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MOZART'S 'FIGARO': THE PLAN OF ACT III

BY ROBERT MOBERLY & CHRISTOPHER RAEURN

EVERY lover of this opera is familiar with the main items of Act III. There is No. 16, the duet between the Count and Susanna. There is No. 17, the Count's aria. No. 18 is the sextet, No. 19 'Dove sono', No. 20 the letter duet, No. 21 the choral item by the village girls, and No. 22 the wedding. The music is splendid. Yet the act somehow seems inferior to the preceding acts. This is partly because the finale of Act II has set a standard difficult to keep up. But commentators nearly always argue that there are also too many loose ends, too many unrelated comings and goings. Can this really be the work of the same two minds (Mozart and Da Ponte) that planned Acts I and II?

We think that the structural weakness is due to a change of plan. There are sentences in the libretto which make much better sense in a different order; and the key sequence rather suggests that Mozart thought of the music in an alternative order which can be inferred from these small indications in the libretto. Moreover, the loose ends then tie up, and the comings and goings become credible. Indeed, the act gains so greatly in dramatic force that it was difficult for us, at first, to imagine why Mozart could have adopted the present order when it came to writing out the score. However, we now think that we know the answer. Mozart altered the order so that the singer who was to double Bartolo and Antonio could change clothes. If so, it is certainly legitimate, and probably preferable, to go back to the original order in productions of 'Figaro' that have two singers for the two parts.

The general idea is very simple. In order to give the singer time to change clothes before his entry as Antonio, Mozart moved 'Dove sono' with its recitative and the preceding little *secco* dialogue. It was the only part of the act which was movable, because it was the only part which did not derive from the play. It was originally intended to come between the Count's aria and the sextet, which was the obvious place for it. We think that the alternative, and original, order of Nos. 17-20 was:

- (1) 'Vedro, mentr' io sospiro' (No. 17). This is derived from Act III, scene 11 of Beaumarchais' 'Mariage de Figaro', hereinafter referred to as MF. The Count leaves the stage at the end of MF III. 11. We think he was meant to leave the stage—the conventional thing to do—after his aria.

- (2) 'Andiam, andiam, bel paggio'. This is not in the play, and serves no obvious purpose except as a short *secco* fill-in between the Count's aria and the entry of the Countess. Note that there is going to be plenty of time for the action described in the *secco* dialogue: Cherubino can go to the cottage, foregather with the local girls, dress up as a girl, and get out of sight of the cottage, before Antonio finds his clothes and looks for, and finds, the Count.
- (3) 'E Susanna non vien? Sono ansiosa di saper come il Conte accolse la proposta' (No. 19a). This is not in the play, either; but it expresses the natural feelings of the Countess as soon as she feels that Susanna's conversation with the Count must be over.
- (4) 'Dove sono?' (No. 19b). Not in the play. Matches and contrasts with the Count's aria. Concludes the serious part of the act, just as 'Deh vieni' concludes the serious part of Act IV, leaving the rest of each act to follow as a splendid comic sequence. Meanwhile the trial (MF III. 12-15) has been taking place off-stage, with Don Curzio as judge. Like the Count, the Countess ends her aria with a conventional trill and leaves the stage.
- (5) 'È decisa la lite'. The trial is over. Marcellina, Bartolo, Figaro and Don Curzio enter. So does the Count. Figaro appeals confidently to the Count. ('Eccellenza! m'appello'). The words of this recitative are taken from MF III. 15-16; except that, in the play, sentence is pronounced by the Count. (1), (2), (3) and (4) together provide adequate time for the operatic trial to take place. The Count is reserved as appeal judge.
- (6) 'Riconosci in questo amplesso' (No. 18), the sextet, is taken from MF III. 16-18. During the sextet Susanna enters excitedly with 2,000 crowns. Susanna and the Countess presumably found each other during (5); Susanna was able to report the outcome of her duet with the Count, and the Countess gave her the money, as MF III. 17 says.
- (7) 'Eccovi, o caro amico', from MF III. 18. Susanna also says (not in the play): 'Voliamo ad informar . . . Madama e nostro zio'. She therefore intends to go straight to see the Countess, and relate all that has happened, i.e. that Marcellina is Figaro's mother, and what happened in the sextet. Then a happy family sing 'E schiatti il signor conte, al gusto mio'. Out go Susanna, Marcellina, Figaro—and Bartolo, who is of course in doctor's clothes.
- (8) In come the Count and Antonio. The Count is popping with anger, to suit the last line of (7). Antonio is of course in gardener's clothes; and is saying 'Io vi dico, Signor' (MF IV. 5).
- (9) The Countess asks Susanna how the Count reacted ('Cosa mi narri? e che ne disse il Conte?') to the news that Figaro is Marcellina's son. Susanna reports that the Count went pop with anger. Then the Countess reverts to the question of the rendezvous in the garden (MF IV. 3.).
- (10) The letter duet (No. 20). MF IV. 3.

Francesco Bussani doubled the parts of Bartolo and Antonio at the first performance of 'Figaro' on 1 May 1786. Mozart may well have planned the music of 'Dove sono', in C major, to come before the sextet, in F major, and the letter duet, in B \flat major. Then it occurred to someone—perhaps Mozart, perhaps Bussani, perhaps Da Ponte—that the bass needed time to change clothes between (7) and (8). A quick and drastic solution was adopted. (2), (3) and (4) were moved to separate (7) from (8). But the alternative order, as set out in this note, more nearly represents the quality of libretto planning that we find in Acts I and II.

What is wrong with the existing order? First, there is not enough time for a trial off-stage, during the Count's recitative and aria. (The trial cannot begin until Figaro leaves Susanna, after 'Haigia vinta la causa', and is over before 'È decisa la lite.') Secondly, there is no point in inventing the little dialogue between Cherubino and Barbarina, if it is not put early enough to give time for the action which is described in it. Thirdly, it is obvious that Susanna would look for the Countess, to tell her what happened during her duet with the Count, as soon as she had told Figaro that it was safe to plead his case. Therefore, it is always a shock to hear the Countess say, so long afterwards, that Susanna has not yet done so; which also makes an unnecessary mystery of how Susanna could rush in, during the sextet, with 2,000 crowns. Fourthly, it is equally mystifying that Da Ponte should have written 'Voliamo ad informar . . . Madama e nostro zio', several pages earlier, unless he meant it. Yet we are apparently asked to believe that a purposeful young woman, who was fond of her mistress, has not yet done what she had time and motive to do earlier, and now fails again to carry out this obvious task. Fifthly, sopranos have been known to complain that Mozart was a little inconsiderate in allowing so short a gap between 'Dove sono' and the letter duet.

If a piece of a jig-saw fits well in one place, and badly in another place, one does not assume that the jig-saw designer meant it to fit badly. The evidence of the score may, for once, be illusory.