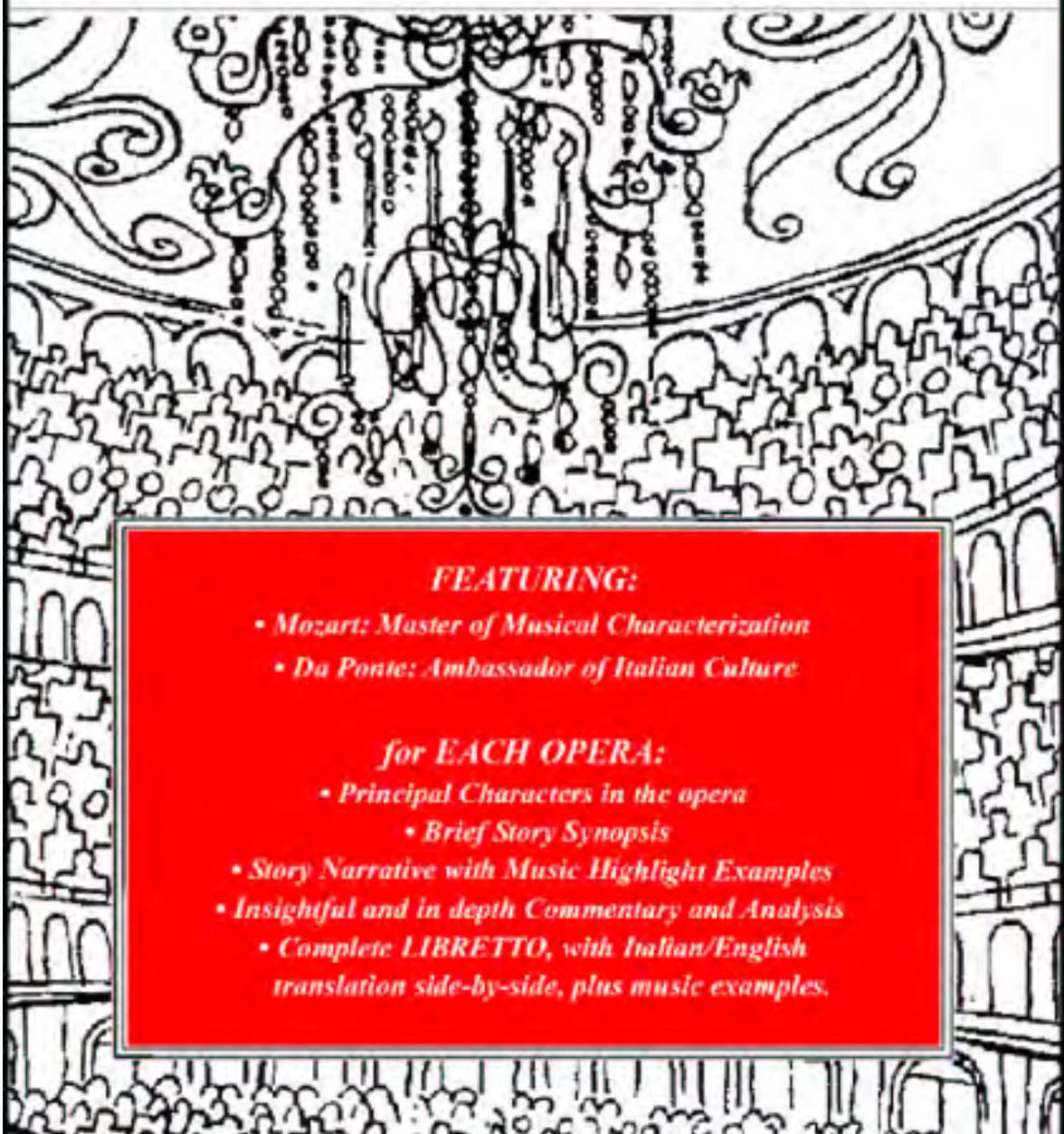

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MOZART'S DA PONTE OPERAS:

The Marriage of Figaro, Don Giovanni, Così fan tutte

by Burton D. Fisher



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OPERA CLASSICS LIBRARY™ SERIES

***Mozart's Da Ponte Operas:
The Marriage of Figaro, Don Giovanni, Così fan tutte***

Written and edited by Burton D. Fisher
Principal lecturer, *Opera Journeys Lecture Series*

Opera Journeys™ Publishing / Miami, Florida

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a Prelude to OPERA CLASSICS LIBRARY's

Mozart's Da Ponte Operas:

The Marriage of Figaro, Don Giovanni, Così fan tutte

The partnership of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Lorenzo da Ponte, composer and librettist respectively for *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte*, was one of the most extraordinary collaborations in the history of opera: da Ponte's shrewdly contrived librettos possess graceful, witty and songlike poetry, as well as depict real and complex humanity: the inspiration for some of Mozart's most extraordinary and insightful musical portrayals that are enormously faithful to character and situation.

The "da Ponte trilogy" satirically deals with despicable aspects of human character; the transformation of those peccadilloes represented the very focus of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and Age of Reason. *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* deal with aristocratic men — Count Almaviva and Giovanni — who can be perceived by our standards as criminals: unstable and wildly libidinous men whose actions transcend moral law. Similarly, in *Così fan tutte*, the actions of the women can be perceived as functioning beyond moral law.

An underlying theme of all three operas is seduction, a passion which ends in hapless failure; it is a subtle forecast of the demise of the ancien régime, the end of the old world order, and the beginning of Enlightenment reason.

OPERA CLASSICS LIBRARY explores the greatness and magic of the Mozart/Da Ponte operas. The text contains a short biographical profile of Mozart, *Mozart: Master of Musical Characterization*; likewise, there is a biographical profile of da Ponte, *Lorenzo da Ponte: Ambassador of Italian Culture*.

The *Commentary and Analysis* for each opera deals with the opera's genesis, its premiere and performance history, and insightful story and character analysis.

For each opera, the text also includes a *Brief Story Synopsis*, *Principal Characters* and a *Story Narrative with Music Highlight Examples*, the latter containing original music transcriptions that are interspersed appropriately within the story's dramatic exposition. In addition, the text includes a *Dictionary of Opera and Musical Terms*.

The complete *Libretto* for each opera was newly translated by the Opera Journeys staff with specific emphasis on retaining a literal translation, but also with the objective of providing a faithful translation in modern and contemporary English; in this way, the substance of the drama becomes more intelligible. To enhance educational and study objectives, the *Libretto* also contains music highlight examples interspersed within the drama.

Opera is a compelling theatrical experience because the art form is the sum of many artistic expressions: theatrical drama, music, scenery, poetry, dance, acting and gesture. In opera, it is the composer who is the dramatist, using the emotive power of his music to express and articulate intense, human conflicts. Words evoke thought, but music provokes feelings: opera's sublime fusion of words, music and all the theatrical arts provides powerful theater; an impact on one's sensibilities that can reach into the very depths of the human soul.

The Mozart/da Ponte operas are glorious operatic treasures, masterpieces of the lyric theater that represent a tribute to the art form as well as to their ingenious composer and librettist.

Burton D. Fisher
Author and Editor

OPERA CLASSICS LIBRARY SERIES

***Mozart:
Master of Musical Characterization***

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart — 1756 to 1791 — was born in Salzburg, Austria. His lifespan was brief, but his musical achievements were phenomenal and monumental, establishing him as one of the most important and inspired composers in Western history: music seemed to gush forth from his soul like fresh water from a spring. With his early death at the age of thirty-five, one can only dream of the musical treasures that might have materialized from his music pen.

Along with such masters as Johann Sebastian Bach and Ludwig van Beethoven, Mozart is one of those three “immortals” of classical music. Superlatives about Mozart are inexhaustible: Tchaikovsky called him “the music Christ”; Haydn, a contemporary who revered and idolized him, claimed he was the best composer he ever knew; Schubert wept over “the impressions of a brighter and better life he had imprinted on our souls”; Schumann wrote that there were some things in the world about which nothing could be said: much of Shakespeare, pages of Beethoven, and Mozart’s last symphony, the forty-first.

Richard Wagner, who exalted the power of the orchestra in his music dramas, assessed Mozart’s symphonies: “He seemed to breathe into his instruments the passionate tones of the human voice ... and thus raised the capacity of orchestral music for expressing the emotions to a height where it could represent the whole unsatisfied yearning of the heart.”

Although Mozart’s career was short, his musical output was tremendous by any standard: among his more than 600 works are forty-one symphonies, twenty-seven piano concertos, more than thirty string quartets, many acclaimed quintets, world-famous violin and flute concertos, momentous piano and violin sonatas, and, of course, a substantial legacy of sensational operas.

Mozart’s father, Leopold, an eminent musician and composer in his own right, became the teacher and inspiration to his exceptionally talented and incredibly gifted prodigy child. The young Mozart quickly demonstrated a thorough command of the technical resources of musical composition: at age three he was able to play tunes he heard on the harpsichord; at age four he began composing his own music; at age six he gave his first public concert; by age twelve he had written ten symphonies, a cantata, and an opera; and at age thirteen he toured Italy, where in Rome, he astonished the music world by writing out the full score of a complex religious composition after one hearing.

Mozart’s musical style and the late eighteenth-century Classical era are virtually synonymous: their goal was to conform to specific standards and forms, to be succinct, clear, and well balanced, but at the same time, develop musical ideas to a point of emotionally satisfying fullness. As that quintessential Classicist, Mozart’s music has become universally extolled, an outpouring of memorable graceful melody combined with formal, contrapuntal ingenuity.

Mozart said: “Opera to me comes before everything else.” He composed operas in all of the existing genres and traditions: the Italian opera seria and opera buffa, and the German singspiel. During Mozart’s time, the Italians set the international standards for opera: Italian was the universal language of music and opera, and Italian opera was what Mozart’s Austrian audiences and most of the rest of Europe wanted most. Therefore, even though Mozart was an Austrian, his country part of the German Holy Roman Empire, most of his operas were written in Italian.

Opera seria defines the style of serious Italian operas in which subjects and themes dealt primarily with mythology, history, and Greek tragedy. In this genre, the music drama usually

portrayed an heroic or tragic conflict typically involving a moral dilemma, such as love vs. duty, and usually resolved happily with due reward for rectitude, loyalty, and unselfishness. Mozart's most renowned opere serie are *Idomeneo* (1781), and his last opera, *La Clemenza di Tito* ("The Clemency of Titus") (1791), the latter commissioned to celebrate the coronation in Prague of the Emperor Leopold II as King of Bohemia.

Opera buffa had its roots in the Italian commedia dell'arte, a theatrical convention that evolved during the Renaissance when strolling street players used satire, irony, and parody to ridicule every aspect of their society and its institutions; they characterized humorous or hypocritical situations involving cunning servants, scheming doctors, and duped masters.

Most of the characters in Beaumarchais' original "Figaro trilogy," the literary basis for Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* and Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, have antecedents in the commedia dell'arte: Figaro is loosely based on the commedia dell'arte character of Harlequin, an athletic, graceful, cunning valet and ladies' man who claimed noble birth. Likewise, Dr. Bartolo is inspired by the character Pantelone, a character that prides himself on being an expert on many subjects, but ultimately becomes a victim of his arrogance and vanity. The Marcellina character in *Marriage* is the only character not based on commedia dell'arte: she is that old rapacious spinster inspired by characters from classic Roman comedies.

Opera buffa had its first popular incarnation in Giovanni Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona* (1733) ("The Maid as Mistress), a work with only three characters, but a quintessential model of the genre, in which lively and catchy tunes underscore the antics of a servant tricking an old bachelor into marriage.

Art shapes and reflects its times. During the late eighteenth century, opera buffa provided a convenient theatrical vehicle in which the ideals of democracy could be expressed in art: opera buffa became an operatic incarnation of political populism. In the opera seria, the aristocracy identified, and even became flattered by its pompous exalted personalities, gods, and heroes, but opera buffa's satire and humor provided the wherewithal to examine social injustices and the frustrations of society's lower classes.

Opera buffa became synonymous with the spirit of the Enlightenment and the Classical era of music, and was enthusiastically championed by such renowned progressives as Rousseau; its music was intrinsically more natural, and its melodies were more elegant and emotionally restrained.

Mozart delighted in portraying themes dealing with ideas inspired by the Enlightenment: he lived and composed during the social upheavals and ideological transitions of the late eighteenth century that would lead to the French Revolution and the demise of the ancien régime. In particular, *The Marriage of Figaro*, an opera buffa, contains all of the era's social and political overtones: it portrays servants who are cleverer than their selfish, unscrupulous, and arrogant masters. Napoleon would later conclude that *Marriage*, both the Mozart and source Beaumarchais play, represented the "Revolution in action."

Mozart's opere buffe range from his youthful works, *La Finta Semplici* (1768) and *La Finta Giardiniera* (1775), to his monumental opera buffa classics that he composed with the renowned librettist, Lorenzo da Ponte: *The Marriage of Figaro* ("Le Nozze di Figaro") (1786) described by both composer and librettist as a "commedia per musica" ("comedy with music"); *Don Giovanni*, (1787), technically an opera buffa but designated a "dramma giocoso" ("humorous drama" or "playful play"), essentially a combination of both the opera buffa and opera seria genres; and *Così fan tutte* (1789) ("Thus do all women behave"), another blend of the opera seria with the opera buffa for which nothing could be more praiseful than the

musicologist William Mann's conclusion that *Così fan tutte* contains "the most captivating music ever composed."

Mozart also composed operas in the German singspiel genre, a style very similar to Italian opera buffa: generally comic opera containing spoken dialogue instead of accompanied recitative. Mozart's most popular German singspiel operas are: *Die Zauberflöte* (1791) ("The Magic Flute") and *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (1782) ("The Abduction from the Seraglio")

Mozart composed over 18 operas, among them: *Bastien and Bastienne* (1768); *La Finta Semplice* (1768); *Mitridate, Rè di Ponto* (1770); *Ascanio in Alba* (1771); *Il Sogno di Scipione* (1772); *Lucio Silla* (1772); *La Finta Giardiniera* (1774); *Idomeneo, Rè di Creta* (1781); *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (1782); *Der Schauspieldirektor* (1786); *Le Nozze di Figaro*, (*The Marriage of Figaro*) (1786); *Don Giovanni* (1787); *Così fan tutte* (1790); *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*) (1791); *La Clemenza di Tito* (1791).

In opera, words are intensified, or realized, by the emotive power of music. Opera is concerned with the emotions and behavior of humanity, and Mozart certainly understood his fellow human beings, ingeniously translating his incredible human insight through his musical language.

As such, Mozart became the first, if not the greatest master of musical characterization and musical portraiture. Like Shakespeare, he ingeniously translated "dramatic truth": his musical characterizations portray a complex panorama of universal humanity; emotions and passions that bare the souls of his characters truthfully, although Mozart rarely suggests any puritanical judgment or moralization of his characters' behavior and actions, prompting Beethoven to lament that in *Don Giovanni* and *Marriage*, Mozart had squandered his genius on immoral and licentious subjects.

Nevertheless, it is that spotlight on the individual that makes Mozart a bridge between eighteenth and nineteenth century operas. The opera seria portrayed abstract emotion, the dramatic form often imitating ancient Greek theater, in which an individual's passions and dramatic situations would generally transfer to the chorus for narration, commentary, or summation.

Mozart was anticipating the transition from the Classical to the Romantic era that was to begin soon after his death, his music truthfully expressing and capturing his character's sentiments and feelings. He was therefore the first composer to perceive clearly the vast possibilities of the operatic form as a means of musically creating characterization: in his operas, great and small persons move, think, and breathe on the human level, his musical characterizations providing extraordinary and insightful portrayals of real and complex humanity in their conduct and character. It is in the interaction between those characters themselves, particularly in ensembles that are almost symphonic in grandeur, which become moments in which an individual character's emotions, passions, feelings, and reactions stand out in high relief.

Mozart's characters have captivated and become treasures to their opera audiences for over two-hundred years: *Don Giovanni*'s Donna Anna, Donna Elvira, Zerlina, Masetto, Leporello, and Don Giovanni himself; *The Marriage of Figaro*'s Count and Countess, Cherubino, Susanna, and Figaro. All of these Mozartian characters are profoundly human: they act with passion, yet they retain that special Mozartian dignity as well as sentiment.

In the end, like Shakespeare, Mozart's characterizations have become timeless representations of humanity, great as well as flawed, but as contemporary in the twenty-first

century as they were in the later part of the eighteenth century, even though costumes may have changed.

Mozart became a magician in developing and inventing various techniques within his unique musical language to portray, communicate, and truthfully mirror the human condition. He expresses human qualities not only through distinguishing melody, but also through the specific essence of certain key signatures, as well as through rhythm, tempo, pitch, and even through accent and speech inflection.

As an example, Mozart used certain musical keys that inherently convey particular moods and effects: often G major is the key for rustic life and the common people; and A major the seductive key for sensuous love scenes. In *Don Giovanni*, D minor appears solemnly in the Overture and its final scene: Mozart's key for " Sturm und Drang" (storm and stress). When characters are in trouble, they sing in keys far removed from the home key, but as they get out of trouble, they return to that home key, reducing the tension.

In both *Don Giovanni* and *The Marriage of Figaro*, social classes clash on the stage with sentiment and insight: musical characterizations range from underdogs to demigods, but when Mozart deals with peasants and the lower classes, he is subtle, compassionate, and loving; the heroes are those Figaros, Susannas, and Zerlinas, bright characters who occupy the lower stations whom he ennobles with poignant music that expresses their complex personal emotions, feelings, hope, sadness, envy, passion, revenge, and eternal love.

Mozart's theatrical genius was his ability to express truly human qualities through his music, endowing his character creations with a universal and sublime uniqueness: in the end, achieving an incomparable immortality for himself as well as his character creations.

