5 : Staging Mozart's Lovers

A. Thesis

1. Class title 1 (*Figro* stills)
2. Main title

Today is entirely devoted to *The Marriage of Figaro* (*Le nozze di Figaro,* 1786) by **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** (1756–1791) in the 2006 production for The Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, by **Sir David McVicar**. The section you just heard comes at the very end of the opera; I'll show the complete scene in context later. You first saw a couple in black kissing and making up; these are the **Countess and Count Almaviva**, in whose chateau the action is set; their marriage of several year has been on the rocks. The other couple, the Marriage of the title, is the Count's manservant **Figaro** and **Susanna**, the Countess's maid. This is the evening of their wedding day, but their journey to the altar has not been simple.

3. Class spectrum in *Figaro*
4. — the same, with the two couples highlighted

You will have noticed many other people on the stage. In fact there are four couples celebrating a happy union. *Figaro*, which Mozart's librettist **Lorenzo Da Ponte** (1749–1838) adapted from a very recent play by **Beaumarchais**, contains 11 characters who between them span the complete social gamut from the Count to the gardener and his daughter. However, I have made the semi-arbitrary decision to focus only on the four main characters and, with the exception of this finale, omit any that include others. Those of you who know the plot of the opera may find some of my explanations over-simple, but there it is. I have divided this simplified account of the opera into three parts: **Thesis**, **Antithesis**, and **Synthesis**.

5. Section title A (Thesis)
6. Score and libretto

Figaro is not an opera that calls for updating or other production tricks. Not that you can't try them, but my purpose today is to show how a director works on the most basic level. Speaking for myself, I start with two things simultaneously: playing the score through several times on the piano (never listening to recordings, which might bias my own interpretation), and finding some way to engage with the libretto. I have done *Figaro* so often that there was a real danger of getting complacent, so the last time I did it, I made my own translation in verse.

7. Libretto opening

Here is the opening. Any director, like any playwright, needs to be sure that he is **telling the story** clearly from the start. Da Ponte, like Beaumarchais, starts with an intimate little scene between the couple. So I start with several questions: what does this tell us about each character individually, what does it say about their relationship, and what complications does it foreshadow in the plot? *The Marriage of Figaro*:

is it really going to be as simple as that? Whether from the libretto or the score, I also note that there are two different textures here: the **recitative**, which is the operatic equivalent of dialogue in a play, where the singers determine how they will deliver the lines and the harpsichord follows along, and the **numbers** (in this case duets), where the music determines the delivery, and the conductor is in charge. It is very rare in opera for there to be two back-to-back numbers for the same characters, but *Figaro* begins with two duets. Why? And how do they differ from one another? Bear these questions in mind as you watch.

8. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro,* Act I opening
9. Libretto opening (repeat)

Any ideas about the answers to these questions? You see something of the two character: Figaro, the practical handyman; Susanna the more romantic, concerned about her appearance. But something else. The first recitative does not add much; it merely shows her being evasive; it is not until the second recitative that she tells Figaro what's wrong. So that's the purpose of the second duet: to force Susanna into coming out with it. And that's the main difference between the two: in the first, they are singing side by side, as it were; he is too busy with man-stuff to pay her more than token attention. But in the second, they engage. He begins in a sing-song tune, "duh-music," as if talking to a child. But she, in using that same tune, turns all his assumptions on their head.

10. Text of Figaro's *scena*

Up to now, the recitative has all been ***secco*** or "dry"—that is, accompanied only by harpsichord. But when Figaro is left alone, we get a new texture, ***recitativo accompagnato,*** still delivered more or less like speech, but underscored with orchestral strings. This is a device more usually associated with heroic operas, but Mozart uses it in his comedies whenever a character is struggling with something serious. Yet when Figaro launches into his aria, he has a rather lighthearted little tune, much like the start of the second duet with Susanna. It is light on its feet, dancelike almost. No, not *almost*; it *is* a dance—specifically a **minuet**. The Opera Stage Director who listens to the music asks *why?* And the answer is surely that this is an upper-class dance; it belongs in a ballroom. But deliberately choosing this kind of music, Figaro is meeting the Count on his own ground; he is imitating his upper-class accent, as it were. His own music comes in the middle section, which is much less poised and a lot more violent. Let's see how Sir David responds to these elements.

11. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro,* "Se vuol ballare
12. — still from the above, with text

What do you think? Did he get it? I particularly like his use of the boots, which manage at the same time to symbolize Figaro's role as a servant, and his master's fancy footwork. One further point: even arias sung alone on the stage can be given greater cogency if the director gets the singer to imagine he is addressing someone else. In this case, the object is clear: Figaro is addressing the Count in his imgination. It will be less clear, but no less important, in some of the arias to follow.

B. Antithesis

13. Section title B (Antithesis)

The **Count** does not enter until the middle of Act One, when we see him immediately trying to press his amorous intentions upon Susanna. The **Countess** does not appear until the start of Act Two, with a short but deeply-felt plea to the God of Love to either restore her huband's love or let her die. *Figaro* has a complex plot which changes directions several times before the end. The Act Two Finale is one of the great scenes in all of opera, but it is entirely devoted to resolving (or further complicating) situations that are raised only in those first two acts, involving secondary characters and subplots, none of which will matter all that much by the time we get to the end of the opera. So, as far as the story of the two marriages is concerned, I might as well skip to the opening of Act Three, and play you a similar sequence from that. The curtain rises on the Count musing on the events of Act Two, but this won't mean much if you haven't seen it, so I'll skip to the entrance of Susanna.

14. Text of the Count/Susanna duet, with recits

The one constant element in all the changes of plot is that the women will lure the Count into a night-time appointment with Susanna, where the Countess can catch him red-handed. This is where Susanna has to convince him that she is as eager as he is. Her suggestion that *her Lordship's wish shall be her pleasure* triggers the duet between them. It is a tiny thing on paper: four rhymed couplets of direct exchange, followed by four more lines in which they continue their reactions **aside**. Now the handling of asides is virtually Opera Directing 101, especially as here where the couple must remain in close contact, and cannot simply walk to different corners of the stage. There is a further wrinkle: Mozart extends this duet to double its length by having the Count repeat his questions and Susanna get confused in her answers. The director needs to find an appropriate way to handle the repeats. Watch.

15. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro,* Act III Count/Susanna duet
16. — still from the above

I trust you saw how neatly Sir David handled these issues. But here is a telling detail you may not have considered: what is the furniture in the room, and why? There is a early piano at one side of the room, and some kind of machine on the table. It would be easy to play the Count as a tyrant of the old school, but these props show him as a man of the Enlightenment; he has already abolished the *jus primae noctis* after all. But even Enlightened Rulers can have human temptatiions.

17. The Countess' recitative

The plan, in its final form, is that the Countess herself will keep the tryst with her huband, but wearing Susanna's clothes so that in effect he will be committing adultery with his own wife. This is another huge aria, beginning with three pages of highly dramatic *recitativo accompagnato,* leading to a long aria in two tempi, slow then fast. Let's start with the recit, because it delves deep into the Countess's psyche in a quite unusual way. At first, she is kidding herself: there's nothing to this, she's merely changing clothes with a servant under cover of darkness… But then it strikes her: Heavens! Who am I fooling?

18. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro,* Act III Countess's recitative
19. The Countess' recitative (repeat of text slide)

Any good singer will find a way to make this personal, and it is the Stage Director's job to work with her, encourage her to see the situation as real, to tap into her own feelings, and so give the aria depth. There is an added problem here: somehow in the middle of all this anger and resentment, it must be clear that the Countess still loves her husband, and that repair is possible. Without it, there would be no final act.

20. Text of "Dove sono"

The question of the rebirth of past love is front and center in the remarkable aria that follows. I mentioned that this was an **aria in two tempi**, slow switching to fast. There are several other such arias in the opera, and in every instance **Da Ponte** has made it totally clear what he wanted by writing shorter lines for the fast section, in a different rhythm. But not here. This is an **elegy for lost love** in three stanzas, each in the same melancholy meter, which I have tried to reproduce in my English version here. Even when the Countess talks about the possibility of turning the clock back, it is in the **subjunctive**, "Ah, *if only* it might….." The three stanzas surely call for something like the three-part ABA structure that Mozart gives them, except that when the Countess return to the original tune, she also returns to the original verse—only now singing whole lines, not half-lines, in a single breath. The aria might end there, as a sad lament. But she breaks off. We have another "Who am I kidding" moment. Instead of ending on a sad "Ah, if only," she changes the thought to "My God, it *will. I* will. ***I*** will change this around myself, by my own actions. ***I*** will turn defeat into triumph. ***I*** will win back his love!" Listen for the way she stops being a victim and becomes a warrior, how she claws a victorious C major *allegro* out of an *adagio* elegy. It is utterly remarkable, and the outstanding example of why a Director in opera must be aware of musical form, and the implications of tempo, key, and orchestration

21. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro,* Act III, "Dove sono"
22. The Countess' aria (repeat of text slide)

Did you see what I mean? For my money, David McVicar made the Countess's change of direction a little too abrubt; we did not see her clawing her way into the new mood. But I did like the way he used the piano and the Count's desk as points of reference for devising the blocking of the scene.

23. Present, past, and future

I raised the question earlier that even solo arias can be sung to an imagined listener. In this case, the Countess seems to be talking to herself—but not the same self throughout. The recitative is about her situation **now**; I might try rehearsing it with her looking into a mirror. With the slow part of the aria, she shifts to the **past**, talking to that girl strolling beside her lover in the park. But with the tempo-change, she looks to the Rosina of the **future**, and that is a different matter entrely

C. Synthesis

24. Section title C (Synthesis)
25. Opera Blocking: pages from my binder for *The Magic Flute*

I mentioned **blocking**—who goes where when—which is basically the nuts-and-bolts of what a Stage Director does: the elementary mechanics that must work smoothly if anything else is to be possible. But the moves are only the start; there are also the questions of *why* someone moves, *how* they move, and *what it reveals* about their character. I will shortly be showing the last 13 minutes of the opera, which eventually involves a dozen people on the stage, so traffic-control is odbiously important. But there is one question to get out of the way first: the matter of **set design**, which very much falls under the Stage Director's responsibility, even if he is not the designer himself.

26. My set, Act III

Figaro is a difficult opera in that it has three acts set *indoors* followed by a fourth that takes place *outside* in the garden at night. It is notoriously difficult to make the fourth act seem like part of the same opera. My own solution, seen here, was to build a series of arches and doorways that could be filled in; the doorways at the side were permanent; the triple arch in the middle was on a revolve, so that it could either go back in perspective or jut forward. For the first act, which takes place in a kind of box room, the arch was brought forward and all the openings were filled in. For Act Two, in the Countess's bedroom, the arch went to the back, and one of the openings became a window with a view of the garden beyond. For the end of Act Three, which you see, the space was as large as we could make it and all the openings were unfilled, so the indoor space and the outer one were virtually continuous.

27. My set, Act IV

Since Act IV takes place by moonlight, I don't have a good production picture, just this one of Figaro eavesdropping from the wings, but here is my artist's impression. The arches at the back are spun round to make a kind of pergola enclosing an ornamental fountain, and all the surfaces are either hung with greenery or covered with trellises. Lots of niches and places to hide; the whole point of the *Figaro* finale is that there are lovers or would-be-lovers behind every corner!

28. Curtain call for David McVicar's production of *Le nozze di Figaro*

The David McVicar production had much the same photography problem as mine; it is simply too dark to see the whole set. You have to wait until the lights are up for the curtain call to see what he has done. He has not removed any of the surrounding architecture at all, but has dropped in a few tree trunks and other bits of greenery. Much of the original furniture still remains; for instance, you will see the Count hiding behind a folding screen that he moves from place to place. It is a daring solution, but once it is lit like a garden and people beging behaving like in a garden, you quickly accept it.

29. Synopsis of the end of Act IV.

I will play from the point in the Act IV finale when we are down to the main four characters. Here is a synopsis. There are three main sections: a scene between the Count and the supposed Susanna (really his wife), a scene between Figaro and the supposed Countess (really *his* wife), and the final showdown witnessed by everyone. The Count is shown up and he apologizes. How do we know that his apology is genuine, and he won't return to his tricks the next day? Largely because of Mozart. When the Count falls to his knees, *he gives him a musical phrase of extraordinary beauty*. The Countess's reply is even more beautiful, and the moment is extended into a hushed ensemble for everybody onstage. Perhaps everybody knows that the moment is fragile, but they have a choice: they can accept the moment for what it is or they can give up in despair. But Mozart is an optimist; they choose life.

30. Blocking meme

I'll leave it to you to decide how well Sir David McVicar handles the basic mechanics of blocking. But if there is any time afterwards, I'd like you to pick out anything he does that seems genuine directing, beyond simple traffic control.

31. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro,* Act IV ending

32. Class title 2 (modification of the opening)