Class 2: The Opera Aria

A. Some Figaro Arias

1. Title Slide 1 (Figaro and Susanna)

The slide shows a moment from **David McVicar's** production of *The Marriage of Figaro* by **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** (1756–91) at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. Susanna (**Miah Persson**) has just told Figaro (**Erwin Schrott**) that their master, Count Almaviva, has chosen the room next to his for their bedroom once they are married that evening, so that she will be readily available for his needs. The Countess rings for her, and she goes out, leaving Figaro alone. And he sings an aria. [In the first hour of this class, I am once more going over some old material, but I'm doing so from a different angle. We will go on to new stuff after the break.]

2. Questions about "Se vuol ballare"

Specifically, I want you to ask the following questions about this and every other aria. To whom is it sung? What is its action? What does it tell us about the character? It may be strange to ask the question "To whom is it sung?" when the singer is alone onstage—but all the same, the question has an answer. And the question "What is its action?" does not necessarily mean what the director has the character do literally, but how do things progress within his mind?

3. Text of "Se vuol ballare" (my translation)

I added one more question: What is its musical shape? This has a technical answer, and I know you are not all musicians. But if you look quickly at the text (in my own translation, like all of these), I can show you the outlines. The aria begins with a ***recitativo accompagnato***, or accompanied recitative: speech set to highly dramatic music played by the full orchestra, with the conductor, not the singer in control; this is the section highlighted in green. Then the aria itself begins. Figaro adopts an aristocratic minuet, as if mimicking the Count's own language. But in the middle (red highlight), he suddenly switches to a faster tempo—his own music. Then the minuet returns, and this is where my question about the action comes in: What has changed between the first and the second appearances of the minuet music?

4. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro*, Figaro's aria with recitative
5. — still from the above

So let's try to answer the three questions: To whom is it sung? What is its action? What does it tell us about the character? It is clearly sung to the Count, *in absentia*. The action, I would say, is that Figaro moves from trying to get a grip on the situation towards a determination to get the better of his master. And it shows the character to be a someone of strength and resource, a servant who does not meekly accept the status quo, and a dangerous man to cross.

6. List of arias in *The Marriage of Figaro*

Here is a list of all the arias in *Figaro*; I also gave it to you as a handout. Figaro's opening aria is one of those I have entered in **red**: Mozart's heavy artillery, an aria in two contrasting tempi, preceded by orchestrally-accompanied recitative, which can convey intense drama and emotion. Mozart uses them only for his leading characters in pivotal moments. I'll play another of them shortly.

However, look first at the column marked "type." I am mainly dividing them into solo arias [S], where the character is alone onstage, and action arias [A], where he or she is addressing another person. Next to it is a column marked "addressee." For the action arias, the answer is obvious, but there is an addressee for the solo arias also. It is an opera axiom that every aria is part of a dialogue with another person. It can be somebody imagined offstage; this is the case here, where Figaro imagines he is talking to the Count; it will also be the case in the Act III aria the Count will address to the offstage Figaro. Characters can address their reflection in an imagined mirror; they can speak to God; they can even buttonhole the audience. But they are always addressing someone.

7. Rinat Shaham as Cherubino

First, though, I want to look at three of the action arias, all involving the pageboy **Cherubino** (sung, as you know, by a mezzo-soprano, here played by **Rinat Shaham**). He is of an age when the hormones run wild, and he is in love with just about anybody wearing a skirt. What is particularly interesting here is that his two arias are both to virtually the same text. Here are my translations:

8. Cherubino's two arias (my translations)

In the first, he is pouring his heart out to Susanna. In the **Beaumarchais** play from which all this started, this section is just a five-line paragraph in prose. Mozart's librettist **Lorenzo da Ponte** (1749–1838) turned that into rhyming verse (and I followed his rhyme scheme exactly), but Mozart sets it in a headlong rush. The Act II aria, however, appears in the play as verse already, because Cherubino has written a little song (Beaumarchais even specifies the tune!) which he will perform before the Countess. This gives him cover, since he can always claim it is merely verse, and not personal. Let's listen:

9. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro*, Cherubino's Act I aria
10. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro*, Cherubino's Act II aria
11. — texts of both arias, as above

It's too complicated to explain just now, but part of the plot involves dressing Cherubino as a girl, and having *him* meet the Count in a moonlight tryst that evening. Anyway, this leads to another type of aria, a genuine **action aria**, accompanying specific stage business. It is not intended for deep internal reflection or revelation. Although the words are written in verse, they are not sung lyrically, but match the action more or less naturally. It is sung by Susanna to Cherubino, but in a good production it will also involve quite a bit of non-verbal interplay between the page and the Countess as well.

12. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro*, Susanna's dressing aria
13. Text of Countess' Act III *accompagnato*

I used the term "heavy artillery" for an aria like Figaro's, which begins with an accompanied recitative and then sets the aria itself in two contrasting tempi. But that is nothing to the major examples of the genre, which he reserves for his leading sopranos in their most serious moments (and only occasionally for the men). We are in Act III. The Countess has finally scrapped the Cherubino plan, and has instead sent Susanna to make an appointment with the Count for that night in the garden—an appointment that the Countess intends to keep herself, wearing her maid's clothes, so that the Count, while thinking he is seducing the pretty maid, will actually be making love to his own wife!

Beaumarchais gives the Countess just three lines of reflection about her part in this: "*My little plan is rather audacious…. Ah, M. le Comte, what have you done? And what am I doing at this moment?*" Da Ponte builds these up into a longer crisis of self-examination, in which the Countess tries to convince herself that it is all a harmless game, but then realizes the horror of her own humiliation. Mozart sets it an as extended *recitative accompagnato*; it is the first stage in the large *scena*—accompanied recitative followed by two-section aria—which will raise the Countess to truly heroic status.

14. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro*, "E Susanna non vien?"
15. Text of the aria

Here is what da Ponte gave Mozart for the aria. I have tried to stick closely to the tone, rhythm, and rhyme scheme of the original. It is gentle elegy over the loss of "those happy moments." But it is typical of the Countess that what really hurts are the memories of *happiness*; this is a sad aria wreathed in beauty. Anyway, it is three very similar stanzas; you might expect Mozart to bring in a little contrast for the happy memories of the middle one, then return to the elegaic mode at the end, making an ABA structure rather like a Handel aria. And this, in effect, is what he does.

16. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro*, "Dove sono?" (first part)
17. Text of the aria (repeat)

But wait—this is not the text of the third stanza that the Countess is singing in rounding off the ABA structure, but a return to the first, very much like Handel might have done. For Mozart has a very different use for the third stanza. There are many arias in the Mozart/daPonte operas which start slow and end fast, but for all of them, da Ponte moves to a distinctly different rhythm for the faster section. Here he doesn't; the Countess is simply going to accept that this is a situation she cannot change. But this Countess doesn't. The Italian tenses say something like "If only there *might have been* a way to change his heart…". But she interrupts herself, singing the same words, but changing them musically to "Dammit, there *will* be a way! I'll *make* this happen!" After clawing around with the idea for a moment, she launches into a radiant *allegro*. It is a song of triumph. She has taken ownership of both the aria, and of her fate!

18. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro*, "Dove sono?" (second part)
19. Still from Act IV

The Countess does win back her husband at the end. It takes many complications to reach that point, but the climax of the *inner* action is what happens here, exactly at the golden section of the opera.

B. A Verdi Scena

20. Section title (Ermonela Jaho in *La traviata*)

Mozart was not the only one to build operas around the solo *scena*, consisting of accompanied recitative followed by an aria in two tempi. Rossini and Donizetti did this too, and the *scena* became the major building block for **Giuseppe Verdi** (1813–1901). Here is one of the most famous of them, the ending of the opening act of *La traviata* (1853). The courtesan Violetta Valéry has just had a private moment with the hero Alfredo Germont, and now wonders whether she dare risk giving herself to true love. Like most Verdi scenes, the slow section (known as the cavatina) does not flow immediately into the fast one (the cabaletta), but it separated by another recitative.

21. Breakdown of Violetta's *scena*

Her mental journey takes a zigzag path and reaches an ambiguous ending. In the first recitative, she thinks of Alfredo's kindness and devotion, and wonders whether she dare let herself fall in love. In the slow cavatina, she allows herself to imagine this love coming true. Then in the second recitative, she pulls back from the brink, and decides to put all such ideas out of her head by plunging into the vortex of pleasure. But Alfredo's voice is heard in the distance (or perhaps in her mind), singing the refrain of their duet together. Violetta's only answer—for now—is to plunge even more wildly into the champagne world. But when the curtain opens on the second act, we see that he has indeed followed her first idea, left behind the social whirl of the city, and settled into a rented house in the country with Alfredo.

22. Verdi: *La traviata*, "È strano!"
23. Scene from Act II

We shall be looking in more detail at *La traviata* in next week's class.

C. Writing for Stravinsky

24. Section title C (Lullaby from *The Rake's Progress*)

When **Igor Stravinsky** (1882–1971) wrote *The Rake's Progress* in 1951 to a text by **WH Auden** (1907–73) and **Chester Kallman** (1921–75), he was deliberately channeling the conventions of older opera composers, including both Mozart and Verdi. And he ends his opening act with a *scena* for the leading soprano closely modeled on the aria that closes Act I of *La traviata*. **Anne Trulove**, the heroine of the opera, has not heard from her boyfriend **Tom Rakewell** since he came into a lot of money and left for London. So she determines to go and look for him, not knowing that her search will lead her eventually to the madhouse, Bedlam.

But I am not going to play it as simply another example. Instead, I want to use it to examine how we hear words in opera, and conversely what are good words for opera written in English. Here is the first

verse of Anne's *cavatina*. I have removed the titles. Take a piece of paper and jot down any words you were able to catch; it is short enough for me to play it twice. If you already know the aria, though, sit out on this game. The singer, incidentally, is **Miah Persson**, the Susanna in our *Figaro.*

25. Stravinsky: *The Rake's Progress*, first verse of Anne's cavatina
26. — the same, repeated
27. — still from the above

What, if anything, did you get of that? My guess is occasional words at best. Lyrical music (as opposed to recitative or rap) is a notoriously poor medium for conveying text, as it happens; the high voices (soprano and tenor) have the greatest difficulty. It is not a matter of their skill, simply how the voice works. Now let me play you the same thing, both verses this time, with the text in subtitles. It may seem a stupid exercise, but I am going to ask you to summarize what you think she said.

28. Stravinsky: *The Rake's Progress*, Anne's cavatina, with subtitles
29. — still from the above, with text

Now you have the titles, is this all crystal clear? My guess is no. You probably have the sense that she feels the night and the moon connect them, that she is praying for him, and perhaps that she hopes he is free from guilt. But even on paper, this text requires elucidation. For example, you to have hear all the last five lines of the first stanza before you understand them. The punchline, "it knows of loneliness," not only comes late, but it is still quite oblique when it does come. What Anne is essentially saying is, "I hope he's not as lonely as I am." For these verses to make sense, you have to figure out the syntax—but opera does not do syntax, although it is very good with isolated images and ideas.

30. Stravinsky, Auden, and Kallman

So is the Aduen/Kallman text for *The Rake's Progress* a bad libretto? On the contrary, I have always considered it one of the great English-language libretti of modern times. But working on this class has given me pause. If the object of a libretto is to communicate clear ideas to the audience, then it is a failure. But if the object is to stimulate the composer to communicate those ideas in his own medium, then it is a triumphant success. Stravinsky wanted an opera that would conjure the 18th-century of the engravings of **William Hogarth** (1697–1764), whose *Rake's Progress* series was his ultimate source. Auden and Kallman gave him a text that could almost have been written in that century, right down to the imagery, the language, the punctuation, and most certainly the inverted syntax. When setting their words, the composer was already halfway there.

31. Text of the Bedlam duet

Let me give you one more example. Here is the text of the last part of the duet that Anne sings with Tom when visiting him in Bedlam. Quite mad, he addresses her as Venus, and she plays along; these grim surroundings are the fields of Elysium. He tries to apologize, but she demurs: "*What should I forgive? Thy ravishing penitence | Blesses me, dear heart, and brightens all the past*." And he replies, "*Embrace me, Venus; I've come home at last.*" The four lines on the screen that follow mean simply "Let's treasure the fact that we're together here and now, and forget all the rest." But how much more beautifully!

32. Stravinsky: *The Rake's Progress*, madness music (audio)

Stravinsky has already introduced the theme of this duet in a some piquant phrses for woodwind after Tom goes mad. So the tune is already in our heads when he and Anne start singing together. And how marvelous, how ecstatic, *how eighteenth-century* it is!

33. Stravinsky: *The Rake's Progress*, "Rejoice, beloved!"

D. Words in English

34. Section title D (*Angels* poster)

So we have established that the primary purpose of a libretto is to inspire to composer to tell a dramatic story in a sequence of emotionally compelling scenes. The main way we do this is by how we shape the scenario; that will be the topic for next week. Right now, we are talking about the words. Not specifically about the opera shown here—that will be my final section—but writing words for opera in general.

35. Functions of words

Here is a prioritized list. The first three bullet points mainly concern the *composer*: inspiration, narrative thrust, and the provision of sounds that will flatter the singing voice, rather than strangle it. The next bullet concerns the *singer*: if he or she is to inhabit the role at all, there must be a text in which they can believe, and make their own. The last two bullets concern how the words come across to the *audience*. Total understandibility is probably the impossible dream, but at least the words should offer a series of images that will clue the audience into what they are hearing. My task now is to show how this might be done. We'll start with an abstract exercise.

36. Irina from *Three Sisters*

On the class website, you will find a text file with four short excerpts from existing texts: the novel *Wuthering Heights*, the plays *Three Sisters* and *The Lion in Winter*, and the screenplay for *Sunset Boulevard.* If you have time, you might like to choose one of them and try your hand at converting it into an opera text! EMail me the result by Wednesday night, and I will share it in next week's class. But let me first work through an earlier speech from *Three Sisters* as an example. It is spoken by the youngest and most optimistic of the sisters, Irina (in white in this photo). First, let's hear it from the play. This is an audition tape made, I think, by an undergraduate, **Jet Jameson**, applying for graduate school; I would accept her for her enthusiasm alone!

37. Chekhov: *Three Sisters*, Irina's Act I monologue
38. — text of the above

Here is the text of what you have just heard, written out as prose. Now the first thing you need to do is break it into separate sentences.

39. Text of the above, with sentences turned into paragraphs

You can see immediately that some of these sentences are very long. I always encourage librettists and composers to write out their texts in short lines like poetry, even if they do not intend to write rhymed verse like Da Ponte or Auden. For it can be shown that the most a listener can pick up from a sung text at a time is a phrase of around half a dozen words. The bits of each sentence shown in blue might as well not be there at all. And you can see that just reading the white bits makes a certain kind of sense, though not entirely; the essence of some of these lines comes only in the second halves, and in a few of them both the opening *and* one or more of the later phrases are important. So, still without making any actual cuts, let's lay this out entirely in short phrases.

40. Text of the above (first part), with phrases separated into separate lines

It's now rather longer on the page, so we'll just concentrate on the first part from here on out. It makes more obvious sense as a sequence of images, but there are still a couple of lines that are over-long; we can fix these later.

41. The above, with less singable phrases marked

Here is the same thing, but this time I have marked phrases that have too many short unaccented "helper" words. Such things are important for clear prose, but they do not carry sound well, and they might actually get in the way of how text works in opera: as a sequence of images, rather than a logic of ideas connected by syntax. If I were going to work on this—and I don't have time to take it beyond this one further stage—these are where I would think of getting out my scissors, or perhaps my pen.

42. Possible aria text of the above

Here is a first stab; I could obviously refine it further, given time. You will see that I have rewritten the opening somewhat, to start with a stronger statement, "I saw it this morning." I have emphasized the idea of work even more: "It's work! We were put here to work!" "Without work…" "Without work…." Several of the verbs have been changed to stronger tenses. And that long sentence from "Oh how good it would be" through to "railroad engineer" has been rewritten as a series of separate images, with almost no syntactical connection.

E. Transforming Forster

43. Section title E (*Angels* at Peabody)

For the rest of the hour, I want to speak from experience, in reference to my own text for *Where Angels Fear to Tread* by **Mark Lanz Weiser**, which premiered at Peabody in 1999. The poster I showed you before was the professional premiere at Opera San Jose in 2015. It was a more sumptuous production, though probably no better sung. But union rules prevented us making a videotape, so I have to show the original from Peabody, technically less accomplished though musically fine.

44. Harriet's travels (Forster, chapter 6)

I hope you have read the three excerpts I sent out. In case you haven't, here is the shortest of them. It describes Harriet, the provincial, termagant, and thoroughly xenophobic sister of the hero, Philip Herriton, who has come to the small Italian town of Monteriano (San Gimigniano) to claim the baby that their deceased sister-in-law Lilia had with a local man, Gino Carella. We have brought her onstage, and needed to give a character sketch very quickly. What better than a short, and frankly comic, aria? So I plundered this paragraph of Forster's.

45. Text of Harriet's aria.

What I decided on was to take the most absurd line in the whole paragraph, "Foreigners are a filthy nation," and use variants of it as the refrain to the three stanzas of the aria; it also occurs once before the aria begins. For the rest, it was merely a matter of listing the various indignities in the appropriate places. A sequence of images linked by an overriding attitude, that is all a text like this requires. The marvelous singing actress is **Susan Minsavage**.

46. Weiser/Brunyate: *Where Angels Fear to Tread* 1/4, Harriet's aria
47. — still from the above

But writing a more serious aria is a more difficult proposition. I wanted one for the heroine, Caroline Abbott, as she explains to Philip why she encouraged Lilia to marry Gino in the first place, and also to describe her meeting with him earlier that day. So I took ideas from the two other excerpts I sent you, which occur 40 pages apart in the novel, and put them together. There is no room for cleverness in a moment like this. It is a matter of breaking it down into short phrases of no more than a line long, and connecting them in a way that will seem perfectly natural. But it also has an emotional purpose, which I think you will hear in Mark Weiser's music: to show the romantic aura both of Gino and that setting, to suggest that Caroline herself is half in love with the Italian, and that Philip is beginning to fall in love with her. I'll put the text on the website, but you'll get it all from the subtitles. The singers are **Taylor Armstrong** and **Anne Jennifer Nash**.

If time, I will continue the scene into the aria for Philip and the short duet that follows. It is interrupted by the entrance of Harriet, who suddenly turns on the lights in the twilit room.

48. Weiser/Brunyate: *Where Angels Fear to Tread* 2/1, Caroline's aria
49. Weiser/Brunyate: *Where Angels Fear to Tread* 2/1, continuation of the above
50. Closing title