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The buffa aria in Mozart's Vienna

JOHN PLATOFF

Like the modern romance novel or murder mystery, late-eighteenth-century opera buffa is a thoroughly conventional genre.¹ Standard plot devices, stock characters and vocal types, and particular kinds of musical number appear again and again,² and any reasonably comprehensive understanding of the genre requires that we recognise these familiar patterns in text and music. This is especially important in the case of Mozart, who lies at the heart of our interest in the repertory: while his operas are routinely praised for their uniqueness and originality, we can evaluate these claims only by addressing the formal and stylistic procedures that served as his immediate context.

The present enquiry will concentrate on the normative dramatic structure of the period: the solo aria. Opera buffa of the classical period uses various types of aria, sung in particular situations and by particular kinds of character. The use of these types responds to a number of factors: the social class of the character and his or her position as *parte seria*, *mezzo carattere* or *parte buffa*; the character's vocal range; the 'status' of the role (whether for prima donna or secondo buffo, for example); and the emotion appropriate to the moment. The gamut runs from a lightweight aria in 6/8 for a female servant to the leading soprano's rondò,³ but one of the clearest conventional types is the buffa aria for the leading comic bass (what we would today call a baritone). Buffa arias appear in nearly all the Italian comic operas in the Viennese repertory of the 1780s,⁴ forming a coherent group in textual organisation, musical style and structure. A close examination of this group thus also provides an appropriate context in which to reconsider several of Mozart's most famous arias.

By recognising the common elements between the buffa arias of Mozart and those of his leading operatic rivals, we can begin to address what Daniel Heartz has called 'a blind spot in Mozart scholarship'.⁵ Moreover, as we shall see

¹ I am grateful to the National Endowment for the Humanities for research support, and to Wye Allanbrook, Mary Hunter and James Webster for many valuable suggestions.

² See, for example, Michael F. Robinson, 'Mozart and the Opera Buffa Tradition', in Tim Carter, *W. A. Mozart: 'Le nozze di Figaro'*, Cambridge Opera Handbooks (Cambridge, 1987), 13–14 and 23–4.

³ The rondò is a showpiece aria in two tempos (slow–fast), in which the main theme of each section returns at least once. See Daniel Heartz, 'Mozart and his Italian Contemporaries: *La clemenza di Tito*', *Mozart-Jahrbuch* (1978–79), 281–3.

⁴ There were approximately seventy-five *opere buffe* performed in Vienna during the 1780s, and about twenty of them were written between Mozart's arrival there in 1781 and the première of *Così fan tutte* in 1790. For a list of the latter group see John Platoff, 'Musical and Dramatic Structure in the Opera Buffa Finale', *Journal of Musicology*, 7 (1989), 230.

⁵ Heartz (see n. 3), 280.

later, such comparative enquiries raise broader questions. Releasing Mozart's operas from the lonely splendour in which they are normally discussed encourages a new look at some of the analytical terms used to describe them, and may for example cast doubt on the widely-held view that operatic numbers from the late eighteenth century – in particular those of Mozart – consistently rely on sonata form, or on the somewhat more broadly conceived 'sonata principle', to achieve their most telling dramatic effects.⁶

1

The typical opera buffa involves a pair of lovers whose attempts to marry, initially opposed by one or more characters, eventually succeed. And the main opposition usually comes from the basso buffo. He may be the young lady's father, who dislikes her marriage out of vanity (and the hope of making noble connections), greed or some mistakenly bad impression of her suitor; if he is her guardian, he may want to marry her himself; or he may be a good-hearted fellow with an extremely short temper, or under the spell of a crackpot philosopher, or even the philosopher himself.⁷ Whatever the details, the primo buffo, like the principal lovers and the various supporting characters, appears in opera after opera, a true embodiment of the genre.

In Vienna this role was usually sung by the great Italian bass Francesco Benucci, the most important and highly appreciated member of the Italian operatic troupe established in Vienna after the failure of Joseph II's National Singspiel. He sang in Vienna from 1783 to 1795, with only brief interruptions for commitments elsewhere; and in a city where opera buffa dominated the repertory his talents as a singer and comic actor made him even more highly prized than the leading soprano, Nancy Storace.⁸ Although Benucci created the roles of Figaro and Guglielmo, and was the first Viennese Leporello, he was more highly acclaimed for roles in operas by other composers: Dr Bartolo in the lengthy Viennese run of Paisiello's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, and the irascible old man or comically misguided lover in operas by Paisiello, Martín y Soler, Salieri and Cimarosa. Contemporary accounts – including those in Mozart's letters

⁶ The concept of a 'sonata principle' was first discussed by Edward T. Cone, in *Musical Form and Musical Performance* (New York, 1968), 76–7.

⁷ We find the amorous guardian in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (Petrosellini and Paisiello, 1782); the vain father in *Il re Teodoro in Venezia* (Casti and Paisiello, 1784) and *Il matrimonio segreto* (Bertati and Cimarosa, 1792); the greedy (if affectionate) father in *La cifra* (Da Ponte and Salieri, 1789); the short-tempered guardian in *Il burbero di buon cuore* (Da Ponte and Martín y Soler, 1786); and comic philosophers and their students in *Il Demogorgone* (Da Ponte and Righini, 1786) and *Democrito corretto* (Brunati and Dittersdorf, 1787).

⁸ See Joseph II's letter of 29 September 1786, quoted in Otto Michtner, *Das alte Burgtheater als Opernbühne* (Vienna, 1970), 227, and more extensively in Daniel Heartz, 'Constructing *Le nozze di Figaro*', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 112 (1987), 78–9.

– attest to the high regard in which Benucci was held by professionals and opera-lovers alike.⁹

While the buffa aria was created long before the rise of Benucci,¹⁰ his comic talents clearly contributed to its frequent use in Vienna. (It is surely no coincidence that some operas in which Benucci did not appear have no full-scale buffa arias.¹¹) Generally the Benucci character had two solo numbers in an opera, at least one of which would be a buffa aria – an extended and openly comic piece. If the character were involved in the love intrigue, the other aria might be a more lyric or ‘amoroso’ piece in which he admitted his love or attempted to woo his beloved.¹² Otherwise, both arias tended to be comic.

The central purpose of a buffa aria was to afford a talented singer and actor an extended opportunity for comic expression, and this demanded a relatively expansive piece in which the humour and excitement could build gradually. In ‘Sorger dobbiam dal letto’ from Da Ponte’s and Righini’s *Il Demogorgone* (Vienna, 1786), Demogorgone, a self-important philosopher, holds forth to an unwilling pupil about his intended course of instruction.¹³ He is only one of several instances of such philosophic types, who favour a comically ascetic regime of early rising, little contact with food, drink and women, and concentration on the beauties of the rural landscape.¹⁴ The lengthy text – thirty-six lines – divides into two sharply contrasting sections.¹⁵

⁹ See Michael Kelly’s report of Benucci singing ‘Non più andrai’ to the great delight of Mozart (*Reminiscences of Michael Kelly* [London, 1826], quoted in Hertz, ‘Le nozze’, 91). For further accounts see Hertz, ‘Setting the Stage for *Figaro*’, *The Musical Times*, 127 (1986), 256–60, and Michtner, 149–51, 158, 240–1 and 302 n. 7.

¹⁰ Two representative earlier examples of buffa arias are ‘Non comoda all’amante’, from Goldoni’s and Piccinni’s *La buona figliuola* (1760), and ‘Per esempio: quando viene’, from Coltellini’s and Gassmann’s *La contessina* (1770).

¹¹ For example, Mazzola’s and Weigl’s *Il pazzo per forza* (1788). Either Francesco Bussani or Stefano Mandini, both of whom frequently played secondary buffo roles, sang the primo buffo when Benucci did not appear.

¹² In *Il barbiere*, Bartolo’s ‘Seghidiglia Spagnuola’. See also ‘Ma piano; adagio andiamo’ from *Democrito corretto*.

¹³ The role of Demogorgone may have been written for Benucci. Christopher Raeburn, ‘An Evening at Schönbrunn’, *Music Review*, 16 (1955), 109–10, claims that tenor Michael Kelly sang it, referring to a somewhat inconclusive passage in Kelly’s *Reminiscences*; but the part was clearly written for a baritone.

¹⁴ For a similar type, see *Democrito corretto*, which features both the philosopher Democrito and his reluctant disciple Strabone.

¹⁵ The differences between these sections are clear once we consider the organisation of Italian lyric verse. The standard line (a *verso piano*) has its principal accent on the penultimate syllable; *versi sdrucchioli* follow the final accent with two unaccented syllables; *versi tronchi* end on the accented syllable. This last type normally serves to end stanzas, though *tronchi* may be used at other points. Syllabic line-lengths are counted in terms of *versi piani*, so that a *tronco* line with six syllables, a *piano* line with seven and a *sdrucchiolo* line with eight would all be examples of *settenario* (a seven-syllable line). According to this method of counting, the other common line-lengths are *quinario* (five syllables), *senario* (six syllables), *ottonario* (eight syllables), *decasillabo* (ten syllables) and *endecasillabo* (eleven syllables). A stanza generally contains four to six lines, with linked rhymes (such as abac or aabcb), and concludes with a *verso tronco*. The final *tronco* lines of subsequent stanzas often rhyme with one another.

	a	Sorger dobbiam dal letto	We must get out of bed
	b	Al sorgere del sole,	at sunrise,
	b	Allor l'anima suole	so as with the spirit of the sun
	a	Udir con più diletto	to hear with greater delight
(5)	c	Il ver che a lei dimostra	the truth that
	d	La placida ragion.	calm reason shows you.
	e	Andrem per valli, e monti	Let us walk among hills and valleys
	f	A contemplar natura,	to contemplate nature,
	f	Tra i fiori, e la verdura,	among the flowers and the greenery,
(10)	e	Tra gli arboscelli e i fonti,	the shrubs and the streams,
	g	Ora leggendo Tullio,	now reading Tullius,
	d	Ora il divin Platon.	now the immortal Plato.
	<i>h</i>	Poi vesti simili	Then you will need
	i	Pigliar bisogna:	clothes like these;
(15)	<i>j</i>	Queste a un filosofo	those would cause shame
	i	Fanno vergogna:	to a philosopher;
	<i>k</i>	Fuggir gli stolidi	flee the silly
	l	Vani diletti	vain delights
	<i>m</i>	Contrari al nettare	contrary to the purity
(20)	l	De' miei precetti,	of my precepts;
	<i>n</i>	Mangiar pochissimo,	eat very little,
	o	Bere ancor meno,	drink still less,
	<i>p</i>	Onde a l'indocile	in order to calm
	o	Senso por freno;	unruly feelings;
(25)	<i>q</i>	E se mai femmina	and if a woman
	r	Vi vien davanti	ever approaches you,
	<i>s</i>	Il guardo torcere	avert your eyes
	r	Da quegli incanti,	from her charms,
	t	Porla in deriso	treat her with derision
(30)	u	Se vi disprezza,	if she scorns you,
	t	Riderle in viso	laugh in her face
	u	Se vi accarezza,	if she caresses you;
	<i>v</i>	Così comandavi	these are the commands of
	d	Demogorgon.	Demogorgone.
(35)	<i>w</i>	Eccovi, o giovane,	That, young man,
	d	La mia lezion. ¹⁶	is my lesson.

The first part of 'Sorger dobbiam dal letto' comprises a pair of regular six-line stanzas in *settenario*. The second and longer section – in the new poetic metre of *quinario*¹⁷ – is constructed much more freely: instead of stanzas, a succession of *versi piani* and *sdrucchioli* continues to line 34, where a *tronco* line prepares

¹⁶ The letters to the left show the rhyme scheme, *versi sdrucchioli* in italics, *versi tronchi* in bold.

¹⁷ The layout follows the printed libretto (Vienna: Kurzbek [sic], c. 1786), although the metre may actually be *quinario doppio*, with *sdrucchioli* on the first verse of nearly every pair.

the final couplet. In contrast to the more organised rhyme scheme in the sestets of the opening section, lines 13–34 rhyme by pairs of even-numbered lines. Since the odd-numbered lines end in *sdrucchioli* – which tend to attach themselves to the subsequent line – the rhyme scheme creates a sing-song effect. (Some comic texts further accentuate this by rhyming in an aabbcc pattern.) The second part of the text creates a sense of acceleration: the lines are shorter, and Demogorgone's directives come in four-line groups rather than six-line stanzas. The acceleration complements a progression from mildly unpleasant strictures, such as rising with the sun and walking in the countryside, to more ridiculous ones, such as eating very little and scorning the advances of women. The final couplet (in other arias this is sometimes a quatrain) serves as an envoi or 'tag line': words which a composer could repeat to good effect at the end of the aria.

'Sorger dobbiam' typifies the buffa aria text: it is considerably longer and – at least in its second part – freer than most other aria texts in Viennese opera buffa. A further buffa aria text, that of Leporello's 'Catalogue Aria', reveals much the same structure. Its two quatrains of *decasillabo* are followed by twenty-two lines of *ottonario*, divided by *tronco* lines into a six-line and then a sixteen-line group. The *ottonario* section uses both alternating and immediate rhymes, and Da Ponte takes advantage of strong accents on the third and seventh syllables to create a sing-song rhythm.¹⁸ The last two lines provide the envoi: 'Purchè porti la gonnella / Voi sapete quel che fa' [So long as she wears a skirt, you know what he'll do]. As Tim Carter has pointed out, several arias in *Figaro* employ these textual features: lengthy texts in two poetic metres, the first section in regular stanzas, the second free and concluding with an envoi.¹⁹ And they also occur in buffa arias from non-Mozartian works, with libretti by Da Ponte and others.²⁰

The musical settings of Viennese buffa arias exhibit as many common features as do their texts. These pieces most often use a neutral 4/4 time signature and a tempo of Allegro or Allegro moderato,²¹ and they avoid certain characteristics associated with seria arias: long, formal opening ritornellos, melismatic singing and coloratura, wide leaps between long notes, sustained high notes and the broad duple rhythms of the 'exalted march'.²² Buffa arias rely instead on two distinct melodic styles, both of which occur in 'Veramente ho torto, è vero', sung by Dr Bartolo in Paisiello's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (Ex. 1). The

¹⁸ Especially in lines such as 'V'han fra queste contadine, / Cameriere, cittadine, / V'han contesse, baronesse, / Marchesane, principesse', which rhyme aabb and in which the third line contains an internal rhyme.

¹⁹ Carter (see n. 2), 80–1.

²⁰ See, for example, 'In quegli anni in cui soleva' from Da Ponte's and Martín y Soler's *Una cosa rara* (1786), and 'Ma piano; adagio andiamo' from *Democrito corretto*.

²¹ Unless they have multiple tempos, as discussed later.

²² For a discussion of some stylistic features of seria arias in opera buffa, see Mary Hunter, 'Text, Music, and Drama in Haydn's Italian Opera Arias: Four Case Studies', *Journal of Musicology*, 7 (1989), 32–8, 42. The term 'exalted march' is used by Wye Jamison Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart: 'Le nozze di Figaro' and 'Don Giovanni'* (Chicago, 1983), 19 and *passim*, to describe the solemn, almost ecclesiastical style adopted by noble and serious characters in the expression of grand and passionate sentiments, as in Donna Anna's 'Or sai chi l'onore'.

Petrosellini and Paisiello: *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, Act I scene 9:
 'Veramente ho torto, è vero': a) bars 20-34; b) bars 71-77.

a) Dr Bartolo 21



Se una pen - na tin - ta re - sta, fu ca - gion che su la ve - sta nuo - vo
 25
 fior si di - se - gnò. Se di car - ta un fo - glio man - ca, voi mi
 29
 di - te, mol - to fran - ca, ch'al - la fi - glia del Bar - bie - re un car - toc - cio pien di
 32
 dol - ci in que - st'og - gi si man - dò, in que - st'og - gi si man - dò.

b)



si man - dò. U - n'al - tra vol - ta quan - do ch'io sor - to con ca - te - nac - ci e più luc -
 74
 - chet - ti a cen - to chia - vi vi chiu - de - rò, a cen - to chia - vi vi chiu - de - rò.

Ex. 1

first, a kind of neutral declamatory singing, sets each line of text as a two-bar phrase that begins on a weak beat and whose final accented syllable (normally the penultimate) falls on a downbeat (see Ex. 1a, bars 20–26). The basic feature of this style – the succession of discrete two-bar phrases – appears frequently, in ensembles and finales as well as arias.²³ Its declamatory quality derives both from the consistently syllabic setting of the text and the mechanically regular rhythm. Rests normally separate the two-bar settings of individual lines – which therefore do not flow into one another as in more lyrical arias – and each phrase tends to move from one chord-tone to another, often resulting in a rather dull melodic profile. The effect, though not inherently comic, is certainly non-lyrical.

The second melodic style ubiquitous in comic numbers is rapid patter, which serves to depict rage, fear, joy or some other strong emotion. Patter declamation compresses the two-bar settings of lines to one bar. The final accent of each line still falls on a downbeat, but the note values are roughly halved so that the line begins after the downbeat of the preceding bar, as in bars 30–34 of

²³ This style is discussed in more detail in Platoff (see n. 4), 199. Not all arias reiterate the rhythmic pattern quite as mechanically as Ex. 1. Friedrich Lippmann, 'Mozart und der Vers', *Analecta Musicologica*, 18 (1978), 117, notes that Paisiello in particular tends to maintain a single rhythmic pattern for a considerable time.

Ex. 1a. While two-bar line settings frequently leave room for a rest between lines, one-bar patter settings tend to run continuously into each other, allowing the singer to declaim several lines in rapid succession for comic effect.

The interaction of neutral two-bar declamation and faster patter settings varies, but certain general principles apply. The buffa aria has two dramatic aims: to set the stage for a comic outburst and then to provide that outburst, making full use of the vocal and dramatic talents of the singer. The first aim relies on two-bar text declamation: the slower style, used extensively in the first part of an aria, enables the audience to understand clearly the motives from which the frenzy will grow. Conversely, patter most often occurs in the second, freer part of the aria. A sense of acceleration and gathering energy, often of being nearly out of control, ideally suits the climax of a comic number, in which the comprehensibility of the words – usually repeated many times – is a lower priority. Some arias even feature a second level of patter, in which composers shorten the note values still further to fit each line of text into a half bar (see Ex. 1b). This ‘second-order’ patter is typically held in reserve until after the original patter has been presented, thus serving as the comic high point of the piece. The envoi may then either cap this final flurry of rapid declamation, and be repeated several times in succession, or it may stand apart, sung more slowly to emphasise its message.

2

That buffa arias rely on neutral declamatory singing and then on fast patter will surprise no one familiar with opera buffa in its late-eighteenth-century form. But, as mentioned in the introduction, study of these arias as a group – and particularly of their recurring patterns of structure – serves to highlight other, perhaps less immediately obvious stylistic features. It suggests, for one thing, that despite scholarly claims to the contrary the instrumentally-based concept of ‘sonata form’ is less useful as a general analytical yardstick than is one based directly on the two-part structure of the aria text and the two styles of declamation discussed above. We can take as a first example ‘L’anno mille settecento’, a buffa aria from Da Ponte’s and Salieri’s *La cifra* (1789). Its text is a rambling narrative in which the peasant Rusticone (a role created by Benucci) attempts to obscure the fact that one of the two daughters he claims as his own is adopted, and is in fact the offspring of a count. It consists of a quintain, two freely constructed seven-line stanzas with paired rhymes, and two closing quatrains in which Rusticone first sums up his tale and then, in the envoi, privately rejoices in its success.

a	L’anno mille settecento	In the year one thousand seven hundred
b	Cinquantotto, o poco più;	and fifty eight, or about then;
a	Forte al punto, state attento:	here is the point, pay attention:
c	Mi sposai con una giovane	I married a young girl,

- | | | | |
|------|---|---|---|
| (5) | b | Fior di grazie, e di virtù. | a flower of grace and virtue. |
| | d | Tre figliuole il Ciel mi diè, | Heaven gave me three daughters, |
| | d | Perchè una, e due fan tre; | because one and two make three; |
| | e | E fan tre nel modo istesso | they make three in the same way; |
| | e | Una, un'altra, e un'altra appresso. | one, another, and then another. |
| (10) | f | In vent'anni tre figliuole, | In twenty years three daughters, |
| | f | Che per altro or son due sole, | who are now however only two, |
| | d | Perchè l'altra più non c'è. | because the other is no more. |
| | g | Non è poi la gran famiglia; | It is not a big family; |
| | g | E si tratta che ogni figlia, | and the point is that each daughter, |
| (15) | h | Benchè resti senza madre, | although being without a mother, |
| | h | Quando è figlia di suo padre, | when she is her father's daughter, |
| | i | Bella o brutta, brutta o bella, | pretty or ugly, ugly or pretty, |
| | i | Sempre è figlia, sempre è quella, | she is still a daughter, still she is, |
| | j | E si deve maritar. | and she must be married. |
| (20) | k | Questo conto è così chiaro, | This story is so clear |
| | k | Che l'intende anche un notaro, | that even a notary could understand it; |
| | l | Lo so io, lo sanno tutti, | I know it, everyone knows it, |
| | j | Qui non v'è da dubitar. | and there's no reason to doubt. |
| | m | (Gliè l'ho fatta, son confusi, | (I've done it, they're confused, |
| (25) | m | Son storditi, son delusi: | they're stunned, they're deluded: |
| | n | Che piacere, che spassetto, | what pleasure, what amusement, |
| | j | Più non san cosa pensar.) ²⁴ | they no longer know what to think.) |

After a brief introductory ritornello, the aria opens with a standard exposition.²⁵ Its first group provides the neutral, stage-setting passage that serves as precursor to the comedy. The initial quintain is set to a closed period concluding with a full tonic cadence, after which lines 6–9 make a transition towards the dominant (see Fig. 1). The second group (given in Ex. 2, bars 34–69) uses the remainder of the text – except for the envoi – and develops comic momentum. The period in bars 34–54 opens with two-bar phrases but continues flexibly, incorporating patter in bars 38 and 43–45 and concluding with a repeated cadential phrase (bars 50–52 and 52–54). The subsequent two short periods (bars 54–61 and 61–69), in which Rusticone sums up his story, rely on patter singing to create the climax of the exposition. In the first period a melodic pattern initially one bar long (marked *x*) gives way in bar 57 to a two-beat pattern (marked *y*). This shorter pattern, which creates a sense of faster pace, occurs repeatedly in the second period. As is typical, both periods abandon patter

²⁴ The text is reproduced from the Milan libretto (Gio. Battista Bianchi, c. 1790 [US-Wc: Schatz 9281]), with minor changes from Salieri's autograph score (A-Wn: 16.514).

²⁵ 'Exposition' in this context refers to a section that presents musical paragraphs in the tonic and then a contrasting key (virtually always the dominant), with a confirming cadence in that key. It does not imply the presentation of thematic material that will return later in the movement.

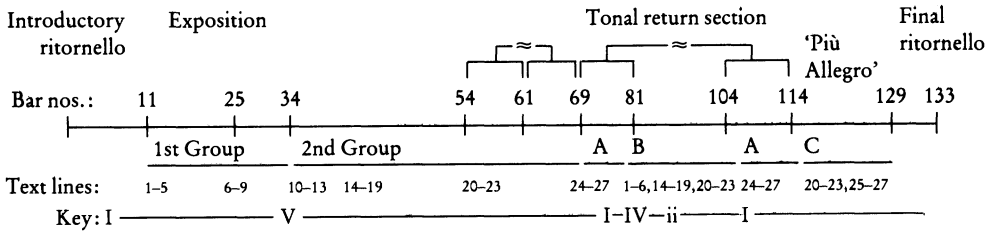


Fig. 1. Da Ponte and Salieri: *La cifra*, II, 20: 'L'anno mille settecento'.

to conclude with two-bar cadential ideas, repeated in the second case to mark the end of the exposition.

The second half of the aria comprises the 'tonal return section'. As the term suggests, this section remains largely in the tonic; but the return to the home key, a moment of crucial importance in an instrumental sonata movement, receives relatively little emphasis here.²⁶ It occurs within two bars (bars 72–73), as a tonic chord in B^b becomes V⁷ in E^b through the addition of the seventh, a moment not marked by a cadence but subordinated to the continuity of a section that will conclude with a strong cadence eight bars later (see bars 69–81 in Ex. 2). The lack of emphasis at bar 73 is particularly clear in comparison with the strong articulation marking the end of the exposition (at bar 69), an important moment because it concludes the public part of Rusticone's peroration and separates it from the final quatrain, delivered as an aside. The latter begins unobtrusively and, as mentioned above, builds to the cadence at bar 81.

While the aria minimises the point of tonal return, it focuses energy on the end of the long tonic section (and thus the end of the piece). The second half of the aria is in ABAC form. The two A sections (bars 69–81 and 104–14), which set Rusticone's triumphant aside, are equivalent except that the second omits the two bars in which the first A section returns from V to I. In the long B section, Rusticone repeats in rapid pater much of the story already told in the first half of the aria. And in C, a stretta marked 'più allegro', he enthusiastically restates both final quatrains. Both the repeated passage (A) and the reiteration in pater of earlier text (B) are typical of tonal return sections. Their presence clearly serves the needs of structural balance and comic expression rather than those of the 'story', since the entire text has been heard by bar 81. But this structural balance does not depend on the sonata principle, with its call for the non-tonic thematic material of the exposition to return in the tonic. Salieri's tonal return section has virtually no thematic connection to the exposition (beyond the conventional rhythmic patterns of the one- and two-bar

²⁶ The term derives from Hunter (see n. 22), 40, who uses it to describe through-composed arias by Haydn 'in which the tonic make[s] a structural return, but is not accompanied by thematic material from the exposition'. I use the term more broadly here, referring to the second portion of an aria even if the return to the tonic is not highly articulated.

Da Ponte and Salieri: *La cifra*, Act II scene 20:
 'L'anno mille settecento', bars 34-81.
 (Violins, voice and bass-line only)

34 [Allegro] a 2

1st & 2nd Violins

Rusticone

[Basso]

f *p* [simile]

In ven - t'an - ni tre fi - gliuo-le, che per al - tro or son due

38

Vns.

R.

B.

f *p* [simile]

so - le, per - chè l'al - tra più non c'è, for - te al pun - to, non è poi la gran fa -

42

Vns.

R.

B.

[simile]

- mi - glia; e si trat - ta ch'o - gni fi - glia, ben - chè re - sti sen - za

45

Vns.

R.

B.

mf *p*

madre, quando è fi - glia di suo pa - dre, bel - la o brut - ta, brut - ta o bel - la, sem - pre è

mf *p*

49

Vns. *cresc.* *fp*

R. *fi - glia, sem - pre è quel - la, e si de - ve ma - ri -*

B. *cresc.* *fp*

52

Vns. *fp* *ff*

R. *- tar, e si de - ve ma - ri - tar.*

B. *fp* *f*

55

Vns. *p*

R. *x* *p* *y*

Que - sto con - to è co - si chia - ro, che l'in - tende an - che un no - ta - ro, lo so io, lo san - no

B. *p*

58

Vns. *f* *a2* *p*

R. *tut - ti, qui non v'è da du - bi - tar, qui non v'è da du - bi -*

B. *f*

61

Vns. *p* *cresc.*

R. *p* *cresc.*

B. *p* *cresc.*

- tar. Que-sto con-to è co-sì chia-ro che lo ve-de anche un no-ta-ro, lo so io, lo san-no

64

Vns. *f* *a2*

R. *f*

B. *f*

tut-ti, qui non v'è da du-bi - tar, qui non v'è da du-bi -

67

Vns. *p*

R. *p*

B. *p*

- tar, qui non v'è da du-bi - tar. (Glie l'ho

70

Vns. *p*

R. *p*

B. *p*

fat-ta, son con - fu - si, son con - fu - si, son stor-di - ti, son de-

73

Vns.

R.

B.

- lu - si: che pia-ce-re, che spas - set - to, son con-fu - si, son de -

76

Vns.

R.

B.

- lu - si, che pia - ce - re, che spas - set - to, son con - fu - si, son de - lu - si, più non san co - sa pen -

79

Vns.

R.

B.

sar, che pia - ce - re, che spas - set - to, più non san co - sa pen - sar.)

Ex. 2

phrase units).²⁷ Instead, its sheer length balances the first part of the aria, and as the section progresses it becomes more comic and increasingly energetic, relying on patter singing and a faster tempo for an exciting ending. The smugness of Rusticone's aside, first heard in bars 74–81, becomes doubly effective the second time, after a long and deliberately aimless passage in which he needlessly retells his story. And this repeated aside leads to the faster, climactic stretta.

Salieri's aria remains, however, a less-than-perfect illustration in one respect:

²⁷ Some buffa arias restate in the tonal return section material either from the first or the second group of the exposition, though not from both; a larger number do not restate previous thematic material.

except for its faster coda it stays in one tempo throughout. The lack of thematic connection between exposition and tonal return section is even more pronounced in buffa arias with more than one tempo – and this group comprises at least half of the Viennese repertory of the 1780s. In a two-tempo aria the first section, most often an Andante, will form the exposition;²⁸ if the aria has three tempos the exposition will be divided in two, with the first group either an Andante or a fast tempo and the second a contrasting Andante or Larghetto, usually in 3/4 or 6/8.²⁹ In either case the final tempo (Allegro or faster) provides the tonal return section, without any reference to earlier thematic material.

3

In an era when the operas of Mozart's contemporaries have largely disappeared from the repertory, studies of them can often best be justified by the new insights they offer into Mozart's own works. Mozart remains our focus, even if we have largely moved beyond the approach that bases musical history on the study of a few 'geniuses' and their 'masterpieces'. And in light of Mozart's careful attention in the 1780s to operatic style in Vienna, the resemblances between his buffa arias and those of Salieri or Paisiello are by no means unexpected. 'Aprite un po' quegli occhi', Figaro's outburst of jealous rage in Act IV of *Le nozze di Figaro*, exemplifies with particular clarity the two-part structure of the buffa aria, with the opening stanzas (two quatrains of *settenario*) setting the scene for a subsequent outburst of comic energy (a free section of nineteen lines in *senario*).³⁰ What is more, its music relies for comic effect on the same melodic styles and formal principles as 'L'anno mille settecento': hardly surprising, as both arias were designed to exploit the vocal and dramatic talents of Francesco Benucci.

	a	Aprite un po' quegli occhi	Just open your eyes,
	a	Uomini incauti e sciocchi,	you rash and foolish men,
	b	Guardate queste femmine,	and look at these women,
	c	Guardate cosa son.	see what they really are.
(5)	d	Queste chiamate Dee	These goddesses, so called
	e	Dagli ingannati sensi,	by the intoxicated senses,
	e	A cui tributa incensi	to whom feeble reason
	c	La debole ragion.	offers tribute.
	f	Son streghe che incantano	They are witches who cast spells
(10)	g	Per farci penar,	for our torment,
	f	Sirene che cantano	sirens who sing

²⁸ For example, 'Quel che spesso vero appare' from Brunati's and Storace's *Gli sposi malcontenti* (1785).

²⁹ See 'Sorger dobbiam dal letto' from *Il Demogorgone*, whose text is given on p. 102.

³⁰ Heartz, 'Le nozze' (see n. 8), 88–9, points out the resemblances between this aria and 'Veramente ho torto, è vero' from Paisiello's *Il barbiere* (Ex. 1). See also Hermann Abert, *W. A. Mozart: Neubearbeitete und erweiterte Ausgabe von Otto Jahns Mozart*, 2 vols., 8th edn (Leipzig, 1973–75), I, 363, who shows a connection between 'Aprite un po'' and an aria from Paisiello's *Il re Teodoro*.

	g	Per farci affogar;	for our confusion;
	<i>b</i>	Civette che allettano	night owls who fascinate
	<i>i</i>	Per trarci le piume,	to pluck us,
(15)	<i>j</i>	Comete che brillano	comets who dazzle
	<i>i</i>	Per toglierci il lume;	to deprive us of light;
	k	Son rose spinose,	they are thorned roses,
	k	Son volpi vezzose,	alluring vixens,
	l	Son orse benigne,	smiling she-bears,
(20)	l	Colombe maligne,	malign doves,
	m	Maestre d'inganni,	masters of deceit,
	m	Amiche d'affanni,	lovers of anxiety,
	<i>n</i>	Che fingono, mentono,	who cheat and lie,
	<i>n</i>	Amore non sentono,	who feel no love
(25)	o	Non senton pietà.	and have no pity.
	p	Il resto nol dico,	The rest I need not say,
	o	Già ognuno lo sa.	for everyone already knows it.

Da Ponte's text depicts ruefulness gradually growing into expressive (and comic) fury, from the warnings of the opening two quatrains to increasingly fanciful and rapid-fire metaphors. The music accordingly avoids sharp breaks within the first setting of the text (bars 24–70), moving in a carefully controlled build-up of energy from the neutral phrases of the exposition to ever-faster patter in the tonal return section. In the exposition (bars 24–48) the two quatrains are set to tonic and dominant paragraphs respectively, with each line of text sung to a two-bar phrase. Unlike Salieri's aria, where a break was dramatically appropriate, the end of Mozart's exposition is not marked by elaborate cadences. Patter dominates the rest of the piece, as Figaro characterises the cruelty and deceitfulness of women.

The tonal return section begins with patter in bar 49 (see Ex. 3), but the lines are initially paired in two-bar phrases. As in 'L'anno mille settecento' the music moves easily from V to I, with I in the dominant becoming V⁷ in the tonic, Mozart smoothing over the tonal shift by placing it within a sequence (marked with brackets in bars 53–57). At bar 57 the one-bar phrases, immediately repeated, create a sense of acceleration. The build-up is intensified by the faster, 'second-order' patter beginning in bar 61 and by a climb to climactic high E^b in bars 64–66 following a crescendo to *forte*. The period then closes with two-bar cadential phrases carrying the envoi: 'Il resto nol dico, / Già ognuno lo sa' [The rest I need not say, / for everyone already knows it].³¹ The increasingly excited music of bars 49–70 is clearly the comic centre of the aria; we are not surprised to hear the passage again, only slightly changed, in bars 77–102. And in between Figaro briefly returns to the beginning of his complaint, just as Rusticone more expansively retold his tale. At the end of the aria Figaro, like

³¹ The fact that both composers were writing for Benucci may contribute to the similarities between the patter build-up in bars 57–66 of Mozart's aria and bars 55–65 and 74–81 of 'L'anno mille settecento'.

Da Ponte and Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro*, Act II scene 26:
 'Aprite un po' quegli'occhi', bars 47-71.

47 Figaro

de - bo - le ra - gion. Son stre - ghe, che in-

50

F. - can - ta - no per far - ci pe - nar, si - re - - ne, che can - ta - no per far - ci af - fo -

53

F. - gar, ci - vet - te, che al - let - ta - no per trar - ci le piu - me, co - me - te, che

56

F. bril - la - no per to - glier - ci il lu - me, son ro - se spi - no - se, son vol - pi vez -

59

F. *z* - zo - se, son or - se be - ni - gne, co - lom - be ma -

61

F. li - gne, ma - e - stre d'in - gan - ni, a - mi - che d'af - fan - ni, che fin - go - no, men - to - no, a - mo - re non

63

F. sen - ton, non sen - ton pie - tà, non sen - ton pie -

65

F. - tà, no, no, no, no, il re - sto, il re - sto nol

68

F. di - co, già o - gnu - no, già ognu - no lo sa. A - pri - te un po' que -

Ex. 3

Rusticone, restates the envoi several times, in the process making the famous joke in which the horn-calls suggest the cuckold.

Several common features emerge from this comparative consideration of arias by Salieri and Mozart. Each piece moves from a relatively neutral beginning to an energetic, comic continuation based on patter singing, with two or more high points. The tonal return section of each aria relies on new thematic material, not on material from the exposition. Continuous phrases smooth over the return to the tonic after the exposition: there is no sense of this return being a crucial point of articulation. Finally, ends of sections (rather than beginnings) are highly articulated. This is most clear in the closing cadences of the expositions (especially emphatic in 'L'anno mille settecento') and in the repeated energetic cadential phrases that conclude periods within the tonal return section (bars 66–70 and 94–102 in 'Aprite un po'). By contrast, the tonal return section of each aria begins unobtrusively, without particularly striking melodic ideas.

Other buffa arias by Mozart operate according to similar guiding principles, even though their formal plans may vary. In the 'Catalogue Aria', for instance, the exposition and tonal return section are in different tempos. While this is quite common, the unusual progression from a fast to a slow tempo means that the aria cannot end with rapid excited patter.³² Therefore both the introductory section (bars 1–16) and the comic build-up of patter singing occur within the exposition, the latter section laid out in an ABAB' pattern (as might be found in a tonal return section). In bars 16–37 in the tonic (and the equivalent bars 49–71 in the dominant), Leporello reports the total number of Don Giovanni's conquests, country by country. The two passages of patter (bars 37–49 and 71–84) list the variety of social types found in the catalogue – the farm girls, countesses and others. The first passage, which modulates to the dominant, uses patter lines initially separated by four-beat rests, for an effect of gradual acceleration. But the second passage jumps suddenly into continuous patter at bar 71, the quaver motion soon taken up by the entire orchestra for the climax of the Allegro, and is concluded by a pair of emphatic cadential phrases. In effect the Allegro exposition comprises both the dramatic and comic

³² The same progression also occurs in Figaro's 'Scorsi già molti paesi' from *Il barbiere*.

functions usually accomplished by a complete buffa aria. The Andante that follows has a different purpose: it presents the more subtly comic scene of Leporello describing Don Giovanni's seduction techniques while aping them to the strains of an elegant minuet.³³

4

What do pieces like these have to do with sonata form? Some writers have asserted that operatic numbers of the Classical period (or at least those by Mozart) rely on sonata form principles as much as do instrumental movements, though slightly more general terms like 'sonata style' or 'sonata principle' are sometimes used. Charles Rosen, for example, claims that 'no description of sonata form can be given that will fit the Haydn quartets but not the majority of forms in a Mozart opera'; and Tim Carter says flatly that 'the sonata principle governs nearly all Classical instrumental and vocal forms'.³⁴

Whether the term is 'form' or 'principle', the paradigm implicitly offered by these and countless other writers has several basic features: a strong polarity between the tonic and a contrasting key (usually the dominant); a highly articulated return to the tonic, typically following a section that withholds the tonic while modulating several times; and a concluding section in the tonic that balances and resolves the earlier harmonic tensions. It is this balancing and resolution aspect that seems critical. Writers often see the return of earlier melodic material, particularly that from the second key area of the exposition, as an 'ideal' structural solution,³⁵ yet when dealing with operatic pieces they are constrained to acknowledge the frequent absence of such a melodic return, often invoking the dramatic situation as justification. Writing about the Act III sextet in *Figaro*, for instance, Rosen admits that 'the harmonic structure and the proportions outweigh the letter of the melodic pattern', while in demonstrating the sonata aesthetic of the Act II sextet in *Don Giovanni* he notes the imbalances caused by 'dramatic exigency'.³⁶ This sort of argument is problematic precisely because it is irrefutable. By beginning with the supposition that operatic numbers rely on sonata form, one ensures a predictable result: all formal elements congruent with sonata form confirm the initial hypothesis, while incongruities are ascribed to dramatic necessities of one sort or another. What is more, such an analytic approach relegates the poetry and story of an opera

³³ The principles outlined here apply in different ways to other examples, such as Figaro's 'Se vuol ballare' and 'Non più andrai' from Act I of *Figaro*. For a recent analysis of the latter see James Webster, 'To Understand Verdi and Wagner We Must Understand Mozart', *19th-Century Music*, 11 (1987–88), 181.

³⁴ Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style* (New York, 1971), 296; and Carter (see n. 2), 90. See also Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (1956; rev. edn, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1988), 58–63, and Nachum Schoffman, 'Vocal Sonata Forms of Mozart', *Current Musicology*, 28 (1979), 19–29.

³⁵ Carter, 102–3.

³⁶ Rosen (see n. 34), 295, 296–301.

to second-class status, largely ignoring them until they are needed to account for a formal 'anomaly'.

It is in this context significant that discussions of sonata form in Mozart's operas consider almost exclusively ensembles rather than arias, and that most references to arias involve *Idomeneo* rather than the Italian comic operas:³⁷ the arias in both Mozartian and non-Mozartian opera buffa all too often fail to conform to all-embracing sonata-form prescriptions. As Michael Robinson says:

The appearance of [...] non-recapitulatory structures in arias of the 1770s and 1780s suggests that composers were getting out of the frame of mind of believing that formalised returns of musical material or of text were necessary in solo items [...] 'Returns' of one kind or another in these items there may be, but these formalised gestures are less heavily emphasised than they used to be.³⁸

And our analyses would seem to confirm Robinson's point. A tonal return of the type normally associated with the start of a sonata recapitulation may be marked in several ways. Various devices create a point of closure before a return: a strong cadence or half-cadence, or a rhythmic pattern that closes on a downbeat followed by rests. Alternatively, changes in dynamics and texture, perhaps with a preparatory dominant pedal, call attention to what is about to happen. The moment of return itself can be highlighted by the restatement of a previously heard theme (particularly the opening theme, creating a so-called double return³⁹) or by the presentation of a new theme. But neither 'L'anno mille settecento' nor 'Aprite un po'' adopts these procedures; instead they return unobtrusively to the tonic within a phrase. Clearly Salieri and Mozart did not regard the moment of return as a crucial juncture in the form of these arias.

What remains of the instrumentally-based 'sonata principles' described above is the polarity between tonic and dominant and the notion of a concluding tonic section that resolves earlier harmonic tensions. And here it seems important to distinguish between the characteristics of specific forms and common, even ubiquitous, features of Classical music. With the exception of variation forms, virtually all instrumental and vocal movements of this period move from the tonic to a contrasting key, and then they return to the tonic, continuing for some time rather than concluding immediately on arrival back in I. But the fact that nearly all Classical vocal and instrumental movements rely on the same overall tonal plan – I–V–I (or I–V–X–I)⁴⁰ – does not mean that the tonal plan

³⁷ Kerman (see n. 34) uses the trio 'Ah, taci, ingiusto core' from Act II of *Don Giovanni* (63–8); Rosen's principal example is the sextet 'Riconosci in questo amplesso' from Act III of *Figaro* (290–5); Carter relies mainly on 'Cosa sento! tosto andate', the Act I trio from *Figaro* (95–104). For discussions of *Idomeneo* see Kerman, 82–5, Rosen, 306–7, and Jehoash Hirshberg, 'Formal and Dramatic Aspects of Sonata Form in Mozart's *Idomeneo*', *Music Review*, 38 (1977), 192–210.

³⁸ Robinson, in Carter (see n. 2), 24.

³⁹ In an aria or ensemble, it is a triple return if the beginning of the text also returns. See Hunter (n. 22), 34.

⁴⁰ This formulation of the 'key-area form' is discussed in Leonard G. Ratner, *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (New York and London, 1980), 209–47.

has the same role, or the same significance, in all contexts. Operatic movements differ from instrumental ones in obvious but important ways: they have texts, they occur in dramatic situations, and they convey information about characters and stories. And precisely because operatic numbers communicate in these additional ways, they may not function as do instrumental forms.

In an instrumental movement, for example, the division between first and second groups – or the articulation at the end of the exposition and the start of the recapitulation – is clearly indicated, in part to communicate a sense of the size and shape of the overall movement. Without such moments one might fail to perceive the balances and relationships built into a form, for example the similarities and differences between exposition and recapitulation. However, musical demarcation of these divisions may not be crucial in an operatic number, where attention can be directed to the presentation of character, the particular qualities of a text or a striking dramatic conflict. In 'L'anno mille settecento', we enjoy the smugness of Rusticone's last two stanzas and have no objection to rehearing them after an intervening section of patter, despite the formal redundancy. As we have seen, the envoi, delivered aside, immediately follows the penultimate, summing-up stanza in bar 69. In this case the clearly marked end of the exposition typical of a sonata form is dramatically valuable, indicating the end of Rusticone's public presentation. But an articulated return to the tonic would give too great an importance to the opening of this final section, which is after all an aside. Instead Salieri introduces the quatrain quietly, letting it build to an energetic cadence (at bar 81) and unobtrusively returning to the tonic. Because the dramatic situation and the organisation of the text in 'Aprite un po' are different from 'L'anno mille settecento', Mozart's musical organisation differs in some respects from Salieri's. As Figaro's words portray a man whose jealousy gradually makes him more and more angry, the musical setting builds continuously in energy and excitement. Its first important point of formal articulation occurs only after the entire text has been sung through (at bar 70), setting up a typical restatement of earlier text and a repetition of the climactic patter section.

Thus within a formal structure common to a great many buffa arias, 'L'anno mille settecento' and 'Aprite un po' exhibit distinct and individual responses to the needs of their texts. Salieri separates Rusticone's narrative from his peroration while Mozart builds gradually and continuously from Figaro's opening statements to his comic metaphors, only to repeat the process in condensed fashion. Even given the extent of possible variations, however, the relevance of sonata-form features to these arias seems limited, at least beyond the presence of an exposition. They contain no recapitulatory tonic restatement of either first group or second group material from the exposition. (Indeed, much of the thematic material in these expositions is considerably less distinctive than that normally found in the exposition of an instrumental movement.) They do of course present long closing tonic sections that balance the earlier departures from the tonic; but, as mentioned before, so does nearly every instrumental and vocal movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And the term

‘sonata form’, if we apply it so broadly as to encompass all such pieces, loses its usefulness to distinguish some musical forms from others.

It is hardly a mystery why our current understanding of Classical period opera depends on formal models derived from instrumental music. As James Webster observes, ‘serious and responsible analysis of opera is scarcely two decades old, against a tradition of nearly two centuries for Classical period instrumental music’.⁴¹ Analysis of symphonies and quartets has long relied on formal approaches, in no small part because of the great formal clarity of much of this music. But there is an additional factor: the Classical composers whose operas most interest us (particularly Mozart, but also Haydn) were also masters of instrumental music. It has thus seemed doubly appropriate to think of their operatic works in instrumental terms.

Recent writers on nineteenth-century opera have been quicker than those working in the eighteenth century to recognise the fundamentally different concerns that shape operatic and instrumental music of their respective periods. In discussing Joseph Kerman’s essay on *Tristan*, ‘Opera as Symphonic Poem’, Carolyn Abbate calls attention to the important messages of Kerman’s title:

‘Symphonic’, then, makes both a statement about the relationship of music to poetry or staged drama, and a value judgement concerning the music: the one, that we need not appeal to external elements – whose relation to the music may be tenuous – to account for musical events; the other, that the music is ‘unified’ or ‘coherent’ in purely musical terms.⁴²

Her statement loses none of its force if we substitute ‘sonata form’ for ‘symphonic’. And the claims she challenges in Kerman’s title need to be addressed in connection with Mozart’s operas as well as Wagner’s. We *do* need to appeal to the ‘external elements’ of poetic text and stage action to account fully for the music of a Mozart aria or ensemble; and we cannot take the purely musical coherence of such a piece as a given.

Thus far the tradition of seeing Mozart’s operatic music in instrumental terms remains to be decisively confronted.⁴³ Nonetheless, certain requirements for a more appropriate analytic method seem clear. It should begin with the text, and examine the music as a setting of that text; and it should deal explicitly with the appropriate expressive and structural conventions, and with the needs of the singer and the particular moment in the drama. By locating an individual number or an entire opera within a more fully defined context, such an approach promises a more complete understanding of how the norms of operatic writing shape even the most original and challenging works: works such as Mozart’s three late masterpieces of opera buffa.

⁴¹ Webster (see n. 33), 179.

⁴² Carolyn Abbate, ‘Wagner, “On Modulation”, and *Tristan*’, *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 1 (1989), 35. Kerman’s essay is in *Opera as Drama* (see n. 34), 158–77.

⁴³ See Webster (n. 33) for a critical survey of analytic approaches to late-eighteenth-century opera.