Class 4 : Twilight of an Era

A. The Revolution in Action

1. Title 1 (*Figaro* at Covent Garden)

The photo shows **David McVicar's** 2006 Covent Garden production of *Le nozze di Figaro* (The Marriage of Figaro) by **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** (1756–91), an opera that is invariably cited as a key social document of its turbulent time. The set design says it all: on one side of the stage, the elegant windows of a nobleman's palace; but occupying the bulk of it, the rough jumble of the servants' quarters, pulsing with rude energy. Written in 1786, only three years before the French Revolution, *Figaro* would seem to deal directly with the social upheavals that were soon to follow; I have certainly directed it that way myself. Yet this reading should be qualified. We must not forget that both Mozart's opera and the play on which it was based were performed in royal theaters under royal patronage. Moreover, so far from being an exception, *Figaro* fits a pattern in Mozart's work that deals not so much with revolution as with the Enlightenment values that his patrons saw themselves as embodying.

2. Mozart's Vienna operas

Here are five of the operas that Mozart wrote during his years in Vienna. We have already mentioned the first and last of them, *The Abduction from the Seraglio* (1782) and *La clemenza di Tito* (1791), as examples of an authoritarian ruler showing the Enlightenment quality of clemency. In *The Magic Flute* (1791), which we'll visit briefly toward the end of this class, humanitarian principles win out over authoritarian ones. And in both *Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*, the main subjects of today's class, any threats to the social order are addressed before the opera ends.

3. Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais (1732–99)

The author of the original play, *La folle journée* (the crazy day), or *Le mariage de Figaro*, was **Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais** (1732–99). Wikipedia gives his occupation as "watchmaker, inventor, playwright, musician, diplomat, spy, publisher, horticulturist, arms dealer, satirist, financier, and revolutionary (both French and American)." It goes on to say: "*Born a Parisian watchmaker's son, Beaumarchais rose in French society and became influential in the court of Louis XV as an inventor and music teacher. He made a number of important business and social contacts, played various roles as a diplomat and spy, and had earned a considerable fortune before a series of costly court battles jeopardized his reputation. Beaumarchais lobbied the French government on behalf of the American rebels during the American War of Independence. Beaumarchais oversaw covert aid from the French and Spanish governments to supply arms and financial assistance to the rebels in the years before France's formal entry into the war in 1778*." It calls him a **polymath**, which is true, but you could equally easily say **entrepreneur**. Beaumarchais is the perfect example of a man who rose through the middle classes

through talent alone, and who managed—albeit sometimes with difficulty—to prosper in both Royalist and Revolutionary environments. A Figaro himself, if you will.

4. *Le mariage de Figaro*

Beaumarchais probably wrote the play in 1780 or 1781. It was accepted by the *Comédie Française*, but **King Louis XVI** was so shocked at a private reading that he forbade its performance. One of the things that shocked him was the long monologue by the valet **Figaro** in the final act. Believing that his master, **Count Almaviva**, has seduced his wife on their bridal night, Figaro first rails against women in general, and then addresses the Count directly across the footlights. Watch…

5. Beaumarchais: *Le mariage*, Figaro's Act V monolog
6. — text of the above

And this is only a small part of the edited and censored version! For Beaumarchais did eventually succeed in getting his play performed. He cut out the more obviously political references and switched the setting from France to Spain. This won him the opportunity of a private performance at court. While the King was still doubtful, most of the court, including his own brother, were delighted, and the King was persuaded to give his permission. In its first run in 1784, the play broke all box office records. Looking back with 20/20 hindsight, **Napoleon** later said that *Le mariage de Figaro* was "the revolution already put into action." But at the time, it could at least pretend to be cementing aristocratic values, not knocking them down.

7. Lorenzo da Ponte, Mozart, and Emperor Joseph II

Emperor Joseph II of Austria also banned the play, for much the same reasons that Louis XVI did. But Mozart, who was interested in the play precisey because it was so edgy, obtained the services of **Lorenzo da Ponte** (1749–1838) as his librettist. Da Ponte was as colorful a character as Beaumarchais, and he was similarly connected at court. Somehow he persuaded the Emperor that an opera in Italian was quite a different animal from a play in German, and promised that he and Mozart would cut all the political bits. So the Emperor gave his approval. And true enough, Da Ponte did cut out the offending sections. Figaro's Act IV aria concentrates entirely on his denunciation of womankind, and omits any direct attack on the nobility. But Da Ponte had already given him something of the kind earlier…

8. Text of "Se vuol ballare"

In the first act, after **Susanna** has told **Figaro** about the Count's hopes to reinstate the *jus primae noctis* to sleep with her on her bridal night, Figaro addresses him *in absentia*, much as Beaumarchai's character had done, though less explicitly. But music speaks in its own language. Look at this text. When Figaro tells the imaginary Count that he will teach him to dance, the music he sings is an aristocratic minuet; it is the musical equivalent of imitating his upper-class accent. But when we get to the middle section, the part I have indented in red, his music changes to something much more plebeian and dangerous. I think of it as the wooden *sabots* of the Revolution trampling on the satin slippers of the old order. But all in metaphor, musical metaphor at that; nothing for the Emperor to object to at all.

9. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro* I, "Se vuol ballare"
10. Gerald Finley as Count Almaviva and Erwin Schrott as Figaro

Mozart is constantly using musical style to make social points; we'll see more of it in *Don Giovanni*. Here is a more complex example from the Act II finale of *Figaro*. The finale as a whole is a marvelous 21-minute sequence in which one *contretemps* is apparently resolved, only to be succeeded by another as someone else walks into the room with a new problem. I am going to start with the first such apparent resolution. **The Count**, having failed to find a lover hidden in his wife's closet, is offering a grudging apology. Then Figaro bursts in, eager to get the marriage ceremony started; his music is all energy and bustle, similar to the middle section of the aria we have just heard. But the Count has another investigation to pursue. He has received an anonymous letter accusing the **Countess** of adultery—this is one of the minor plot points that over-complicate the action of the opera, but never mind. So he puts the brakes on Figaro's eager music and to another aristocratic dance meter, this time a *gavotte*, he asks Figaro if he knows about the letter. Figaro does not know that the women have already owned to it as a practical joke. He denies everything and tries to get back to his own tempo, but the Count still has control. It is only by taking over the tune for himself, much as he had done with the *minuet* in the other aria, that he is able to take control once again, and the scene ends in a wonderfully poised quartet. Upon which, the gardener **Antonio** bursts in with more lower-class energy, and the cycle begins again.

11. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro* II, Figaro's entrance in the finale
12. Mozart's Vienna operas (as before, but with class distinctions)

I don't have time to continue with this particular section, but note what has happened. A room containing two aristocrats (the Count and Countess) and two upper indoor servants (Figaro and Susanna) is now invaded by an outdoor servant with mud on his boots. *Figaro* contains a wider range of social classes than anything else in the 18th century or most of the 19th.

13. Character spectrum in *Le nozze di Figaro*

Here is the table I showed before, now with one addition: the three columns showing the proportion of time devoted to the three social classes, upper, middle, and lower. All the characters in *La clemenza di Tito* are aristocrats, as befits a tragedy. But the comedies all contain ordinary characters alongside the exalted ones. What is unusual about *Figaro* is that it spans the gamut. Not only are there aristocrats and servants, but also a professional middle-class as represented by **Doctor Bartolo**. Furthermore, the servant class is not a single layer. The gardener Antonio is on a different level from Figaro who, like his creator, is upwardly mobile and likely to survive on his own wits come the Revolution. And the page **Cherubino**, though presumably also an aristocrat, is still a minor and therefore occupying a curiously classless middle-ground. [I'll explain later the question marks I have put in the middle-class column for *Don Giovanni* and *The Magic Flute*.]

14. Philip Langridge, Gerald Finley, and Miah Persson in the Act I trio

Let's go back to Act I, with a scene that really puts these class ambiguities into relief. We are in the former box room which the Count has assigned to Susanna so that he can have easy access to her. And

indeed he has just been making use of that access, by bursting in just as Cherubino is pouring out his adolescent heart to her. The page hides behind the chair. But then when the music master, **Don Basilio**, is heard approaching, it is the Count's turn to hide behind the chair, and Cherubino now hides in it. Socially, Basilio occupies a curious middle-ground: he is professionally qualified and furthermore (like Da Ponte) has taken holy orders, but he works in the palace so in that regard he is a servant. And there is one other curious social indicator in the scene. You will hear the Count say that he just happened to be visiting Antonio's daughter **Barbarina** when he found Cherubino hiding under the table in her room. A Count "just happening" to call on the gardener's daughter—obviously his sexual interests extend beyond Susanna.

15. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro* I, terzetto
16. Graciela Araya as Marcellina and Jonathan Veira as Dr. Bartolo

Think of the range of characters present, or mentioned in this scene. From the top down, we have: the **Count**, an aristocrat; **Cherubino**, also of gentle birth, but as yet a minor; Basilio, a professional man in service; **Susanna**, an upper servant; and Barbarina, the gardener's daughter. Just before that scene, we would have met these two characters, **Doctor Bartolo**—a professional man not dependent on the palace, and thus the epitome of middle-class—and **Marcellina**, whose social status is rather ambiguous; we will later learn that they are Figaro's parents. Marcellina comes into the story through another one of those plot complications that Beaumarchais could not help throwing in: apparently she lent money to Figaro, on condition that he must marry her if he cannot pay her back. And at the end of the Act II finale, after the gardener has left, the two of them plus Basilio—the three representatives of the middle class—burst into the room to petition the Count to force Figaro to honor his contract. But the scene does not break entirely along social lines. In what is essentially a battle between Marcellina and Figaro, the Count sides with the middle-class group, while the Countess aligns herself with Figaro and Susanna.

17. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro* III, septet of the finale
18. Text of the Count's aria

In Act III, the Count hears Marcellina's case and, now convinced that Figaro and Susanna are plotting against him, uses a corrupt judge, **Don Curzio**, to decide the case in her favor. [Beaumarchais first came to public attention, incidentally, through his campaign against a corrupt judge who had decided against him in a patent dispute about a watch escapement mechanism that he had invented, but which was stolen by a rival.] Before this, though, he has an aria that is placed at exactly the same point in the second half that Figaro's "Se vuol ballare" had in the first. And like Figaro, he directly addresses his absent rival. His text, though, is a blatant misuse of class privilege; essentially, he is saying, "You can't have her because you're a servant and I'm the Count!"

19. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro* III, the Count's aria
20. The Act III sextet

But the scene does not turn out in the way the Count had intended, because the truth comes out about Figaro's parentage, ending the resultant sextet with some of the most radiant music in the entire opera.

21. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro* III, sextet
22. Dorothea Röschmann as the Countess and Gerald Finley as Count Almaviva

I cannot end without playing the sublime ending. The Count has gone for what he thinks is a romantic assignation with Susanna in the garden (though in this production played indoors). But he doesn't know that she and the Countess have changed clothes, so he has been making love to his own wife! And when he sees Figaro apparently putting the moves on the Countess, he goes berserk. But of course the egg is on his face at the end. All the cast is onstage, with the full range of classes, and Mozart could have played this for its social embarrassment. But he doesn't. Instead, he gives the Count an apology so beautiful that it can only be sincere. Beaumarchais' play may have been a politico-social document, but before anything else, Mozart's opera is about the human heart.

In the five or six times I have directed the opera, I have always had the Count fall to his knees at this point; most directors do. But not Sir David McVicar. He does have him kneel, but later—and that makes all the difference.

23. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro* IV, final scene
24. Main title 2 (Figaro aloft)

B. A Force of Anarchy

25. Main title 3 (Francisco d'Andrade as Don Giovanni, 1912)

John Bokina, the author of the book *Opera and Politics* that has been such a stimulus in preparing this course (I have put on out bibliography), includes a chapter on Mozart, as you'd expect. But Bokina's choice for Mozart's most political opera is not *Figaro*, as you'd expect, but its immediate successor, *Don Giovanni*. I am inclined to agree, though the line I am taking is more mine than his.

26. Text of "Fin ch'han dal vino"

Here is a synopsis of **Don Giovanni's** most ebullient aria, "Fin ch'han dal vino," often called the Champagne Aria because of its fizz. He is telling his servant and chronicler **Leporello** to prepare a party where anything goes, so that he may add to the list of seductions that Leporello gleefully maintains. The swashbuckling figure in both this and the previous slide is the early 20th-centuy Spanish baritone **Francisco d'Andrade**. But let me play it for you in a decidely anti-traditional production from Finland, where the Don is not taking champagne but coke. It is totally over the top!

27. Mozart: *Don Giovanni*, "Fin ch'han dal vino" (Finland 2021)
28. The social spectrum in *Don Giovanni*

I don't know that I could take an entire production like that, but they have got something absolutely right. Don Giovanni's role in the opera is as a force of anarchy, and his idea of mixing up the guests, mixing the drinks, mixing the dances, is the perfect expression of what he is out to do. If you draw up a

social chart like we had for *Figaro*, you don't get a neat series of steps. The **Commendatore**, whom the Don kills in the first scene and who arrives to summon him to Hell in the last, is in the top left, together with his daughter **Donna Anna** and her fiancé **Don Ottavio**. I have put **Donna Elvira** slightly lower because it is not clear whether she too is aristocracy or merely an independent *bourgeoise*. The peasant girl **Zerlina** and her blockish bridgroom **Masetto** are equally clearly at bottom right. And in between are **Don Giovanni** and **Leporello**, not as a middle class—the one is an aristocrat, the other a servant—but because they refuse to abide by the conventions, and their refusal threatens the entire social system. *Don Giovanni* is most often viewed in moral terms, as a challenge to sexual convention, or religious ones, as challenging the powers of Heaven or Hell, but it works equally well as a challenge to society.

29. Rod Gilfry as Don Giovanni and Isabel Rey as Zerlina (Zurich 2001)

Of the three women in the opera, **Donna Elvira** was last week's conquest, in Burgos; she has now followed Giovanni to Seville, either for revenge or because she wants more. **Donna Anna** may or may not have been last night's; she swears not, but behaves otherwise. And the peasant girl **Zerlina** is on the menu for today; this is the only seduction we actually get to watch onstage. Note the Don's technique: he starts by flattering her, persuading her that her beauty makes her one of Nature's aristocrats. But when he sings, it is absolutely in her musical language, a tune so utterly simple, so devoid of baroque flourishes, it is no wonder it has become the most famous number in the score. I am showing this 2001 video largely because of its wonderful use of silence before the singing even begins. The singers are **Rod Gilfry** and **Isabel Rey**.

30. Mozart: *Don Giovanni*, "La ci darem la mano" (Zurich 2001)
31. The ballroom scene

Act One of the opera ends with that ball that we heard Leporello being told to arrange. And it is truly a mixture of all the classes: Zerlina, Masetto, and their peasant friends, together with Donna Anna, Donna Elvira, and Don Ottavio. Don Giovanni greets them with a toast, "Viva la libertà"; the liberty he is talking about is less a revolutionary slogan than the motto of social anarchy. And the various dances he was talking about, he not only provides them, but has three different bands play them all at the same time! But the women are on his trail and won't give up so easily. I am back at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden for this one, and for the rest of the class. The production is by **Francesca Zambello**. **Simon Keenlyside** is in the title role; for the rest, check your handouts.

32. Mozart: *Don Giovanni*, Ballroom scene (London 2008)
33. The Commendatore scene

The first act of *Don Giovanni* is all about the Don's challenge to the social order, and the inability of that order to bring him down. For that, you need a higher power. This is found in the statue of the Commendatore, which Giovanni invites to supper as a joke. But when the statue actually appears, the joke is over, and Giovanni rises to a stature he has not before attained during the entire opera.

34. Mozart: *Don Giovanni*, Commendatore scene (London 2008)
35. — still from the above

C. The Brotherhood of Mankind

36. Main title 4 (Sarastro, Royal Opera House, 2020)

Let's return to *The Magic Flute* as a brief postscript. The scene you see here, and the clip I am about to play, shows the opening of Act II in Sir David McVicar's marvelous production at Covent Garden. What sort of society is being presented here?

37. Mozart: *Die Zauberflöte*, opening of Act II (London 2020)
38. The opening of Act II at Covent Garden (repeat of title)

What sort of society is being presented here? The answer, of course, is the Masonic Brotherhood, of which both Mozart and his librettist **Emanuel Schikaneder** (1751–1812) were members. Sarastro is its presiding authority, but not a King. This is much more like a Republic, with an elected President, and consent of the Senate being required for all important decisions. What I especially like about McVicar's production is that he has made each member of the chorus an individual, building up a very believable picture of an Enlightenment society.

39. Sabine Devielhe as Queen of Night

Sarastro's nemesis, though, is an absolute ruler, striking fear among her followers. This is the Queen of Night. I am going to play the scene from the Act II finale where she attempts to attack Sarastro's temple and is overthrown by the power of Light. Before that, though, comes the delightful duet in which the bird-catcher Papageno (Schikaneder's role) meets the girl of his dreams, Papagena, and makes plans for raising a family. The elevated characters in *The Magic Flute* may have more arias, but it is the ordinary guy who gets the best tunes!

40. Mozart: *Die Zauberflöte*, Papagena duet
41. Mozart: *Die Zauberflöte*, Defeat of the Night (London 2020)
42. Main title 5 (London 2020)