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# TONAL ORGANIZATION IN 'BUFFO' FINALES AND THE ACT II FINALE OF 'LE NOZZE DI FIGARO'

BY JOHN PLATOFF

THE TONAL PLAN of the finale to Act II of Mozart and Da Ponte's *Le nozze di Figaro* is an admirably clear structure, and one that has drawn nearly as much approving comment from analysts as the opera itself has received from audiences.<sup>1</sup> The reasons for this favourable view of the finale's tonal scheme are not hard to find: its eight sections or movements move from the tonic of E flat to the dominant and then by a descending third to G, from which point the return to the tonic occurs through a regular series of falling fifths (see Table I). The resulting structure has been universally judged to have a wonderful logic. While descriptions of the finale vary in detail, what they have in common is their emphasis on its overall, large-scale tonal coherence.

In form the finale consists of eight smaller pieces laid out in a large key-area plan. They move from E-flat major to the dominant, then through an 'X-section' (G, C, and F major) to the dominant again, and finally return to the tonic. This key scheme shapes a closed form with its own harmonic drive and dynamic curve.<sup>2</sup>

The sections all contribute to an organized key structure based on the tonic Eb major. The modulations between sections take the form of an harmonic arch, reaching a peak at the centre: Eb-Bb-G-C-F-Bb-Eb. After the G major section *D* [so noted in Steptoe's chart], each succeeding key is a step down the circle of fifths . . . and heralds greater relaxation and reduction in tension. Conversely, the ascent to the apex in section *D* is approached by modulations in the dominant direction.<sup>3</sup>

First, E-flat major, with its dominant, is established in three sections . . . [This] long stretch, in which the Count looks for the Page and finds Susanna, is organized like a sonata, two very fast *alla breve* movements inclosing an andante in 3/8 . . .

A short scherzo (G major) accompanies [Figaro's] eager entry; an andante (C major), the scene in which all difficulties seem to be solved. [Then the troublemakers interfere in the last three sections of the finale: Antonio, and later Marcellina and the others.] This whole episode of the troublemakers thus again forms an entity: fast-slow-fast or 2/2-6/8-2/2, like the formation of the beginning. The spiritual affinity of the opening and closing groups has been noted: both are directed and motivated by the shadow of the

<sup>1</sup> The many discussions of the finale include the following: Hermann Abert, *W. A. Mozart*, 1919-21, 9th edn., Leipzig, 1978-9, ii. 269-78; Alfred Lorenz, 'Das Finale in Mozarts Meisteroper', *Die Musik*, xix (1926-7), 629-30; Siegmund Levarie, *Mozart's 'Le nozze di Figaro': a Critical Analysis*, Chicago, 1952, pp. 107-23 (which draws extensively on Lorenz, 'Das Finale'); Hans Engel, 'Die Finali der Mozartschen Opern', *Mozart-Jahrbuch 1954*, pp. 123-7; Gerald Abraham, 'The Operas', *The Mozart Companion*, ed. H. C. Robbins Landon & Donald Mitchell, 2nd edn., London, 1969, pp. 316-18; Wye Jamison Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart: 'Le nozze di Figaro' and 'Don Giovanni'*, Chicago, 1983, pp. 119-36; Stefan Kunze, *Mozarts Opern*, Stuttgart, 1984, pp. 307-18; Tim Carter, *W. A. Mozart: 'Le nozze di Figaro'*, Cambridge, 1987, pp. 118-19; and Andrew Steptoe, *The Mozart-Da Ponte Operas: the Cultural and Musical Background to 'Le nozze di Figaro', 'Don Giovanni', and 'Così fan tutte'*, Oxford, 1988, pp. 173-83.

<sup>2</sup> Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture*, p. 119.

<sup>3</sup> Steptoe, *The Mozart-Da Ponte Operas*, p. 175.

TABLE I

Mozart and Da Ponte, *Le nozze di Figaro*: Finale to Act II

Musical section	Bar numbers	Key	Metre	Tempo	Characters	Number of characters	Poetic metre*
1	1-125	E♭	4/4	Allegro	Count Countess	2	8
2	126-66	B♭	3/8	Molto andante	Count Countess Susanna	3	6
3	167-327	B♭	4/4	Allegro	same	3	6
4	328-97	G	3/8	Allegro	same + Figaro	4	6
5	398-466	C	2/4	Andante	same	4	8
6	467-604	F	4/4	Allegro molto	same + Antonio	5	10
7	605-96	B♭	6/8	Andante	same (Antonio leaves)	5, then 4	10
8	697-939	E♭	4/4	Allegro assai	Count Countess Susanna Figaro Marcellina Bartolo Basilio	7	8
				Più allegro; Presto			

\* These numbers indicate the number of syllables in a line of text

absent Page. One distinguishes between the tonal development of the first group from T to D and that of the last group from [double] D to T. If these two groups, which are both in bow form, are interpreted as the main sections of a larger bow, a scherzo and an andante are left as middle movements. Short as these middle movements are, the whole organization is reminiscent of the sonata scheme.<sup>4</sup>

It is ironic, in the light of this emphasis, that the coherence of its overall tonal plan makes the Act II finale of *Figaro* unique, both for Mozart and for an *opera buffa* of its era. The study of finales in the Viennese *opere buffe* of the 1780s reveals that while some aspects of the tonal scheme in this finale are typical, its combination of elements produces a structure not to be seen in any other finale of the decade. And in fact it is precisely the most unusual features of the *Figaro* finale's organization that analysts consistently cite. This paradox suggests that a different sort of analytic approach will be necessary if we are to understand the typical *buffo* finale of the late eighteenth century.

The approach I present here is based on the study of the finales in the two dozen *opere buffe* that received their premières in Vienna between Mozart's arrival there

<sup>4</sup> Lorenz, 'Das Finale', p. 629, translated in Levarie, *Mozart's 'Le nozze di Figaro'*, p. 108.

in 1781 and the completion of his last *opera buffa*, *Così fan tutte*, in 1790.<sup>5</sup> Its central premiss is straightforward: that the structure of the drama provides a more accurate guide to understanding tonal structure in an operatic finale than do abstract formal schemes of the type applied to instrumental music (Schenkerian plans, sonata form or arch structures, and so on).

One valuable principle seems to have been tacitly accepted by most analysts of multi-movement finales. It is that tonal motion between movements or sections is more important than tonal motion within them. In their discussion of the Act II finale of *Figaro*, for instance, nearly all writers provide charts in which only the initial key of each movement is shown.<sup>6</sup> In this finale, of course, each movement ends in the key in which it began, so the charts still reflect the direct tonal juxtapositions between movements; but this would not be true for a comparable chart of the second finale of *Così fan tutte*, some of whose movements start and end in different keys (for example, bars 66–172 move from E flat to A flat, and bars 204–89 from E to A).

Nonetheless, the common view of the greater importance of tonal motion between movements can be justified. For one thing, tonal schemes within individual movements are normally quite simple, involving motion to the dominant, perhaps the subsequent establishment of another related key (such as vi or IV), and return to the tonic. Nearly three-quarters of all finale movements begin and end in the same key. Of the remaining group, the vast majority end in a key a fifth higher or (less frequently) lower than the opening tonic.<sup>7</sup> Where movements do not return to their opening key, this is not for dramatic reasons. Rather than stemming from the action of the story, the close in a different key seems designed to facilitate the next tonal transition. Moreover, modulations that occur within movements of finales tend not to be highlighted by musical articulations; instead they are subordinated to the continuing flow of the music, unlike moves to the secondary key within a sonata form, for example, which are emphasized by important cadences.<sup>8</sup>

A greater concern with tonal relationships between movements is logical, given the highlighting of these juxtapositions by a change in tempo and metre. The listener's attention is drawn to the music by the marked alteration in its pace—from duple to triple metre, from Andante to Allegro—and focused on the new movement as it begins, so that any key-change at such a point is necessarily striking. Thus the concentration on initial keys of movements in finales seems appropriate, as long as movements that end in keys other than the tonic are not overlooked. Our approach should focus on the juxtapositions between the ending key of a movement and the opening key of the one that follows. With this framework in mind, we may outline the typical tonal organization of a *buffo* finale of the 1780s. Finales invariably begin

<sup>5</sup> A list of those works appears in the appendix of my earlier study of the Viennese *buffo* finale, 'Musical and Dramatic Structure in the Opera Buffa Finale', *The Journal of Musicology*, vii (1989), 191–230, to which the present article is a companion.

<sup>6</sup> Levarie, *Mozart's 'Le nozze di Figaro'*, p. 109 (based on Lorenz, 'Das Finale', p. 630); Engel, 'Die Finali', p. 125 (Engel erroneously lists the third movement as E flat/B flat); Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture*, p. 119; Kunze, *Mozart's Opern*, p. 310; Carter, *Mozart: 'Le nozze di Figaro'*, p. 86; and Steptoe, *The Mozart–Da Ponte Operas*, pp. 174–5. Abraham ('The Operas', p. 317) does essentially the same, although his chart notes the 'wide range of modulation' in the third section.

<sup>7</sup> A few movements modulate from major to relative or tonic minor, or up or down two fifths (that is, up or down a major second, as from C (via G) to D).

<sup>8</sup> Foreground harmonic gestures, such as augmented sixth chords or deceptive resolutions, are frequently used to highlight dramatic events, but key changes within movements are not commonly employed in this way.

and end in the same key. The return to the opening tonic of a finale may come only in the final stretta movement, or for the last two or three movements. Generally, the central movements of a finale avoid this tonic key. There are exceptions, however, such as the Act I finale of *Don Giovanni*, in which the movement 'Viva la libertà!' (bars 360–405) is in the key of C, the initial and final key of the finale.

Within a finale, tonal transitions between successive movements are of two kinds, which I will call 'near-key' and 'distant-key' moves. Near-key moves encompass those tonal juxtapositions that are common and familiar in the tonal language of the late eighteenth century and do not draw particular attention to themselves: continuation in the same key, motion up or down a fifth and motion to the relative or tonic major or minor. (In C, for example, the goals of near-key moves would be C, G, F, A minor and C minor.) These comprise some two-thirds of all transitions between movements of finales.<sup>9</sup> Distant-key moves, which occur in about a third of all transitions, involve motion up or down a major or minor third (other than to or from the relative minor), and (infrequently) up a semitone. (From C, possible distant-key moves would be to E, E flat, A, A flat and D flat.) These transitions are striking in the context of eighteenth-century music: they involve motion by at least three steps on the circle of fifths, and thus a pronounced change in colour caused by a quite different scale.

The near-key moves, on which composers relied most of the time, are the norm, and do not carry any special dramatic significance. The more colourful shifts to distant keys, on the other hand, generally serve a clear dramatic and articulative purpose. They tend to occur only in certain kinds of situation, to illuminate or underline particular dramatic points. The tonal plan of a typical finale may be described as a succession of near-key moves with no clear higher-level pattern, interrupted at certain points by distant-key moves.

One purpose of distant-key moves is to mark the end of a phase of action within a finale and the start of a new one. A shift of a third might thus accompany the exit of a group of characters and the entrance of a new group, or a change in location from inside a building to the garden outside, or simply a temporary point of rest in one sub-plot and a switch to another. This usage may be seen several times in the finale to Act I of Dittersdorf and Brunati's *Democrito corretto* of 1787 (see Table II). The first three movements, involving Strabone and Erminio, are in C and F. When they leave and the group of Silene, Egeria and Ismene enters, the key shifts from C to A. These characters, like the first pair, have a series of movements in closely related keys (A, D, G and D); and their exit and Democrito's entrance are marked by a shift from D to B flat. Throughout this finale, each distant-key move corresponds to a complete turnover of characters on stage (and thus a change to a different aspect of the story); when characters join or leave an existing group, the tonal moves are to closely related keys.<sup>10</sup>

In Dittersdorf's finale the distant-key moves serve to underline natural breaks in the dramatic flow. But shifts to a distant key can also emphasize unnatural or unexpected breaks, by occurring in the middle of a scene to mark a surprising twist of the plot. Typically a composer accompanied the twist by a cadence closing a movement, the next movement beginning immediately in a distantly related key. This new

<sup>9</sup> Continuations in the same key represent a third of all transitions; motion up or down a fifth about 10% and 20% respectively; and all moves to or from the tonic or relative minor about 5%.

<sup>10</sup> The exception is the shift between movements 10 and 11. Though no one leaves at this point, four new characters enter and the story takes off in another direction.

TABLE II

Dittersdorf and Brunati: *Democrito corretto*, Finale to Act I

Musical section	Bar numbers	Key	Metre	Tempo	Characters	Number of characters	Poetic metre*
1	1-50	C	2/4	Allegretto	Strabone	1	8
2	51-74	F/C	3/4	Allegro molto	same + Erminio	2	8
3	75-114	C	2/4	Tempo di primo	same	2	8
4	115-76	A	3/4	Andantino	Silene Egeria Ismene	3	6
5	177-94	D	2/4		same	3	7
6	195-206	G	3/4	Larghetto	same	3	7
7	207-29	D	2/2	Agitato	same	3	8
8	230-84	B $\flat$	2/4	Andante	Democrito	1	7
9	285-319	E $\flat$	3/4	Adagio ma non troppo	same + Lisandro	2	5
10	320-83	E $\flat$	6/8	Allegretto	same + Taumete	3	5
11	384-475	C/g	2/2	Andante	same + Erminio, Silene, Egeria, Ismene	7	8 6
12	476-596	G	2/4	Allegro	same + Strabone	8	8 10
13	597-611	C	2/2	Larghetto maestoso	same	8	7
14	612-773	C/g	3/8	Allegretto	same	8	7
15	774-812	G	2/4	Andantino	same	8	7
16	813-63	C	2/2		same	8	8
17	864-926	C	2/2	Stretta	same	8	8

\* These numbers indicate the number of syllables in a line of text

movement could take one of two forms. Quite frequently it was a 'shock tutti', a static slow movement in which the characters express amazement or fear at the unexpected turn of events.<sup>11</sup> Stephen Storace employed this procedure in the Act II finale of *Gli equivoci* (1786), whose libretto by Da Ponte is based on Shakespeare's *A Comedy of Errors*. The story involves two pairs of identical twins, separated from birth and now all in the same city. Since none of the four knows his twin is alive, the repeated instances of mistaken identity become extremely complex. In the last finale Solino, the Duke of Ephesus, untangles the confusion. He reveals the two pairs of twins to one another and to the rest of the cast, a revelation that produces total astonishment. At the moment the twins see one another a movement in D reaches its final cadence, and a repeated unison D moves up by a semitone to E flat, in which key the shock tutti then proceeds.

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the shock tutti, see Platoff, 'Musical and Dramatic Structure', pp. 219-22.

Mozart makes similarly effective use of a distant-key move in the Act I finale of *Così fan tutte*, at the moment when Ferrando and Guglielmo pretend to awaken from their poison-induced comas in a state of disorientation (bar 429). The change of key, from G to a dreamy, slow-moving Andante in B flat, here does not convey surprise; instead it highlights the contrast between the fully conscious state of the previous movement and the trance-like condition feigned by the two men. And at the conclusion of the movement, Ferrando and Guglielmo's complete return to consciousness—as indicated by their request for kisses from Fiordiligi and Dorabella—is likewise marked by a distant-key move, from B flat to D.

Sometimes what is called for at the moment of surprise is not an emotional reaction but further action. The story of Salieri and Da Ponte's *La cifra* (1789) depends on the unravelling, in the second act finale, of the cryptic message 'A.I.F.' on a hidden box. Its contents will in turn solve the mystery of which daughter of the peasant Rusticone is actually of noble birth. When Eurilla, the heroine, suggests that the letters stand for 'Aprasi il fondo'—'open the bottom'—the box is opened to reveal important documents. At this moment the key-change occurs, from a movement in E flat to one in C. This is appropriate, for the plot shift occasioned by these documents is crucial: they soon establish that Eurilla, not Lisotta, is the daughter of a noble, enabling her to marry the man she loves. The finding of the papers is unexpected, but Salieri and Da Ponte chose not to supply an extended expressive passage since the identity of the real noblewoman has not yet been revealed. Instead the action continues, but in a new direction.

A more familiar example of this procedure occurs in the Act I finale of *Don Giovanni*, when Zerlina cries out in attempting to resist the Don (bars 467–8). The music at that moment shifts suddenly from the civilized (if complex) ballroom music in G to an Allegro assai in E flat. And there follows not a shock tutti but an acceleration of the action, until Don Giovanni appears and attempts to blame Leporello. Given Zerlina's plight, any extended expressive passage before her rescue would be quite out of place.

Not all occurrences of distant-key moves are as well-motivated dramatically as in the cases just discussed. There are also finales in which such a move occurs between the penultimate movement and the final stretta, without any apparent dramatic justification. Here the reason is a purely practical one: since finales conventionally began and ended in the same key, composers relied on distant-key moves when necessary to return to the opening tonic of a finale, regardless of other considerations.<sup>12</sup>

We should remember, of course, that one cannot fully understand tonal planning in an operatic finale apart from other formal elements. Distant-key moves are only one of a number of ways in which composers highlighted the articulations between one part of a finale and another. As was noted above, the very fact that a movement ends with a cadence and a pause, followed by another movement in a new tempo and metre, creates an important caesura. To minimize this break somewhat, in response to the continuity of dramatic action in the story, composers sometimes elided successive movements of a finale rather than pausing between them (see, for example, in the Act IV finale of *Figaro* the moment of Susanna's entrance at bar

<sup>12</sup> For an example, see the Act I finale of Martín y Soler and Da Ponte's *Una cosa rara* (1786). Its final movement returns, without any particular dramatic motivation, from B flat to D, where we hear the tune later made famous by Mozart's quotation of it in the second *Don Giovanni* finale.

121). To create still more musical continuity, several phases of action could be set within a single movement, with changes of texture, orchestration and dynamics serving to separate passages with different dramatic purposes. For instance, the long Allegro movement in the first-act finale of *Così* (bars 62–291) comprises three distinct sections. In the first (bars 62–137), Ferrando and Guglielmo feign death by poisoning; in the second (bars 138–218) Fiordiligi and Dorabella call for Despina, who runs off with Don Alfonso to fetch a doctor; and in the third (bars 139–291) the ladies timidly approach the unconscious ‘Albanians’. Each of these sections concludes with an expressive tutti passage, and each is separated from the next by a change of key (from G minor to E flat, and then to C minor) and by the use of a different orchestral texture and new thematic material.

The use of distant-key moves to separate one group of movements from another sometimes creates ‘tonal regions’ within a finale. I use this term to describe a series of successive movements in closely related keys, usually involved with a single thread of the story and bounded by distant-key moves that set it apart from the rest of the finale. While some *buffo* finales show no signs of having been organized in this way, others have one or more tonal regions that clearly tie in with the dramatic events of the finale. The Dittersdorf finale discussed above (see Table II) is organized in four tonal regions, comprising movements 1–3, 4–7, 8–10 and 11–17 respectively. (It should be noted that this finale has many more separate movements than the average of seven or eight.) The first finale of Paisiello and Casti’s *Il re Teodoro in Venezia* (1784) divides into three rather simple regions: two opening movements in D and G, a pair of central movements in B flat, and three final movements in D. The Act IV finale of *Figaro* provides another clear example. Its ‘public’ portions take place in sharp keys—the first two movements in D and G, the last three in G, G and D—while, as Allanbrook points out, the ‘private’ reconciliation of Figaro and Susanna that forms the heart of the finale (movements 3–5) occurs in E flat and B flat.<sup>13</sup> This central region is bounded on either side by descending-third transitions, from G to E flat and from B flat to G.

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With the above discussion in mind, we may usefully reconsider the finale to Act II of *Figaro*, focusing initially not on its overall tonal scheme but on the local effect and dramatic context of each tonal juxtaposition between movements. From this perspective the tonal organization of the finale seems generally typical of contemporary practices. However, a second look at the large-scale tonal plan of the finale reveals that in two important respects it is virtually unique.

A brief word must be said about the rhythmic nature of the connection between any two successive movements. In the majority of cases a full cadence closes a movement, followed, after an indeterminate rest (marked by a fermata), by the start of a new movement in a different tempo and metre (see Ex. 3). In rhythmic and metric terms, the separation between the two movements is complete. Some movements use a brief linking passage to mediate their connection, rather than a simple full cadence and a pause (see Ex. 1a). Alternatively, a movement may proceed *attacca* into the next, creating an effect more like a change of gear than a new beginning (see Ex. 2). The obvious continuity this produces is mitigated by the difference in pace between the two movements, which has a momentarily disruptive effect since it arrives without any rhythmic preparation. A change of key at such a point can

<sup>13</sup> Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture*, pp. 173–4, 185–6.



further dramatize the break and strengthen the sense of disruption. In each of the above cases the overall effect is determined both by the tonal juxtaposition and by the nature of the rhythmic and metric connection between movements.<sup>14</sup>

To return to *Figaro*: Allanbrook has observed that the dramatic structure of the Act II finale comprises 'four waves, only three of which crest and break'.<sup>15</sup> These are: the crisis of Cherubino in the closet, resolved by Susanna's appearance instead (movements 1–3); Figaro's entrance and call for his wedding to Susanna to proceed, which the Count parries (movements 4–5); Antonio's story of someone jumping from the balcony, which refuels the Count's concern about Cherubino and which Figaro finally resolves by claiming to have jumped himself (movements 6–7); and the entrance of Marcellina (with Basilio and Bartolo), demanding that Figaro marry her (movement 8).

Given such a dramatic plan, much of Mozart's tonal organization is logical, even predictable. The first wave of action is set as a tonal region (in E flat and B flat). Its high point is the second movement, the shock tutti depicting the stunned response of the Count and Countess to Susanna's emergence from the closet (the 3/8 *Molto andante*, bars 126–66). The four linking bars after the closing cadence of the first movement in E flat (bars 122–5) serve to accompany Susanna's entrance, thus making possible the emotional reaction that follows (see Ex. 1a). At the same time they economically prepare the dominant key (B flat) in which the shock tutti will proceed. Moreover, the placing of the fermata in bar 125 rather than in bar 121 maximizes the comic potential of the pause, allowing for a 'double-take' by the Count and Countess alike. Perhaps because the shock of the characters on stage is so evident – and to maintain the first three movements as a tonal region – Mozart does not employ a distant-key tonal move to stress their surprise. But by moving to B flat rather than remaining in E flat, he strengthens the sense that the *Molto andante* is very different from what precedes it. A comparison of Ex. 1a and 1b – the latter my own non-modulating alternative – makes this point quite forcefully. The linking passage in Ex. 1b reaches a half cadence in E flat rather than B flat, and the *Andante* follows in the home key of the previous movement. In this alternative its opening bars sound much less like a new realm, and suggest less effectively a moment of suspended animation, than they do in Mozart's original.

After the shock tutti the return to *tempo ordinario* (*Allegro*) occurs *attacca* but without a change of key; it brings a recovery from the surprise occasioned by Susanna's appearance, and the resumption of a kind of normality (see Ex. 2). Moreover, the continuation in the same key, less disruptive than a key-change would have been, conveys the sense that the entire *Molto andante* was a moment frozen in time, from which we have now been released. Because nothing has changed – at least tonally – we find ourselves at the end of the movement just where we were at its beginning (i.e., in B flat). This is appropriate because, after all, nothing has happened since Susanna's entrance. Only with the *Allegro* does the plot once more move forward.

The single distant-key move in the finale, between movements 3 and 4, marks Figaro's entrance, which puts a temporary end to all concern about Cherubino and

<sup>14</sup> Most of Mozart's contemporaries (Salieri and Joseph Weigl are the exceptions) employed transitions or *attacca* connections only rarely, relying for the most part on clear breaks between finale movements. In the finales of Mozart's three Da Ponte operas, as many as half the movements move *attacca* one into the next or are connected by a linking passage.

<sup>15</sup> Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture*, p. 119.

Ex. 1

(a)

120 **Allegro** COUNT

Su - san - na!

COUNTRESS 125 **Molto andante**

Su - san - na!

(b)

120 **Allegro** COUNT

Su - san - na!

COUNTRESS 125 **Molto andante**

Su - san - na!

Ex. 2

**Molto andante** 165 **Allegro** COUNTESS

SUSANNA  
- da - te! guar - dia - te! qui a - sco - so sa - rà. Su-

COUNT  
guar - dia - mo! qui a - sco - so sa - rà.

san - na, son

begins the second wave of the action. It may be compared with the following near-key move between movements 4 and 5 (Exx. 3 & 4). Both involve a full cadence with a fermata, followed by a new beginning in a new tempo and metre; thus it is the difference in tonal motion that suggests a larger or smaller break in the dramatic flow. In the first case the distant-key move from B flat to G signals a stronger caesura, appropriate both to the entrance of an additional character (Figaro) and the start of a new direction in the plot. Conversely, the near-key shift from G to C in Ex. 4 maintains a degree of continuity between Figaro's call for the wedding to begin (movement 4) and the Count's delaying tactic of questioning Figaro about the anonymous letter (movement 5). In a subtle way the tonal move helps us perceive the Count's actions as a direct response to, rather than as unrelated to, Figaro's pressure.

The other point at which a distant-key move might most reasonably be expected is at the entrance of Antonio, which initiates the third wave by reintroducing the spectre of the absent Cherubino. Instead Mozart takes advantage of the disruptive effect of an *attacca* connection with a change of key; the unison C's in bars 467–8

that begin the *Allegro molto*, pivoting suddenly as the dominant note of the new key of F, create the momentary sense of vertigo and shock that a distant-key move might have provided (Ex. 5). The fact that the C's initially announce a faster tempo while hinting that there will *not* be a key-change heightens the effect. This unsettling transition helps signal the new danger faced by Figaro, Susanna and the Countess

Ex. 3

325 **Allegro** **Allegro con spirito** 330

SUSANNA  
 pren - der po - trà.

COUNTESS  
 pren - der po - trà.

COUNT FIGARO  
 pren - der po - trà.

Ex. 4

**Allegro con spirito**

SUSANNA 395  
 - nir, com' ha da fi - nir?

COUNTESS  
 - nir, com' ha da fi - nir?

COUNT  
 con ar - te le car - te con - vien qui sco - prire.

FIGARO  
 - nir, com' ha da fi - nir?

**Andante**  
COUNT (to Figaro) 400

Co - no - sce - te, si - gnor Fi - ga - ro,

Ex. 5

**Andante** **Allegro molto**

465

SUSANNA *f*  
- sir, con - so - la - te i miei de - sir.

COUNTRESS *f*  
- sir, con - so - la - te i lor de - sir.

COUNT *f*  
- rir, quan - to tar - di a com - pa - rir.

FIGARO *f*  
- sir, con - so - la - te i miei de - sir.

(the revelation of Cherubino's jump from the balcony).<sup>16</sup> At the end of this movement, when Figaro attempts to take control of the situation by claiming that it was he who jumped, the effect of the tonal move from F to B flat is overshadowed by Figaro's mock-tragic complaint of having hurt his foot (Ex. 6). The two bars of *ad*

<sup>16</sup> A full cadence and distant-key shift at this point might also seem redundant, coming only 139 bars after the same device used at the point of Figaro's entrance.

*libitum* and the fact that Figaro's vocal line descends to close on F in unison with the orchestra (bar 605) minimize the sense of a new key; instead we attend to the new tempo and metre, whose deliberateness Mozart uses subsequently to heighten the dramatic effect of Figaro's interrogation by the Count.

Ex. 6

The musical score for Example 6 consists of two systems. The first system is labeled 'Allegro molto' and features a vocal line for Figaro in bass clef and piano accompaniment in treble and bass clefs. The tempo is 3/4. The second system is labeled '605 Andante' and features the same vocal line and piano accompaniment, but with a tempo change to 6/8. The lyrics are 'e stra- vol - to m'ho un ner - vo del piè.' The piano accompaniment includes markings for *p* and *collà voce ad lib.*

The entrance of Marcellina, Basilio and Bartolo in the final movement marks the beginning of the last dramatic wave in the finale. But a distant-key move could not have been used here, given the succession of keys to this point. With the necessary return to the opening key of E flat an overriding factor, Mozart would have had to plan the finale differently at earlier stages to make a distant-key move possible. Instead, he creates a clear enough disjunction with a quiet cadence in B flat, followed after a pause by an energetic new beginning a fifth lower (Ex. 7). Nothing further is needed to evoke the momentary relief of Figaro, Susanna and the Countess which is shattered by this latest arrival.

What, then, makes the Act II finale of *Figaro* unique? The preceding paragraphs document the degree to which the tonal and rhythmic juxtapositions between movements correspond to the dramatic situation, with the local effect of each tonal shift carefully considered. But if in this respect the finale typifies the Viennese *buffo* finale of the 1780s, in two other ways it is highly unusual. First, its initial movement in the tonic is followed by a movement in the dominant, rather than the subdominant or some other key. Only two other finales of the more than 50 I have examined proceed in this fashion, which inevitably suggests to modern commentators an analogue to the exposition of a sonata form.<sup>17</sup> Second and even more unusual in the *Figaro* finale is its purposeful series of five movements related to one another by

<sup>17</sup> Both of the other finales are by Vincenzo Righini. (In the sketched-out first act finale of Mozart's unfinished *L'oca del Cairo* (1783) the opening two movements in B flat are followed, after a brief accompanied recitative, by a

descending fifths. No other finale known to me displays such a tightly organized succession, whether aimed at the tonic of the finale or not. Indeed the tonal successions in most finales are laid out with much more local considerations in mind; there is little evidence of planning over several movements, as in this case.

Ex. 7

**Andante** 695

SUSANNA *p*  
 più non av - vi nau - fra - gio per me.

COUNTRESS *p*  
 più non av - vi nau - fra - gio per me.

COUNT *p*  
 tut - to tut - to è un mi - ste - ro per me.

FIGARO *p*  
 po - ve - ri - no ne sà men di me.

**Allegro assai** 700  
 MARCELLINA

BASILIO  
 Voi si - gnor,

BARTOLO  
 Voi si - gnor,

Voi si - gnor,

movement in F.) There are also a few Viennese finales in which the opening movement modulates to and closes in V, followed by a second movement that begins in V. As already noted, this creates a very different effect, since the juxtaposition between the end of the first movement and the start of the second involves continuation in the same key.

Even Mozart, in whose finales we might expect to find a greater degree of high-level planning than in those of his contemporaries, wrote no other finale like this one. As we have seen, the Act IV finale of *Figaro* has a symmetrical arrangement of three tonal regions, but no exposition-like plan or sequence of falling fifths. The finales of *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte* are still looser in their tonal organization. (Consider the second finale of *Don Giovanni*, for example, whose movements proceed in D–D/F/B flat (the tunes played by the stage band)–B flat–F–d–G–G–D.) Nor can an example be found in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* or *Die Zauberflöte*. Thus it is somewhat misleading to claim, as does Abraham, that ‘for the study of the Mozartean finale there is no better example than the second act of *Figaro*’.<sup>18</sup> In terms of tonal structure any other finale would be a better example, or at least a more typical one.

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If the tonal plan of the Act II finale of *Figaro* is in fact unique, there are several reasons why such an observation is important. First, the undeniable tonal coherence of this finale has led analysts to draw conclusions, based on the presumed power of a tightly organized tonal structure, that may be debatable.

It is evident therefore that section *D* [the section in G major] is in an axial position harmonically, since it is here that the structural tension is greatest. It is entered via a bold modulation from B $\flat$ , but more importantly, it is midway between the tonic (E $\flat$ ) and the dominant (B $\flat$ ) of the whole Finale. The keys of [the first four] sections . . . pick out the E $\flat$  major tonic triad, reinforcing the home key while generating tension from it. Interestingly however, section *D* does not contain the most dramatic confrontation or thorniest intrigue of the Finale.<sup>19</sup>

Because Steptoe views the tonal relations among the movements in a global sense, seeing the section in G not only as locally related to the previous key of B flat but as ‘axial’ between the tonic and dominant of the finale, he concludes that the G major section must have the greatest ‘structural tension’. But he is forced to admit that the dramatic importance of the section does not live up to its presumed structural role. Allanbrook makes a claim about the C major movement that is equally dependent on a global view of the finale’s key relations.

The gavotte movement is the storm center of the finale and, appropriately, the point of furthest remove from the tonic (C major in an E-flat key scheme). It terminates in the quietest moment of the finale, in a mood both exalted and tender, on a plane far removed from the tone of comic melee which dominates the remainder of the piece.<sup>20</sup>

In general, Allanbrook is not primarily concerned with high-level tonal plans; instead, with great insight, she discusses issues of musical *topos* and the emotional life of the characters. But the point of this passage rests on the assumption that C is the key in the finale furthest from E flat (whereas G is further distant on the circle of fifths), and that at least by implication the C major movement is actually *heard* as being ‘the point of furthest remove from the tonic’. I would argue that all but the most adept listeners perceive local tonal relationships rather than global ones. And by those standards the G major movement, which moves abruptly to that key from B flat, is most likely to seem far removed.

<sup>18</sup> Abraham, ‘The Operas’, p. 316.

<sup>19</sup> Steptoe, *The Mozart–Da Ponte Operas*, p. 176.

<sup>20</sup> Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture*, p. 120.



There remain other reasons why it is important to recognize the uniqueness of the tonal organization in this finale. One is that analysts have, perhaps too uncritically, linked the extraordinary greatness of the piece to that tonal organization. Implicit in many discussions—and quite explicit in Lorenz's, for example—is the proposition that this is a great finale *because* of its tonal plan, whose coherence suggests analogies to familiar instrumental structures. I present an alternative to this proposition below. In fact the very clarity of the tonal plan creates a danger for analysts: the temptation not only to discuss the tonal structure at length but to view it as the most important element of structure in the finale. There is, however, no clear reason why the tonal scheme should be of greater significance than many other dramatic and musical factors.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, a claim that the tonal plan is of central importance in this finale will hamper an understanding of Mozart's other finales, which are not constructed in this way.

This investigation also raises the question of Mozart's intentions: why did he create in this finale a tonal structure whose exceptional coherence he never employed again? The question has not been faced by previous commentators, for whom the uniqueness of the finale was not an issue. Let me suggest two speculative reasons for Mozart's choice, emphasizing that I am focusing here on his intentions in structuring the finale as he did, rather than on the effect of that structure. The first reason relates to the course of Mozart's compositional career in the decade before *Figaro*. He had not written an *opera buffa* since *La finta giardiniera* in 1775,<sup>22</sup> and had in his first years in Vienna written almost exclusively instrumental music, above all string quartets and piano concertos. It is not unreasonable to imagine, therefore, that a certain degree of 'instrumental' thinking—specifically the desirability of a high-level tonal plan—might find its way into the organization of a large finale.<sup>23</sup> This becomes more plausible in the light of the second reason: the unusual dramatic complexity of the finale. This portion of Beaumarchais's play,<sup>24</sup> which Da Ponte adapted without much change, might be described as 'brilliantly confusing'. In no other finale from Mozart's *opere buffe* does incident follow incident, and the resolution of one difficulty give way to a new one, with such swiftness and sureness. Most of Mozart and Da Ponte's finales follow a much straighter course, with one dramatic line throughout (such as, for example, the splendid first finale of *Così*, all of which stems from the supposed poisoning of Ferrando and Guglielmo). By contrast the plot of this *Figaro* finale is never predictable or inevitable. Its 'four waves' cited by Allanbrook alternate between the Count's jealousy about Cherubino and his hope of delaying Figaro's wedding with the help of Marcellina. As each phase of the drama reaches a point of temporary resolution the next surges in upon it. Mozart's unusually coherent tonal scheme may be seen as an attempt to compensate for the unusual lack of straightforward direction in the drama. (Carter suggests this view when he calls the finale 'a masterpiece of tonal planning that creates a firm structure . . . despite all the twists and turn of the

<sup>21</sup> The argument in this paragraph is indebted to Roger Parker & Carolyn Abbate, 'Dismembering Mozart', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, ii (1990), esp. 193–5. See also James Webster, 'Mozart's Operas and the Myth of Musical Unity', *ibid.*, pp. 205–6.

<sup>22</sup> If one excludes the unfinished *L'oca del Cairo* and *Lo sposo deluso* of 1783, for each of which Mozart had completed or sketched several numbers.

<sup>23</sup> James Webster (personal communication) has suggested that *Figaro* as a whole is different from Mozart's other two Da Ponte operas in being 'more instrumentally conceived'.

<sup>24</sup> *La Folle Journée, ou Le Mariage de Figaro*, completed by 1781 and performed in Paris in 1784.

action'.<sup>25</sup>) I do not claim that such compensation was necessary—only that Mozart, at 29 a highly experienced and talented master of instrumental forms with little adult experience in *opera buffa* composition, may have felt it was necessary or desirable.

Furthermore, it seems to me that the greatness of this finale derives less from its tonal coherence, as has been so often asserted, than from the strength of its complex dramatic structure and the success of Mozart's music in depicting each of the phases of the imbroglio. Part of what makes the piece work is the sense of breathlessness it engenders, a breathlessness created by the intensity and compression of the dramatic flow already present in the libretto and brilliantly realized by the music. Moreover, the felicities of the musical realization are frequently local, foreground events. Among a great number of instances let me point to two: the moment of deep, almost transcendent stasis following Susanna's emergence from the closet, with the Count and Countess murmuring their astonishment and Susanna commenting on it, above a tonic pedal and a smoothly descending scale in the bassoon and first violins (bars 145–55); and, much later, the triumphant, long-withheld return to the local tonic B flat, with the chromatic stepping-down by the clarinets and bassoons in bars 667–8, as Figaro finally outwits the Count by 'remembering' that Cherubino's commission needed a seal. Both of these are memorable because of the extraordinary fitness of their musical gestures to the dramatic moment. Their effect does not depend in any way on the high-level tonal coherence of the finale.

If this view has any force it suggests a larger point, to which I alluded near the beginning of this article. In seeking to understand more completely the power of Mozart's operatic music, whether in finales or in other numbers, we must try as far as possible to maintain an approach that is fundamentally dramatic. To look for correspondences with instrumental forms may be to think of this music quite differently from the way it was perceived by eighteenth-century musicians and audiences.<sup>26</sup> Conversely, by beginning with the libretto—as did the composer—we better equip ourselves to understand the purpose and function of each number in an opera, and to judge it in its most appropriate context.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Carter, *Mozart: 'Le nozze di Figaro'*, pp. 118–19.

<sup>26</sup> In this connection, see John Platoff, 'The *buffa* Aria in Mozart's Vienna', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, ii (1990), esp. 119–20.

<sup>27</sup> Portions of this article are drawn from John Platoff, *Music and Drama in the 'opera buffa' Finale: Mozart and his Contemporaries in Vienna, 1781–1790* (unpublished dissertation), University of Pennsylvania, 1984, pp. 402–23. My thanks to Mary Hunter for many valuable suggestions.