style to opera can be seen in its least complex and most perfect form in Mozart's own favorite among the individual numbers of *Figaro*, the great sextet of recognition in the third act, which is in slow-movement sonata form (i.e., without a development section, but with a recapitulation starting in the tonic—although the 'second group' of the exposition is sufficiently heightened and intensified here as to provide some of the effect of a development). The sextet begins with Marcellina's expression of joy at finding that Figaro is her long-lost son (a):

Andante a

Ri - co - no - sci in que - sto am - ples - so

Vin. 1 *p*

Vin. 2 *f*

Vla. *f*

Cello + Bass *f*

The tonic section has three main themes, of which this is the first. The second (b) appears after Doctor Bartolo has sung a variant of (a); Don Curzio and the Count express their irritation:

13 b

DON CURZIO

Ei suo pa - dre, el - la sua ma - dre!

IL CONTE Son smar - ri - to Son stor - di - to,

2 Obs.

Vins.

2 Bsns.

Vla.

Cello + Bass *f*

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the third (c), an ecstatic one based on a diminished fifth, is divided between Marcellina, Figaro, and Doctor Bartolo:

17

MARCELLINA

Fi - gli o a - ma - to !

FIGARO

Pa - ren - ti a - mati !

BARTOLO

Fi - gli o a - ma - to !

The painful dissonance outlined by this melody gives it its passionate character. The section ends on a semi-conclusive dominant cadence as Susanna enters with the money, no longer necessary, to buy Figaro out of his contract of marriage with Marcellina:

22

Fls.

+ Obs.

Vlns.

Hns.

Vla.

Cello + Bass 8va (voices omitted)

+ Bsns.

cresc.

SUSANNA

Al - to, al - to ! si - gnor con - te,

25

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

p (Cello + Bass 8va)

Mozart

This is the beginning of what is respectably called the 'bridge passage' in a sonata exposition, and the added tension that comes with the change to the dominant is admirably calculated to parallel Susanna's ignorance of what has been happening and her inevitable misunderstanding. As at the beginning of the second group of most of Haydn's sonatas and many of Mozart's, part of the first group reappears:

33

Fl. 1

Hrns.

Bsn.

Fls.

Obs.

Vin. 1

Vin. 2

Vla.

Cello

Bass (voices omitted)

+ Bsns.

It is (c) that is repeated, as Marcellina, Figaro, and Bartolo are still lost in their discovery. A dissonant sonority appears with a turn to the dominant minor and Susanna's rage at seeing Figaro kissing Marcellina (d):

40

SUSANNA

Già d'ac-cor-do col-la spo-sa giu - sti Dei, che in - fo - del - ta

Vins.

Vla.

Cello

+ Bass 8va

p

ff

While Figaro tries to appease her, a new caressing motif appears in the violins:

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48 FIGARO

Sen - ti o ca - ra

Vin. 1 *p*
Vin. 2 *p*
Vla. *p*
Cello *p*
+ Bass *8va*

but it is derived from the violin part in (a), and has the same sensuous swell as (c). The exposition continues with a motif (e) derived from it and combining with it—which expresses Susanna's indignation:

62 SUSANNA

fa, fre - mo, sma-nio dal fu - ro - re, fre - mo, sma-nio dal fu - ro - re,

Vin. 1 *7*
Vin. 2 *7*

66

u - na vec - chia me la fa,

Vin. 1 *7*
Vin. 2 *7*

and closes with a firm cadence on the dominant, as every exposition did then.

Only the recapitulation of a sonata requires any ingenuity in being adapted to the stage; an exposition is, as it stands, a model for an intrigue that becomes more complex and more tense with the introduction of new elements and new events. For a recapitulation, on the other hand, the classical composer had to find the elements of symmetry and resolution in the situation and in the very words of the libretto. It need hardly be emphasized that this is not a playful or pedantic adaptation of a fixed form to a dramatic genre; the symmetry and resolution of the sonata were permanent needs of the classical composer, not dispensable elements of form.

Mozart

The resolution in the sextet begins when the situation is carefully explained to the furious Susanna; accordingly the tonic returns, and the recapitulation begins with (a) once more:

72

MARCELLINA

2 Fls.
2 Bsns.
Vln. 1
Vln. 2
Vla.
Cello
+ Bass 8va

Lo sde - gno cal -

75

ma - te, mia ca - ra fi - gliuo - la, sua ma - dre abbrac - cia - te, che vo - stra orsa - rà

The words, of course, will no longer fit the opening melody, so it is the winds of the orchestra that play the melody (a) here, and Marcellina who decorates it.

Susanna is bewildered, and her confusion is expressed by a variant of (b), used in the exposition for the consternation of the Count and Don Curzio, quoted above:

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80 *b* varied

SUSANNA	BARTOLO	SUSANNA	IL CONTE	SUSANNA	DON CURZIO
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Sua ma-dre? Sua ma-dre! Sua ma-dre? Sua ma-dre! Sua ma-dre? Sua ma-dre!

(winds omitted)

Finally, there is a concluding section in which all express their joy, except, of course, the Count and Don Curzio:

SUSANNA 104 (other voices omitted)

Al dol - - ce con - ten - - to

sotto voce Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

2 Hns.

Cello

Bass

which recalls, above all, the deeply expressive character of (c). There is even a move towards F minor (mm. 110-117) which parallels the C minor of (d). We are given a fine example of the priorities of classical form: the harmonic structure and the proportions outweigh the letter of the melodic pattern here, just as they do in so many of Haydn's and Mozart's abstract works.

Mozart

In fact, no description of sonata form can be given that will fit the Haydn quartets but not the majority of forms in a Mozart opera. This coincidence between abstract and dramatic pattern is significant in many ways, particularly in the insight it provides into the nature of late eighteenth-century form. There are no fixed 'rules,' although there are successful patterns imitated and even aped, and unconscious habits. The abstract forms, no more than the theatrical ones, do not make their effects by breaking 'rules,' as is so often thought: the element of surprise in the string quartets and the operas does not depend upon a deviation from some imagined musical norm outside the individual work. It is the work itself (once its language is understood) that provides its own expectations, disappoints and finally fulfils them: the tensions are implied more by the music and very little by the specific experience and prejudices of the listener, although he must have an educated ear to know what to listen for, educated in the stylistic language and not just in its superficial formalities. One must accept the essentially innovatory nature of the style, like that of any language, its built-in possibility of creating original combinations. In other words, such rules as the classical style genuinely developed—the need for resolution, the sense of proportion and of a closed and framed pattern—are never broken at all. They are its means of communication, and it could say astonishing things without violating its own grammar. As for the conventional patterns that so many composers used unthinkingly, they were not rules of grammar but clichés: they were turned into rules when the musical language changed, and the pressures and the forces that had produced the classical style (along with its idioms and formulas) were exhausted and died.

When the dramatic situation will not lend itself easily to a symmetrical resolution and recapitulation, the sonata aesthetic still remains valid in Mozart's operas. Its use is only superficially more complex: there is the same need for resolution, the same sense of proportion. The second act sextet of *Don Giovanni* has a form as clear but far less openly symmetrical than the sextet of *Figaro*, yet it satisfies the same aesthetic demands. The dramatic complexity—the gradual introduction of new characters, the surprising changes of situation—requires an immense expansion of the 'development section,' and much new material: the resolution is equally immense and emphatic. The opening in E flat major, a small sonata exposition, is short and succinct: like the exposition of Haydn's *Oxford* Symphony, it gives no hint of the enormous consequences that await. At the beginning, Donna Elvira and Leporello (whom she believes to be Don Giovanni) are lost in the dark. Donna Elvira is frightened at being abandoned and her shudder of fear is rendered by the orchestra with a motif (*a*) which will appear later: