LYRIC OPERA KANSAS CITY

THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO

BY W.A. MOZART

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AN IN-DEPTH GUIDE

WRITTEN BY STU LEWIS OF THE LYRIC OPERA GUILD

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There's a wonderful scene in the classic film *The Shawshank Redemption* in which a prisoner, in an act of defiance against the prison authorities, plays the "Letter Duet" from *The Marriage of Figaro* over the loudspeakers, creating a sense of euphoria throughout the prison yard. Red, a fellow inmate, providing a voice-over narration, comments, "I have no idea to this day what those two Italian ladies were singing about. Truth is, I don't want to know. I like to think they were singing about something so beautiful it can't be expressed in words, and makes your heart ache because of it."

He was, of course, only partly right. Like all great opera composers, Mozart recognized the importance of a good libretto, and in Lorenzo Da Ponte he had found an artistic soulmate capable of inspiring him to new heights. *The Marriage of Figaro* continues to move us over two hundred years after its first performance precisely because it represents the perfect fusion of words and music.

Much has been made of the fact that Mozart and Da Ponte toned down the satire of Beaumarchais' revolutionary play in order to make it acceptable to the Emperor, who had the absolute power to censor any stage work of which he did not approve. However, although Da Ponte assured Emperor Joseph that he had removed the offensive passages, it is more likely that he had done what any good librettist would have done to this play by removing the essentially undramatic political speeches in order to move the action along. In any event, there was a long history of upstart servants in operas of the time, as in Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona*, in which a servant cons her master into marrying her. Furthermore, the Emperor was not the target himself and probably would have enjoyed a comedy which satirized the lower nobility.

In his book *Mozart and the Enlightenment*, opera director Nicholas Till has argued that the real theme of the opera is not social class but the institution of marriage, reflecting the concept of Enlightenment thinking that marriage should be based not on financial considerations nor on romantic infatuation but rather on

a feeling of mutual understanding and respect between a man and a woman. Mozart himself had married a woman of limited financial means, over the objection of his father, and he appears to have enjoyed such a relationship with his wife. Noting that the Count and Countess have a marriage in need of restoration, he goes on to say, "The marriage of Figaro and Susanna is a portrait of a marriage that will be stable and secure, based upon freedom and true love, firmly rooted in sound understanding and proper contractual commitments, and free of romantic or sentimental delusion."

Beyond this, however, this opera is also an affirmation of the dignity of all human beings. Figaro and Susanna may be servants, but they are, above all, human beings with feelings. Though the Countess may resent the fact that she needs to enlist her servant's help in winning back her husband's love, the "Letter Duet" establishes for the audience that the two women, singing in perfect harmony, are essentially equal, despite the accidents of birth which assigned them different stations in life.

I think Red did get it partly right, however. By the conclusion of this opera, we feel that we have experienced something which goes beyond anything expressed in the words. Listening to the hymn-like music with which the Countess forgives her errant husband, I am always reminded of the words that Peter Schaffer put in the mouth of Salieri in his play *Amadeus*. Realizing he is speaking to an audience two centuries in the future, the composer feels safe in making an allusion to the fourth act of *The Marriage of Figaro*: "What shall I say to you who will one day hear this last act for yourselves? You will – because whatever else shall pass away, this must remain."

Count Almaviva (baritone)
(ahl-ma-VEE-vah)
The depravity of his morals should in no way detract from the elegance of his manners.

Figaro (baritone): The Count's valet
(FEE-gah-ro)
Possessing good sense seasoned with gaiety and sallies of wit with no element of caricature.

Bartolo (bass): A doctor of medicine (later revealed as Figaro's father)
(BAHR-to-lo)

Don Basilio (tenor): A music teacher
(Dohn ba-ZEE-lee-oh)

Cherubino (mezzo-soprano): The Count's page
(kay-roo-BEE-no)
The basis of his character is an undefined and restless desire. He is entering on adolescence all unheeding and with no understanding of what is happening to him. In fact, he is what every mother…would wish her own son to be even though he might give her much cause for suffering.

Antonio (bass): A gardener, Susanna's uncle

Don Curzio (tenor): A lawyer
(KOOR-tsee-oh)

Countess Almaviva (a.k.a. Rosina) (soprano): The count's wife
Torn between two conflicting emotions she should display only a restrained tenderness and very moderate degree of resentment, above all nothing which might impair her amiable and virtuous character in the eyes of the audience.

Susanna (soprano): The Countess' maid and Figaro's fiance
She is a resourceful, intelligent, and lively young woman, but she has none of the almost brazen gaiety characteristic of some of our young actresses who play maidservants.

Marcellina (soprano): Bartolo's housekeeper (later revealed as Figaro's mother)
(mar-chel-LEE-nah)
She is a woman of intelligence and of naturally lively temperament.

Barbarina (soprano): Antonio's teenage daughter
(bar-bar-EE-na)

Descriptions in italics are from Beaumarchais' notes.

First, the "back story." *The Marriage of Figaro* is based on the sequel to *The Barber of Seville*, whose plot would have been familiar to Mozart's audience through the popular adaptation of that work by Paisiello (Rossini's version, the one we associate with that work today, came much later). In that play and opera, Count Almaviva and Rosina had become infatuated with each other before ever actually meeting. However, Dr. Bartolo, Rosina's guardian, wants to marry the young woman himself. In order to foil the doctor's plans, Almaviva enlists the aid of the town's barber and jack-of-all-trades, Figaro, and together they devise ways to sneak Almaviva in disguise into Bartolo's home so that true love can prevail. All ends happily for everyone except Bartolo, and even he gets a consolation prize of getting the keep Rosina's inheritance.

The Marriage of Figaro takes place a few years later. The Almavivas are married, but the debonair Count has hardly been a model of marital fidelity. In the meantime, Figaro, apparently tired of free-lancing, has accepted employment with the Count as a sort of major domo, or household manager. He has become engaged to Susanna, Rosina's lady in waiting.

Note: Due to its greater-than-average length, *The Marriage of Figaro* is rarely performed without some cuts. The Lyric Opera production may omit or condense some of the scenes described below. Also, the Lyric Opera production will be an updated version, so some details may be changed to reflect a different time setting.

OVERTURE

Unlike those of the other two Mozart-Da Ponte collaborations, the overture to this opera contains no musical quotes from the opera itself – though one might see in the prevalent descending three-note motif an allusion to Figaro's name. Its frantic pace, however, perfectly captures the mood of the play, whose subtitle was *La Folle Journee* (a day's madness). In an era in which audiences paid scant attention to the overture, it is to Mozart's credit that he composed a piece capable of standing on its own as a concert piece.

ACT I: Figaro and Susanna's bedroom

The curtain opens on a half-furnished room which is to become the bedroom of the soon-to-be-wed Susanna and Figaro. In a sprightly duet, Figaro measures the room while Susanna sings of the hat she will wear to the wedding. This duet presents a classic confrontation between masculine and feminine views of the world – the man's concern with numbers and measurements, the woman's with more aesthetic things. Soon harmony is restored, as Figaro joins his voice to Susanna's in admiration of the hat. Figaro's joining his voice to Susanna's melody at the conclusion of the duet could be seen a foreshadowing the fact that despite his bravura, Figaro is less in control of his situation than he would like to believe and must rely on the female characters for advice and guidance.

This duet is followed by a brief dialogue between the two in a style known as *secco* (dry) recitative: sung speech accompanied by harpsichord. Such recitative was typically used in Italian opera of the day, as opposed to the German singspiel, where spoken dialogue was used instead. It was used to allow certain plot transitions to be accomplished more quickly than could be handled with fully scored arias and duets. Susanna is unpleasantly surprised to learn that this room, adjacent to the Almavivas' quarters, is to be their bedroom. This conversation leads into another duet, "Se a caso madama," in which Figaro points out how convenient the room is. The Countess can ring the bell for Susanna ("din din") while the count can ring for Figaro ("don don"). Having great fun with the sounds, Mozart and Da Ponte have Susanna echo the "don don" to remind Figaro that the count could summon her just as easily. She continues to taunt Figaro with these sounds as he begins to understand her implication.

In a passage of *secco* recitative, Susanna provides additional details. The Count has been attempting to seduce her, using the unscrupulous Basilio as his emissary. It turns out that the count had recently abolished the *droit du seigneur*, the right of a feudal lord to have sex with any bride in his employ on the night of her wedding. As Susanna's wedding is approaching, however, he has begun to have second thoughts.

While the *droit* figures prominently in the folklore of Europe, many historians doubt that this practice was widely practiced on that continent, and it may have been simply a product of the literary imagination, like the legendary chastity belt. In any event, it is implied here (and made explicit in the play) that the Count would have no intention of enforcing his "right" by force, preferring instead to win Susanna over with the power of his personality.

Susanna leaves, and Figaro, alone on stage, sings his solo aria (introduced by a secco passage), "Se vuol ballare": "If my master wants to sing a ballad, I'll play the tune." The aria is in the ABA form popular in Mozart's time (an opening section, followed by a middle one, followed by a repetition of the opening theme). The A theme is accompanied in part by pizzicato notes on the strings, suggesting the melody that Figaro is playing.

Figaro exits, and Dr. Bartolo and Marcellina enter. (Entrances and exits in this opera are generally motivated not by logic but by the need to focus attention on particular characters). As we will learn shortly, Figaro had offered to marry Marcellina if he were to default on a loan, and she intends to enforce the contract. In his aria "La vendetta," Bartolo expresses his desire to get revenge on the man who helped the Count steal Rosina away from him. Some critics have suggested that much of the humor of this piece comes from the fact that it is a parody of the revenge arias from *opera seria* (serious opera) that would have been well known to Mozart's audience. In any event, it is a marvelous comic aria with some rapid-fire words reminiscent of the patter song.

Bartolo exits, and Susanna enters, setting the stage for another comic duet, this time between the two women who are to be rivals for Figaro. With mock politeness they ridicule each other, each insisting that the other exit first. Marcellina exits, just in time to miss the entrance of the page, Cherubino, a young man who has a crush on any woman he sees, an ardor which he expresses in his aria "Non so piu." The breathless pace of this aria suggests the impatience of

adolescence, and the concluding line, explaining that when alone "I speak to myself of love," seems to suggest self-gratification.

The scene which follows is pure farce. The Count enters, and Cherubino hides behind a chair. The Count asks Susanna for a clandestine meeting, but when he hears Basilio approaching, he decides to hide behind the same chair. In the nick of time, Cherubino jumps into the chair, and Susannah covers him with a cloak.

Basilio enters, and slyly suggesting that Susannah is having an affair with Cherubino, asks why she would not prefer the master to the page. He further suggests that Cherubino has his eye on the Countess. Angered, the Count reveals his presence, and in a wonderful comic trio the three try to make the best of an awkward situation. Note especially how Mozart portrays the obsequious, cunning Basilio with his hesitating descending notes. In describing how he found Cherubino hiding under a cloak earlier in the day, the Count lifts the cloak under which Cherubino is currently hiding and is amazed to find the same thing happening again. He is embarrassed to realize that the page has heard his supposedly private conversation with Susanna.

As if things were not crazy enough, Figaro enters with a chorus of peasants. As part of the mind game that he is playing with the Count, he directs them in singing the praises of the Count for abolishing the *droit*. Figaro asks the Count to perform the wedding at once, but the latter makes an excuse to delay.

The Count realizes that Cherubino knows too much to be dismissed outright, so he decides instead to promote him, making him an officer in his regiment, ordering him to leave at once. After secretly telling Cherubino to stick around, Figaro launches into the aria "Non piu andrai," in which he warns the page of the hard life that awaits him in the military. Mozart, never missing the chance to add a comic touch, conjures up an entire military band in the background

as the aria concludes and the curtain fails. At the rehearsal for the first performance, the orchestra burst into a spontaneous ovation at the conclusion of this aria. After all, nothing this magnificent had ever before been heard on the operatic stage. They did not have to wait very long to hear music of equal power.

ACT II: The Countess' boudoir

The Countess is alone on stage. To indicate a shift of mood since the Act I finale, a relatively lengthy orchestral passage introduces her plaintive "Porgi Amor," her lament over the loss of her husband's affections. This number, which has no counterpart in the original play, is labeled as a "cavatina" in the score, indicating a short melodic passage less developed than a full aria. But with barely four lines of text to work with, Mozart works magic in building sympathy for the Countess and in reminding us that marital infidelity is not a victimless crime.

Mozart then employs a lengthy recitative to move the plot along. Susanna enters and, at the Countess' request, fills her in on the details of the Count's advances toward her. Figaro enters, and together with the women devise a plan to divert the Count from his attempted seduction and to shame him into abandoning his adulterous ways. Figaro will write an anonymous letter to Basilio telling him of the Countess' alleged meeting with a strange man in the garden. In the meantime, Susanna will agree to meet the Count in the garden, but instead Cherubino will keep the appointment, dressed in women's clothing. Singing an excerpt from his "Se vuol ballare," Figaro reiterates that he is still in control of the situation, as he exits.

Conveniently, Cheubino now enters, and the women persuade him to sing a song that he has written. Labeled a "canzona" (a simple song), "Voi che sapete" is simple and direct in form. Since Cherubino is supposed to be singing rather than speaking at this point, the style is rather formal, in contrast to his earlier aria, in which he expressed his own personality. Susanna accompanies him on the guitar.

The women make their plans for Cherubino's costume. As they are doing this, the Countess happens to look at his military commission and notices that the Count has acted in such haste that he failed to affix his seal. Measuring him for an outfit, Susanna sings the playful "Venite inginocchiatvei," praising his good looks. The women continue with their plans, and Susannah goes off in search of a ribbon. Suddenly the Count knocks at the door. Realizing that his presence could be incriminating, Cherubino hides in the closet. Hearing a noise in the closet, the Count asks who is there, and the Countess tells him that it is Susanna. In the meantime, Susanna has entered unobserved by the others.

The argument between the Count and Countess now develops into a trio, "Susanna, or via sortite." The Count orders Susanna to come out, but the Countess tells her not to open the door (remember, it is Cherubino, not Susanna, in the closet). Susanna, still unseen by the others, expresses her fear of the impending scandal. After the trio ends, the Count goes off to get some tools to pry the door open, taking the Countess with him to keep her from freeing her supposed lover and locking the room behind him.

In their absence, Cherubino jumps out of the window and Susanna takes his place in the closet. The Countess, not knowing the truth, admits that Cherubino is in the closet. She also reveals that Figaro had written the bogus letter about her alleged affair.

While solo arias may be the center of attention for many opera fans, it is in ensembles that composers are able to demonstrate their greatest creativity, balancing several melodies and plot elements simultaneously. The next twenty minutes, the finale to Act II, represent Mozart at the height of his genius. The music here does not slow the story down for the sake of plot development; rather, it helps build the sense of confusion and moves the plot along as duets morph into trios, quartets, and finally a septet.

The Count approaches the closet, sword drawn, over his wife's desperate cries. When he opens the door, both are equally amazed to find Susanna. In an aside, Susanna tells the Countess of the page's escape. Concluding that the Countess was simply playing a joke, the Count asks for forgiveness, but, enjoying the fact that they now seem to have the upper hand, the women mock him.

More complications, of course, lie ahead. With no break in the music, Figaro enters, announcing that the band is ready to perform at the wedding. The Count, however, has not been defeated yet. He asks Figaro about the letter, and, not knowing that the Countess had given away the plot, he denies knowing anything about it, while the two women try to signal to him that the Count already knows the truth. Figaro, Susanna, and the Countess join in unison to ask that the wedding take place at once, while the Count keeps repeating Marcellina's name to himself.

Just as Figaro seems caught in his own lies, Antonio, the gardener, enters angrily, complaining that someone has damaged his garden by jumping into it from the balcony. Though he would have had no reason to jump, Figaro claims that he was the one the gardener had seen, even feigning a limp to add authenticity to his story. Antonio confronts Figaro with the commission paper, which Cherubino had dropped in his haste. With some prompting from the women, Figaro reveals that the lack of a seal as the reason it was given to him to hold.

Figaro does not have the upper hand for long. Marcellina, Don Basilio, and Doctor Bartolo enter, demanding that the Count enforce Figaro's pledge to marry Marcellina. The older characters exult in their apparent triumph, the younger ones react in despair, with Susanna's shrill voice rising above the others, and the seven voices, each with its own purpose, join in a thrilling up-tempo ensemble as the curtain falls.

ACT III: A Hall in the Castle

Act three begins with some brief recitative as the Count and the two women separately continue their intrigues. Susanna and the Count are left alone, and the Count continues his advances. Their conversation leads into the duet "Crudel! Perche finora," which is most likely intended as a parody of "courtly love" conventions. The Count rebukes Susanna for her "cruelty," a standard word for a woman who does not give in to a man's wishes; consider Marvell's poem "To his Coy Mistress" as better-known example. Despite the power than the Count has over Susanna, he poses as a disappointed romantic lover. Mozart and Da Ponte have some fun with the interchange here as the rhythm of the music induces Susanna to make some Freudian slips when she is apparently agreeing to a secret meeting with the Count, first saying "no" when she should say "yes" and then, with perfect symmetry, saying "yes" when she should say "no," much to the Count's chagrin. As she leaves, she encounters Figaro, and the Count overhears her tell Figaro that he has already won his case.

Angered, the Count sings his big aria, "Hai gia vinta la causa," in which he declares his intention to be avenged on his upstart valet. It has been suggested that to an extent the Count and Countess belong to the world of "opera seria" (serious opera) and not opera buffa (comic opera), and the tone of this aria is anything but comic.

Marcellina, Bartolo, and Figaro enter, along with a stuttering lawyer, Don Curzio. The latter insists that Figaro must honor his contract and marry Marcellina, but Figaro plays his last trump card – he cannot marry without the consent of his parents, and since he was kidnapped in infancy, he does not know their identity. As he describes the items found on his person at the time, and a mark branded on his arm – a spatula – Marcellina recognizes that he is her long-lost out-of-wedlock son. Moreover, Bartolo is the father. (A note of perhaps psychological interest: in the play, Figaro's birth name is Emanuel, which was also Da Ponte's birth name. Here, Da Ponte changes it to Rafaello. Was the subject of a name change too close to home?)

This recognition leads into the celebrated sextet "Riconosci in questo amplesso," Mozarts favorite number in this opera. As Marcellina reaches to embrace her son and the other characters express their amazement and frustration, Susanna enters. Seeing the embrace, she assumes that he has abandoned her for Marcellina, and she slaps him. Finally, Figaro is able to get a word in edgewise and he tells her what has happened. In a wonderful exchange that depends on the music for its comic effect, Susanna polls each of the assembled people present to confirm first that Marcellina is Figaro's mother and then that Bartolo is his father. The new-found family sing happily of their joy, while the Count and lawyer sulk. Now that the secret of his past escapade has come into the open, Bartolo proposes marriage to Marcellina, and she immediately accepts.

The Countess enters, and after lamenting the fact that she has fallen so low as to be dependent on her servant's help, she embarks on one of the greatest arias in the entire soprano repertoire, "Dove Sono" ("Where have they gone, those beautiful moments?"). Like the Count's aria, this aria may belong more to the genre of the opera seria than the opera buffa, and like the Countess' earlier aria, it is touching and heartfelt, describing the genuine suffering of a woman forced to realize that she is no longer enjoys her husband's affection.

More entrances and exits: Antonio tells the Count of Cherubino's planned disguise, and then Susanna enters with the Countess. They decide that Susanna will write a love letter, which the Countess will dictate, to the Count. This is the "Letter Duet" that so moved the inmates of Shawshank prison. The Countess dictates a letter to Susanna (to add a touch of realism, Da Ponte has Susanna ask for one line to be repeated).

Barbarina enters with a chorus of young women (along with the disguised Cherubino) to serenade the Countess. The Count enters and immediately unmasks the young man. Barbarina, however, averts the punishment that the Count threatens by reminding him of that when she played along with his physical

advances toward her he promised her anything she would ask. She thus asks for Cherubino as a husband. Figaro enters, and the Count catches him in more lies, from which he is rescued by the sound of marching music, signaling the beginning of the evening's wedding festivities. Two peasant girls again praise the Count for abolishing the *droit*. The music changes to a slow minuet, which accompanies the remaining dialogue. Susanna slips the count the aforementioned letter. The Count tells everyone to celebrate, and the chorus picks up the peasant girls' melody as the curtain falls.

ACT IV: The Garden

With the central conflicts of the story already resolved, the fourth act might be somewhat of an anti-climax, were it not for the brilliant finale. In compliance with the conventions of opera buffa, Mozart provides arias for three principals who have not yet had one, though two of these are frequently cut in production. First comes Barbarina, who, as the curtain opens, is looking for the pin which the Count had asked her to return to Susanna as confirmation that he had received her letter (L'ho perduta"). Figaro enters, followed by Marcellina. He manages to get the unsuspecting girl to tell him about the pin, and he suspects that she may be complying with the Count's wishes after all. In despair, he turns to his mother, but she, we soon learn, chooses to side with Susanna out of feminine solidarity. Why, she wonders in the aria "Il capro et la capreta," can't men and women just get along? Male and female animals seem to do okay. She has clearly grown in character from the desperate old woman we saw in the first act. In Beaumarchais' words, "If the actress who plays the part can rise with a proper proud defiance to the moral heights of the third act, after the recognition scene, she will add greatly to the interest of the work."

The comings and goings in the remainder of this act are reminiscent of a Marx Brothers movie. Figaro plans to catch Susanna with the Count. Basilio is happy to learn that she has finally given in. He tells Bartolo a cautionary tale of how he once got caught wearing an ass's skin ("In quegli anni"), an aria whose purpose is hard

to discern and is rarely heard in actual performances of the opera. Figaro comes forth to address the audience with a complaint about women's infidelity ("Aprite un po' quegli occhi"). With a rapid-fire list of women's flaws in the style of a patter song, this aria seems more at home in the world of the opera buffa than did the Count's aria.

Susanna playfully decides to string Figaro along. In an aria which suggests far more depth of feeling than one might expect in this situation, she sings to herself the aria "Deh vieni," asking her lover to come to her. (Listen to the wonderful way Mozart accompanies this pastoral melody with various woodwind instruments) Figaro believes she is waiting for the Count.

The opera's finale consists of about twenty minutes of continuous music, as Cherubino, Figaro, and the Count woo Susanna and the Countess, who are disguised as each other. Believing he has caught the Countess with another man, the Count calls for his servants to come, bearing arms. Susanna, still in the guise of the Countess, begs forgiveness.

The stage is now set for the wonderful denouement. The Count angrily refuses to forgive her despite the pleas of the others. The Countess enters from the opposite direction, and with an angelic voice she offers to obtain their pardon. Humiliated, the Count turns to his wife and asks for forgiveness.

What follows is pure magic, indescribable in mere words. The Countess' words of forgiveness float over the company and are echoed by the others, saying, "Let us all be happy." While the words of forgiveness relate to this specific situation, the music takes us to another sphere. Critic Paul Robinson has seen in her phrases "the perfect symbol of an age – an age which believed, with alarming lack of ambiguity, in the possibility of human virtue." One might even sense in this hymn-like music a sense of Divine forgiveness; certainly no liturgical music could move us more than this passage.

This is Mozart, however, and a Mozart opera calls for a rousing, up-tempo conclusion. The chorus and principals conclude by celebrating love and pleasure, and they call on everyone assembled to run off and join the fun as the curtain falls.

Of all the great composers, perhaps none has been the subject of more romantic speculation than Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. A few years ago, in the film *Amadeus*, Hollywood presented us with a Mozart for our own age – an irreverent, uncouth young man with an innate and inexplicable gift for composing immortal music. In the Peter Schafer play upon which the film was based, it was clear that what we were seeing was a caricature of the composer as filtered through the deranged mind of his rival, Antonio Salieri (also a caricature). But film audiences, accustomed to television biopics, often have missed that distinction.

When we look at the historical record, much of which can be derived from the large amount of Mozart's correspondence which has been preserved, we find a quite different picture. For one thing, he was a keen student of music theory, aware of the effects of various harmonies and key changes. He also was a devout Catholic who drew inspiration from the rituals of the church. As for the vulgarity, much of which can be confirmed from the letters, we need to remember that in the Eighteenth Century scatological humor and sexual frankness were much more acceptable than they were to become later. Rumors of Mozart's sexual affairs are unsubstantiated, and the erotic letters we do have are addressed to his wife.

But even if we strip away the myths, one indisputable fact remains: Mozart was clearly one of the greatest creative geniuses (if not the greatest) the world has ever known. In a lifetime just short of thirty-six years he revolutionized Western music.

Mozart was born in Salzburg (which was not yet part of Austria) on January 27, 1756, the son of a professional musician, Leopold Mozart. Both he and his sister were child prodigies, and they quickly attracted attention throughout Europe.

After struggling for some time to make a living, in 1781, he made the most important decision of his life, relocating to Vienna, which at that time was the cultural capital of the German-speaking

world. Here he was able to find a wider audience for his works, eventually landing a post in the court of Emperor Joseph II. It was during his travels that he came in contact with a music copyist named Fridolin Weber, whose daughter Constanza became his wife. Leopold was furious about the match, having hoped that Wolfgang, like his sister, would find someone who could provide him with some financial stability. But the young Mozart knew best, and by all accounts it was an excellent marriage, despite the couple's financial difficulties.

Though he had written a number of operas in his teen years, it was in 1781 that the young composer first began to write the works which would bring him immortality in the annals of opera, beginning with *Idomeneo*, which was soon followed by *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, the opera that led to a legendary exchange between composer and emperor: "Too beautiful for our ears, and too many notes, my dear Mozart," to which Mozart replied, "Exactly as many as necessary, your Majesty." Whether or not this dialogue actually took place, it does illustrate the fact that the young Mozart was writing with a complexity that was new to the Viennese audiences.

In 1783, realizing that the German opera company had produced only one work of lasting value – the aforementioned *Abduction* – Emporer Joseph disbanded it in favor of a new company to be devoted to the production of Italian opera. Salieri, the official court composer, invited a promising young Italian poet, Lorenzo Da Ponte, to court so the two men could collaborate on Italian operas. However, in one of those great ironic twists that makes music history so fascinating, when their opera *Il Ricco d'un giorno* flopped, Salieri blamed his librettist and swore that he would never work with him again. This left the field open for Da Ponte to work instead with Mozart. All that was needed was an appropriate subject, and when the composer suggested an adaptation of the hottest play in Europe – Beaumarchais' *The Marriage of Figaro* – he jumped at the chance.

As mentioned earlier, the idea was a hard sell at court. The play itself had been banned, but when Da Ponte showed the Emperor the libretto, from which he had removed the more overtly political passages, the latter rapidly agreed to the performance. The battle, however, was not over. During the rehearsal process, a number of singers, resentful of the upstart composer, sought to sabotage the opera through poor singing, but when Joseph, a devoted and perceptive opera fan, got wind of the conspiracy, he quickly put an end to it.

Premiered May 1, 1786, the opera was an instantaneous sensation, but not a lasting one. Unaccustomed to the complexity of Mozart's ensembles, the Vienna audiences soon turned their attention to Martin Soler's *Una cosa rara*, ironically, another work for which Da Ponte had written the libretto. (There is an in-joke in *Don Giovanni*, where Leporello indicates his preference for *Una Cosa Rara* over *Figaro*.) The two men were to collaborate on two more operas – *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte* – before going their separate ways. Mozart went on to write one more opera seria, *La Clemenza del Tito*, and the celebrated German singspiel, *The Magic Flute*.

At the height of his creative powers, however, the young composer was struck by a disease which his biographers have been unable to identify, though few take seriously the rumor that he was poisoned. He died December 5, 1791, just weeks short of what would have been his thirty-sixth birthday, leaving his *Requiem* unfinished. In accord with funeral practices of the time (part of Joseph II's reforms), he was buried in an unmarked grave. Mozart does not need a stone monument, however. His works are certainly enough of a monument for any man.

Though he is best known as a writer of opera libretti (lyrics), Lorenzo Da Ponte's life itself could well provide the subject of an opera for some enterprising composer and librettist. Born March 10, 1749 in the Jewish ghetto of Ceneda, Italy under the name Emanuel Conegliano, Da Ponte lost his mother at age 5, and when his father chose a Catholic woman for his second wife, the entire family converted to her religion. While Da Ponte failed to mention his Jewish origins in his memoirs and therefore does not comment on his feelings about this change, it appears that he welcomed it not so much out of religious fervor but rather because it opened for him the world of Western culture and education, which was closed to non-Christians at the time. To express his gratitude for these opportunities, he changed his name to that of the bishop who baptized him.

Recognized early as a gifted student, Da Ponte recognized that the best way to obtain a liberal education in his day was to study for the priesthood (he apparently went as far as to become ordained), though he had no intention of serving in that capacity (or, for that matter, of adopting a celibate lifestyle). In fact, prior to his move to Vienna in 1781, his addictive gambling and affairs with married women were well known.

Vienna at that time was a true cultural center. Moreover, the Emperor was known for his tolerance of Jews, and he would not have held Da Ponte's origins against him. Da Ponte achieved the role of poet to the Italian Theater.

In 1792 Da Ponte met a young Englishwoman named Nancy Grahl, and it appears that the two entered into what in effect was a common-law marriage. Under chaotic circumstances, he moved to London to work with an Italian opera company there, and in 1805, one step ahead of his creditors, he and Nancy departed for the United States, where he spent his remaining years as a merchant, bookseller, and professor of Italian at Columbia University. He devoted much of his time to promoting Italian opera in the United States. He was

greatly encouraged in his endeavors by scholar and poet Clement Moore, best known today as the writer of *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*.

Da Ponte eloquently expressed his theory of opera as follows: "The success of an opera depends, first of all, on the poet….I think that poetry is the door to music, which can be very handsome, and much admired for its exterior, but nobody can see its internal beauties, if the door is wanting." Some critics have sought to denigrate the importance of Da Ponte in the creation of these operas, dismissing him as a mere versifier, pointing out how flat the libretti appear on the page without Mozart's music, but it would be more accurate to say that he undoubtedly recognized what the rest of the world was soon to discover: that Mozart was an incomparable genius who could turn the plainest of prose into great music. Da Ponte clearly understood that his words were not what would bring people to the opera house. It is best to say that the two men brought out the best in each other. None of Da Ponte's other works have stood the test of time; yet no other works of Mozart have the same depth of characterization as these three. Their three collaborations represent the integration of text and music at its finest.

"I've been diplomat, acrobat, teacher of etiquette/student and swordsman, spy and musician/satirist, pessimist, surgeon and Calvinist/Spanish economist, clockmaker, pharmacist" – thus Figaro describes himself in Corigliano and Hoffman's *Ghosts of Versailles*," and like the self-proclaimed "factotum" (general handyman) of Seville described in Rossini and Sterbini's *The Barber of Seville*, he might as well have been describing Beaumarchais himself. In fact, anyone who reads the biography of Beaumarchais must inevitably surmise that Figaro was intended as a projection of his creator, the man of humble birth mingling as an equal with the aristocracy. In fact, it is has been suggested that the name Figaro is a pun on the author's birth name – Caron – Figaro being *fils-Caron* (son of Caron).

Though we know Beaumarchais today primarily as the author of the Figaro plays, he would have been one of his era's most remarkable figures even if he had never written a single word. He was born January 24, 1732 under the name Pierre-Augustin Caron, the son of a Parisian watch-maker. Working as an apprentice to his father, he invented a new mechanism that vastly improved watches' accuracy. This brought him to the attention of the Court, where he again demonstrated his inventiveness by improving the pedal mechanisms of the harp.

His popularity at court led him to become involved in a number of diplomatic missions. Most significantly, he was instrumental in persuading the French government to back the American Revolution.

Beaumarchais' literary career began in 1767 with a play called *Eugenie*, a colossal flop. However, in 1775 his play with songs, *The Barber of Seville*, dubbed as a "comic opera," brought him instant acclaim. His battles over royalties for this work were instrumental in assuring authors the right to profit from their endeavors. He followed this with *The Marriage of Figaro*, which was first performed in 1784 after a prolonged battle with the censors, and an opera libretto *Tarare* (1787), with Mozart's rival Salieri.

Throughout his life, Beaumarchais had an incredible knack for being in the right place at the right time, combined with some amazing luck as well, which enabled him to escape the reign of terror which followed the French Revolution in the 1790's, and he died peacefully in bed in 1799.

While the characters in the Figaro plays sprang entirely from the imagination of Beaumarchais, they seem to have taken on a life of their own. Beaumarchais himself wrote three dramas about them, all of which were adapted into operas. Giovanni Paisiello wrote a highly successful adaptation of *The Barber of Seville* in 1782, though it was overshadowed by Giocchino Rossini's 1816 version, which has never been out of the standard repertoire since it first appeared. Apparently, no one else has dared comparison with Mozart by composing a second *The Marriage of Figaro*.

The popularity of both the play and Mozart's opera led Beaumarchais to write another sequel, *La Mere Coupable* (*The Guilty Mother*), which takes place several years after the others and depicts the lives of the out-of-wedlock children of both the Count and Countess. Generally regarded as vastly inferior to the other two plays, it had to wait till the twentieth century for an operatic adaptation, by the French composer Darius Milhaud. In 1991 William M. Hoffman and John Corigliano set out to compose a new version of this play but instead turned it into a play-within-a-play, in which the ghosts of several prominent figures of the French Revolutionary period gather to watch a play which Beaumarchais is in the process of creating to amuse Marie Antoinette. In this highly imaginative work, *The Ghosts of Versailles*, regarded by many as one of the landmark operas of the last quarter of the twentieth century, the ghosts actually interact with the characters in the drama.

In the same spirit which motivates television spinoff shows Jules Massenet's *Cherubin* (1905) describes the further adventures of Cherubino independent of the other characters. Other spinoffs include *The Divorce of Figaro* by the German composer Giselher, and *Rosina* by American composer Hiram Titus and librettist Barbara Field, a somewhat feminist take on the story in which the Countess runs away from the Count to live with an artist. And when Peter Schickele wanted to write an opera parody in the guise of his fictional alter-ego P.D.Q. Bach, he turned to Mozart's characters, the result being *The Abduction of Figaro* (the title itself combining

two Mozart works), which also included a character named "Donald Giovanni" and an older couple named Papageno and Mamageno.

The most notable descendent of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, however, was one which did not to use the same characters but sought rather to capture the spirit of the earlier opera with characters modeled on those of Mozart and Da Ponte. That opera is Richard Strauss and Hugo VonHoffmanstahl's *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911), which tells the story of a noblewoman neglected by her husband who takes solace in the arms of an adolescent page, who, like Cherubino, is a trouser role (a woman playing a male character). Through the character of the Marschallin, the two men created one of the greatest characters of twentieth-century opera, a woman rivaling Mozart's Countess in nobility, and in the quietly understated final scene of that opera, in which she graciously relinquishes her lover to a younger woman, Strauss achieves the nearly impossible task of creating music as sublime as the final scene of Mozart's opera.

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