

VOX IMAGO

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART
THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO

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TEATRO ALLA SCALA



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THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO: LISTENING GUIDE Philip Gossett

Having demonstrated his ability as a composer of serious opera with the remarkable *Idomeneo* (Munich, Residenztheater, 29 January 1781), Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart wanted nothing more than the opportunity again to compose for the lyrical stage. The principal center for operatic performances in the Hapsburg realms was, of course, its capital city of Vienna. In March 1781 Mozart took up residence there, first as part of the retinue of his Salzburg patron, Archbishop Colloredo, then—after he refused in May to return to Salzburg with the Archbishop—as an independent artist. His first important Viennese theatrical composition was the German Singspiel, *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, on which he worked off and on from July 1781 until its first performance on 16 July 1782 at the Burgtheater of Vienna (at that time the theater was devoted to German opera). The enormous success of that work provided a springboard for the further development of opera in German. For Mozart, though, it also helped establish his compositional credentials in Vienna, providing him with further opportunities to compose for the theater.

The key event of 1783, though, was Mozart's meeting with a poet from the Veneto, Lorenzo Da Ponte, who had come to Vienna in 1780-81 and was soon to become the resident librettist for the new Italian company established at the Burgtheater. As he wrote to his father on 7 May 1783:

Our poet here is now a certain Abbate da Ponte. He has a huge amount to do, revising pieces for the theatre, and he has to write *per obbligo* an entirely new libretto for Salieri, which will take him two months. He has promised after that to write a new one for me. But who knows whether he will be able to keep his word—or whether he will want to. As you are aware, these Italian gentlemen are very charming to your face...

There have been few occasions in the history of opera where the talents of a librettist and a composer have meshed so thoroughly. While Mozart probably played a significant role in shaping these librettos, Da Ponte's invention cannot be denied. Their three collaborations, on *Le nozze di Figaro* (Vienna, Burgtheater, 1 May 1786), *Don Giovanni* (Prague, Nationaltheater, 29 October 1787), and *Così fan tutte* (Vienna, Burgtheater, 26 January 1790), are widely recognized today as among the greatest works of operatic art ever fashioned. While we know these works intimately today, we need to understand how revolutionary they seemed in the 18th century: they were considered musically difficult, orchestrally extravagant, dramaturgically dense.

The composer was frustrated because Da Ponte had several librettos to complete before they could work together, but he used his time well. He studied other Italian operas; he came to know Giovanni Paisiello's setting of the first Figaro drama of the French playwright Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (first seen in Vienna in 1783); he studied works by Joseph Haydn, by Antonio Salieri, by Francesco Bianchi; he began composing an opera to an impossible libretto (*L'oca del Cairo*)—which he soon abandoned. Most of all, he continued working in the area of instrumental music and he came to know music by Bach under the guidance of the Baron Gottfried van Swieten. Mozart's accomplishments in the symphonic repertory, in chamber music (the six "Haydn" Quartets were published in 1785), in the piano concerto (he wrote eight new ones, some of them intensely operatic, between February 1784 and February 1785) were all redefining the possibilities of instrumental style in what has become known as "Viennese classicism." Having heard several of the Quartets ultimately dedicated to him, Haydn himself told Mozart's father, Leopold, in 1785 that his son was "the greatest living composer."

Beaumarchais's play *La folle journée ou Le mariage de Figaro*, was politically and morally controversial both in its original Parisian performances and in Vienna, where the play was at first prohibited. But, as happened so often in the history of opera, what could not be said might still be sung (although with some planing down of its more controversial elements). It seems likely that Mozart and Da Ponte began their

work on *Le nozze di Figaro* during the summer of 1785 and had largely completed it by the winter of 1785-86, but its performance (apparently scheduled for the Carnival of 1786) was postponed until 1 May. While the opera was reasonably successful, it was nonetheless considered difficult by the public. It had only nine performances that first season and was revived in Vienna only in 1789, by which time it had begun captivating other operatic centers. It was thanks to the enormous success of *Figaro* in Prague, in fact, that Mozart was commissioned to write *Don Giovanni* for that city.

The following “guida all’ascolto” for *Le nozze di Figaro* is based on the uncut version of the opera performed by Gerard Korsten and his singers for the Teatro alla Scala performances of February 2006.

Sinfonia

The sinfonia begins with a whispered, practically surreptitious opening theme played by strings and bassoon (later repeated with added winds). Its unusual phrase structure consists of one measure, then two, then four. Soon, though, the entire orchestra is in perpetual motion. Despite the rhythmic buzz, the differences in the themes is pronounced: a highly stable tonic theme features winds; a chromatic theme, with characteristic forte/piano alternations, opens the second group; a lovely closing melody is shared by first violins and bassoon. Mozart pits winds and strings against one another, with trumpets and drums adding to the sonority at cadences. While the structure is a standard sonata form (without development), Mozart abbreviates the first group in the recapitulation so as to use its cadential phrases in a forceful coda, whose opening anticipates the “Rossini crescendo.” The character of the sinfonia captures the incessant activity that will mark this mad day at the castle of Count Almaviva near Seville.

Act I

In the first act of *Le nozze di Figaro*, we are introduced to all the principal characters except for the Countess (that she appears only at the beginning of Act II is a master stroke).

N. 1. Duetto (Susanna and Figaro)

We meet first the servants, Susanna to the Countess and Figaro (the one-time Barber of Seville) to the Count. Each prepares in his own way for their imminent wedding. Figaro (accompanied mostly by strings) seeking a good position for the bed the Count is giving them as a wedding present. He knows, but she does not, that they are to be housed in the room in which we find them. Susanna (accompanied mostly by winds) is trying on a hat she has made for herself. Mozart differentiates the characters with music that imitates their actions. Figaro’s melody reaches higher and higher, as if it were measuring musical space; Susanna’s tune is seductive and flirtatious. First we hear their melodies complete; then Figaro begins again, but Susanna constantly interrupts him. “Look at me, look at my hat,” she insists with such vehemence that Figaro has no choice but to abandon his activity to follow hers. It is a simple way to indicate that Susanna will be the dominating force behind much of Mozart’s opera.

N. 2. Duetto (Susanna and Figaro)

When—in the following recitative—Susanna realizes that the Count has assigned them this very room, Susanna calls Figaro a “pazzo.” “Grazie,” he responds and launches another duettino, explaining why this room—right next to the rooms of the Count and Countess—is the best in the castle. If madama wants you in the middle of the night, he sings to a happy little tune in B flat major, accompanied largely by strings, she just needs to ring a bell (a high “din din” with flutes and oboes) and you can be there. And if my master wants me (a low “don don” with horns and bassoons), I’m there to serve him. Sure, Susanna counters, as the music darkens toward the minor, and if the Count sends you “tre miglia lontan,” he will be at my door in no time flat (“don don”). To show us Figaro’s agitation, Mozart stops the jaunty tune cold, turning first to recitative, then to new, troubled music (with horns, traditional instruments associated with cuckoldry, in the background), as Susanna agrees to explain the situation.

N. 3. Cavatina (Figaro)

In his philandering, Susanna informs Figaro, the Count has turned his attention to me. Although he recently abolished formally the *droit du seigneur*, which gave the Lord of a manor the right to sleep with any woman before her marriage, he wants to reinstate it for your “Susanetta.” By granting a big dowry and giving us this room, he hopes to gain an advantage. She adds that the Count uses the music-master, Basilio, to press his case with her. A bell rings, and Susanna goes off to serve her lady.

Left alone, Figaro asserts—in recitative—that the Count’s plan will fail. Then, addressing himself to the absent Count, he launches into his cavatina, accompanied by strings and horns: if you want to dance, I’ll play the tune. The music begins with a minuet (in 3/4), an aristocratic dance at which the Count is more accomplished, but Figaro continues with a variation (now in 2/4), substituting his *own* kind of more popular dance. The cavatina is more bluster than substance. When Figaro starts to explain his plans, he gets stuck on the word “saprò,” making it clear that he doesn’t know at all. Effects of this kind, of course, are entirely the contributions of Mozart’s musical setting: the libretto, however accomplished, is a canvas to which Mozart’s music supplies the pigment. Figaro concludes with a reprise of the opening minuet, without having progressed anywhere, although the orchestra—which has the last word—returns to the 2/4 rhythm of the popular dance as Figaro exits.

N. 4. Aria (Bartolo)

Don Bartolo and his servant Marcellina enter. He is still smarting from the machinations of Figaro that thwarted his own ambition to marry Rosina, and he will be happy to take revenge on the ex-Barber. Marcellina, in fact, has a contract whereby Figaro agrees to marry *her* unless he pays off a large sum of money he has borrowed. Bartolo intends to assist Marcellina in getting the contract respected by encouraging Susanna to refuse the advances of the Count. The latter, Bartolo reasons, will spitefully support Marcellina’s right to marry Figaro.

Both Mozart and his librettist make light of Bartolo’s “revenge” aria, all bluster and noise, even with its trumpets and drums. A verse such as “L’obliar l’onte, gli oltraggi,” with its awkward syllables and double vowels, the loud/soft contrasts at “Coll’astuzia, coll’arguzia,” and the dancing triplets at “se tutto il codice dovessi volgere,” all emerge as basically comic. By the time Bartolo insists that “il fatto è serio,” Mozart has contradicted him: Bartolo is defined musically as a comic character, whose revenge will lack the potentially fatal consequences of the revenge invoked by Mozart’s Queen of the Night. All Saviglia may know Don Bartolo, as he insists, but Mozart lets us know what they think of him.

N. 5. Duetto (Susanna and Marcellina)

Marcellina, left alone, observes Susanna entering. In a series of asides they insult one another, until—as each pretends to avoid the other—they have a direct confrontation. Again the orchestral music is physical, imitating the sarcastic curtsies the two women exchange. Their forced politeness degenerates into name calling, over the same orchestral material, as Marcellina refers to Susanna first as “La sposa novella!” and then as “Del Conte la bella!,” to which Susanna (not to be outdone) replies “La dama d’onore” and “Di Spagna l’amore.” But there is nothing Marcellina can say that equals the young woman’s mocking “L’età,” first once, then (again thanks to Mozart) over and over with exultant triumph, driving the furious older woman from the stage.

N. 6. Aria (Cherubino)

With “old love” gone, “puppy love” enters, in the person of Cherubino, the Countess’ godson, an adolescent boy (played by a mezzo-soprano) in love with the very idea of love. He is upset because he has been banished from the household by the Count, who caught him the other day alone with the daughter of Antonio, the gardener, one Barbarina, with whom the Count, too, carries on a secret dalliance. The young man wants his godmother to plead for him, but Susanna, knowing that the youth is madly in love with the Countess, laughs at him. When Cherubino sees in her hand a ribbon that has touched the skin of the Countess, he snatches it away and promises never to return it so long as he lives. In recompense, though, he gives Susanna a song he has written so that she can read it to the Countess, to Barbarina, to every woman in the palace. (This is the canzona, “Voi che sapete,” which Cherubino himself will sing in the second act.)

Cherubino’s aria, a headlong paean to the power of love, is subtly constructed. The first two poetic stanzas are quatrains of *decasillabi* (“Non so più cosa son, cosa faccio”), with the music flurrying past in a rush of sound. Yet Mozart manipulates it expressively by repeating selective words. Most striking is the final verse of the second strophe (“un desio ch’io non posso spiegar”), where Cherubino’s internal agony is signaled by languishing chromaticism on “un desio.” After repeating the opening, Mozart maintains the musical energy, but alters the melodic ideas, as Da Ponte’s text moves from *decasillabi* to a new set of verses in *settenario* (“Parlo d’amor vegliando”): Cherubino speaks of love when he is awake, when he is asleep, when he addresses the waters, the mountains, the flowers, the grass. Here Mozart constantly stops the motion with fermatas, as if the singer awaits a reply. Realizing there will be no answer, Cherubino finally sings the last two verses, Adagio, then quicker, but with pauses, fermatas, and chromatic notes: “E se non ho chi m’oda, parlo d’amor con me.” The effect is not unprepared (the

fermatas in the previous section anticipate the ending), but it breaks all rules of symmetry: rather than complete a musical discourse, Mozart peers into the soul of this adolescent boy. That glance wins him our sympathy for the entire opera.

N. 7. Terzetto

Just as Cherubino finishes, the Count arrives. Afraid to be caught, the page hides behind a chair. Thus begins one of the most magical scenes in all opera, a trio that is a really a quartet for three singers and the silent page. The Count arrives to court Susanna, who he thinks is alone, asking her to meet him in the garden at dusk. Hasn't Basilio told her of his affection? At that very moment Basilio is heard outside. Not wanting to be compromised, the Count hides behind the chair, while Cherubino transfers himself *into* the chair and Susanna covers him with a dress. Basilio now enters and again speaks of the Count's love for Susanna, while accusing her of preferring the page, who he's seen sneaking around. But most of all everyone knows that Cherubino is enamoured of the Countess. This is too much for the Count, who steps forward.

Mozart constructs the ensuing trio for Susanna, the Count, and Basilio in three sections. Each begins with an ascending figure in the strings accompanying the Count. In the first section Mozart characterizes the Count, Basilio, and Susanna with music that will be identified primarily with each of them throughout the trio. The Count tells Basilio to find the seducer and to chase him away; Basilio, with an ingratiating figure in two-measure phrases, begs the Count's pardon for having arrived at a bad moment; Susanna, to an agitated phrase, sings of her despair and terror. As she practically faints, the other two try to seat her in the very chair in which Cherubino is hiding, but that is enough to bring her back to her senses. Both Basilio (using his characteristic music) and Susanna attempt to assuage the Count's fury, but they fail. The second section of the trio begins with the Count—to music derived from the opening—calling for the page's departure ("Parta, parta il damerino"). Soon the music changes character, as the Count relates how he found Cherubino at Barbarina's house yesterday. Reenacting the scene, first in recitative, then using the insinuating music borrowed from Basilio, he approaches the chair, lifts the dress, and—at the words "vedo il paggio"—discovers Cherubino again.

At this point the third section begins: the Count's fury knows no bounds, as he sarcastically calls Susanna "Onestissima signora." In a mocking aside Basilio comments "Così fan tutte le belle," anticipating the subject that Mozart and Da Ponte would set to music some three and a half years later. Basilio then reappropriates his insinuating phrase, repeating with evident satisfaction that his remarks about the page were only "un mio sospetto." As the music fades away, all three characters (and the page) are left in anguish.

N. 8. Coro

The Count realizes that Cherubino has heard everything, but before he can deal with the "picciol serpente," a chorus of peasants enter, followed by Figaro, who carries a veil. In a popular style they praise the Count for preserving the candor of their flowers, having given up the *droit du seigneur*. Figaro asks the "good" Count to place the veil of chastity on Susanna's head. The Count asks a brief delay so that the wedding can be more splendid, while he hopes to find Marcellina and prevent the wedding. The chorus is repeated and the peasants depart.

N. 9. Aria (Figaro)

Now Susanna and Figaro again appeal to the Count for Cherubino. He yields by naming the page an official in his regiment, a post for which he must depart immediately. The act ends with Figaro addressing to the page an aria in which he compares Cherubino's current life with what awaits him as a soldier.

"Non più andrai, farfallone amoroso," is supremely effective, both for its music and its text (there is no way effectively to translate Da Ponte's delicious "Narcisetto, Adoncino d'amor"). The piece is a rondò, with a simple, largely triadic, principal tune. In the first contrasting section (in the dominant), Figaro points out Cherubino's "pennacchini," his "cappello leggiero e galante," his "vermiglio donnesco color," none of which will remain when he serves as a soldier. In the second contrasting section, Figaro insists on the military life ("gran mustacchi," "sciabla al fianco"), but mostly complains about "molto onor, poco contante," as the music underlines the penury of military life by moving to *E minor*. Instead of a popular dance (the "fandango"), Cherubino will have to put up with a "marcia per il fango." And the march, played by the winds alone, is duly heard, as Figaro speaks of mountains and valleys, snows and excessive heat, bombardments and cannons. A third reappearance of the rondò theme leads to a coda based on the

march, first with the winds and Figaro, then with the entire orchestra alone, a facetious celebration of “la gloria militar” to bring down the curtain on Act I of *Le nozze di Figaro*.

Act II

In the second act, we are introduced to the Countess and we witness the Count’s jealousy and rage thwarted at every turn. Mozart’s construction of the long finale to this act is particularly impressive.

N. 10. Cavatina (Contessa)

In the first act we learned of the Count’s philandering and his assault on the virtue of Susanna. Now we meet his Countess, the “Rosina” he courted and won years before, but whom he now feels no hesitation about betraying. Susanna has explained to her what has been happening and, as she exits momentarily, the Countess sings her cavatina, “Porgi Amor,” a hymn to Love: “o mi rendi il mio tesoro, o mi lascia almen morir.” Mozart’s music is simple, but highly expressive. Largely accompanied by strings, the composer introduces splendid echoes in the solo clarinet and bassoon. A memorable orchestral introduction leads to the vocal section, a continuous melody, without large-scale repetitions. A lesser composer might have repeated the opening phrase after the arrival at a held dominant chord on the first appearance of “o mi lascia almen morir.” By refusing to do so, Mozart keeps the Countess’ emotion fresh and compelling: there is no more poignant reflection on the power and pain of love in all opera.

N. 11. Canzona (Cherubino)

Figaro enters. While he seems to be taking the matter lightly, he is actually hatching plans. To keep the Count in a state of anxiety, he has sent an anonymous letter to the Count via Basilio accusing the Countess of infidelity. Knowing the Count’s jealousy, the Countess is horrified at this plan. Figaro wants Susanna to grant the Count a meeting in the garden, but the assignation will be fulfilled by Cherubino (who has not yet departed), dressed as a woman. The Countess will arrive and catch the Count red-handed. Since the Count is hunting, Figaro will send them Cherubino so they can dress him. Off he goes, singing the refrain from “Se vuol ballare.” Cherubino soon arrives, and Susanna insists he sing for the Countess his canzona, which she will accompany on the guitar.

Cherubino’s “Voi, che sapete che cosa è amor” is another example of Mozart’s genius at taking a genre that *should* be simple and turning it into real drama. After all, the music used for the initial quatrain (in *quinari*), a beautiful melody in *B flat major* accompanied by pizzicato strings with echoes from the winds, could easily have been used for the seven stanzas, all of which have the same structure as the first. Instead, Mozart follows the text, which grows increasingly more personal, as Cherubino sings of the delights and torments of love, describing shivers and fires, sighs and palpitations, before repeating the opening stanza. The music departs further and further from the simple melody: it grows tormented and chromatic, harmonies move to foreign keys, the phrases get shorter. It is as if Cherubino’s impersonal ditty about love begins to describe his own feelings, as the music veers out of control. It takes an act of restraint, after he sings “ma pur mi piace languir così,” to force the music back to the original key and to resume a measured delivery for the concluding repeat of the opening stanza.

N. 12. Aria (Susanna)

The Countess is hesitant about dressing Cherubino as a girl: suppose someone enters, she asks. Susanna responds by locking the door. In information that will be important later, we learn that Cherubino’s military commission lacks a seal.

In a remarkable aria, practically a duet (shades of the first-act trio/quartet), Susanna dresses Cherubino as a girl and shows him how to hold his hands, how to walk, how to behave. See how beautiful he is, she tells the Countess: “Se l’amano le femmine, han certo il lor perché.” Mozart constructs the aria as leading to a lovely theme in the dominant (“Madama qui non è”), repeated at the end in the tonic (“Se l’amano le femmine”). For each instruction, a short vocal phrase is answered by an orchestral passage, with Cherubino responding to Susanna. She tells him to turn, for example, and the orchestra responds with a turn figure, which Cherubino mimes.

N. 13. Terzetto

The Countess discovers that Cherubino has used her ribbon (stolen from Susanna in the first act) to bandage a small wound. When she sends Susanna to get a proper bandage, the frightened Cherubino practically admits his love to the Countess, but unexpectedly a knock is heard. It is the Count, who has received the anonymous letter sent by Figaro. Finding the door locked, his suspicions are further aroused. As the Count enters, Cherubino hides in the Countess’ dressing room, leaving the agitated Countess alone

on stage. A noise from the dressing room convinces the Count that the Countess' lover must be there. She insists it is only Susanna. As he positions himself before the door of the dressing room, Susanna reenters the Countess' room and hides.

Come out, Susanna, the Count sings to the person in the dressing room, as the trio begins (another piece in which the page is a silent participant). It is constructed as a sonata movement. In its opening theme in *C major* the Count demands that Susanna emerge; during a modulation to the dominant (in part inflected to the minor), there are phrases for both the Count and Countess, followed by a concluding passage on the dominant, *a 3*, with each character expressing a different sentiment. During a brief transition the Count continues to call Susanna, despite his wife's protests. Recapitulating the opening idea, the Count asks Susanna at least to speak, while the Countess insists she remain silent. A chromatic passage intensifies the anguish of the Countess, until the *a 3* section is recapitulated in the tonic, with an even stronger conclusion and a momentary pause as husband and wife warn each other "giudizio!"

N. 14. Duetto (Susanna and Cherubino)

The Count is ready to call his men to break down the door, but the Countess brings him to his senses. He forces the Countess to exit with him so that he can find tools to unlock the dressing-room door. In the process he locks the door to the Countess's room, unaware that Suzanne is already hiding there.

As soon as they leave, Susanna runs to the dressing-room door to extract Cherubino. The music, accompanied by strings alone, is in perpetual motion, with extended sequential passages to heighten the tension. But how can Cherubino escape? His only hope lies in jumping out of the window. Susanna tries to stop him, but Cherubino—in order to protect the Countess—is determined to get away. The rhythm continues unabated, but the key turns to minor as he embraces Susanna and asks her to kiss the Countess for him. Then he jumps.

N. 15. Finale

While the terrorized Susanna fears he will kill himself, he is already running off as fast as his legs can carry him. She now enters the dressing room (where the Countess had earlier insisted she was to be found) and locks the door behind her. The Count and Countess return. Not knowing what has just transpired, she is certain that the Count, finding Cherubino half undressed, will kill him in his fury. Finally she admits that it is not Susanna in the dressing room, but the page.

This elaborate finale to Act II of *Le nozze di Figaro* has become the quintessential prototype of a Mozartian finale. Da Ponte, in his *Memorie*, describes the nature of such a piece:

Questo finale, che deve essere per altro intimamente connesso col rimanente dell'opera, è una spezie di commediola o di picciol dramma da sé, e richiede un novello intreccio ed un interesse straordinario. In questo principalmente deve brillare il genio del maestro di cappella, la forza de' cantanti, il più grande effetto del dramma. Il recitativo n'è escluso, si canta tutto; e trovar vi si deve ogni genere di canto. L'adagio, l'allegro, l'andante, l'amabile, l'armonioso, lo strepitoso, l'arcistrepitoso, lo strepitosissimo, con cui quasi sempre il suddetto finale si chiude; il che in voce musico-tecnica si chiama la "chiusa" oppure la "stretta," non so se perché in quella la forza del dramma si stringe, o perché dà generalmente non una stretta ma cento al povero cerebro del poeta che deve scrivere le parole. In questo finale devono per teatrale domma comparir in scena tutti i cantanti, se fosser trecento, a uno, a due, a tre, a sei, a dieci, a sessanta, per cantarvi de' soli, de' duetti, de' terzetti, de' sestetti, de' sessantetti; e se l'intreccio del dramma nol permette, bisogna che il poeta trovi la strada di farselo permettere, a dispetto del criterio, della ragione e di tutti gli Aristotili della terra; e, se trovasi poi che va male, tanto peggio per lui.

This is a wonderful description of what Mozart and Da Ponte accomplish in *Le nozze di Figaro*. The piece, which is in many parts, begins with two characters (the Count and Countess), then adds Susanna, Figaro, the gardener Antonio, and finally Marcellina, Basilio, and Bartolo: thus, seven singers (Antonio has exited) are present at the conclusion. With each new character, the meter, key, and tempo change, although some details (short rhythmic figures, for example) can carry over from one section to the next. The concluding section returns to the tonality of the beginning, so that the entire piece is tonally closed.

The finale begins in *E-flat major*. The Count insists that Cherubino emerge, while the Countess begs for mercy: as their dialogue grows more pointed, every phrase is given its due. The Count demands "Qua la chiave," to which the Countess responds "Egli è innocente." The tone turns ugly at "Mora, mora," while

the Countess comments on his “cieca gelosia.” Finally she hands him the key, and with drawn sword he opens the door to find... Susanna. The tempo changes to “Molto andante,” the meter to 3/8, the key to *B-flat major*, as Susanna comes forward. The Countess does her best to disguise her amazement. When the Count enters the dressing room to be certain no one else is there, Susanna—in yet a different meter—explains what happened. And now it is the Count’s turn to beg for mercy (even referring to the Countess as “Rosina”), in a passage constructed from fragments of melody that Mozart combines ingeniously. When the Countess agrees to forgive him, the three join in a beautiful concluding passage.

But more is to come. In walks Figaro, ignorant of what has just happened (the music, changing meter and tempo, jumps to a distant tonality, *G major*). As he seeks to move along preparations for the wedding, the music imitates a popular dance, but the Count—slowing him down—wants to know about the famous letter. The new situation (even in the absence of a new character) suffices to justify a shift in tempo, meter, and tonality (now to *C major*, as the keys begin their slow return to the tonic of the finale, *E-flat major*). The passage is charming: Susanna and the Countess try to inform Figaro of the changed situation, but he remains stolidly unaware. Another reconciliation seems at hand, although the Count continues to hope that Marcellina will upset the plan of Susanna and Figaro. This ensemble features one of the most beautiful single phrases in all Mozart, over a tonic pedal, at “Deh signor, nol contrastate.”

This is another false reprieve, for now the drunken gardener, Antonio enters (the key moves to *F major*): he’s seen many things thrown from the window, but this is the first time they’ve thrown down a man. After ascertaining that Antonio has not seen the man’s face, Figaro claims he himself jumped for fear of the Count. Strange, Antonio comments, you were half as tall: it looked like Chrubino. You’re drunk, says Figaro: it certainly was me, and I twisted my foot when I fell. The rhythm is largely dactylic (♩³ | ♩ ♩³ ♩ ♩³ | ♩). Figaro begins to limp, and he continues with a similar rhythm in the new key (*B-flat major*), tempo (“Andante”), and 6/8 meter (♩³ | ♩³³ ♩³³ | ♩). Well, asks Antonio, and what were those papers that fell out of your pocket? Now Figaro is truly stumped. As Antonio is chased away, Susanna and the Countess sneak around and realize that he has handed the Count the page’s commission. Why did Figaro have it? The information Susanna and the Countess gathered before now proves crucial: the seal was missing!! The Count, nonplussed, does not know how to respond.

But he has no time to do so, for Marcellina, Basilio, and Bartolo arrive and the music returns to the over-all tonic, *E-flat major*, for a final “Allegro assai” in 4/4 time. The orchestra continues the dactylic rhythm (♩³ | ♩ ♩³ ♩ ♩³ | ♩), as the three intruders demand justice for Marcellina. Susanna and the Countess argue against them, but the Count, always to the same music, insists he must read the contract and judge impartially. The ensemble of confusion gets faster (“Più allegro”) and faster (“Prestissimo”), with the act concluding in bedlam.

Act III

In the third act, which takes in a large hall decorated for a wedding feast, we learn that Figaro is actually the son of Bartolo and Marcellina, so that the plot to marry him to Marcellina is doomed. But that does not stop the Count from pursuing his efforts to seduce Susanna.

N. 16. Duetto (Susanna and Conte)

Although perplexed by recent events, the Count is determined to get revenge by forcing Figaro to marry Marcellina. The Countess encourages Susanna (without informing Figaro) to agree to meet the Count that evening in the garden, but the Countess intends to take the place of Susanna at that encounter. Susanna therefore promises the Count she will meet him so as to receive the dowry he has promised her, with which she will pay off Figaro’s debt to Marcellina.

This is the first piece in the opera that begins in a minor key (*A minor*), as the Count reproaches Susanna for holding back. Will she come? he asks. If you wish, she responds. Then, as he exults in his happiness (“Mi sento dal contento”), the music moves to the parallel major. But Mozart has two games to play. First a game of negatives: the Count repeatedly asks “Verrai?” to which the correct answer is “Sì”; and “Non mancherai?” to which the correct answer is “No.” Yet Susanna, hardly of one mind about this game, sometimes gives the wrong answer, leading the Count to question her more intensely. When, finally, he is convinced she will come, he repeats “Mi sento dal contento,” but Mozart plays his melodic line off against a quasi-canonical aside in Susanna (to the text “scusatemi se mento”), leading to a cadential conclusion in

which they sing in thirds, as if they really were in agreement. Mozart's music indulges in a subtle game of expressing real and feigned intentions.

N. 17. Recitativo ed Aria (Conte)

Reassured, the Count exits momentarily, but returns to overhear Susanna telling Figaro “hai già vinta la causa,” throwing into doubt the sincerity of Susanna's agreement to meet with him. The Count launches an accompanied recitative, the first of the opera, and one suited—of course—to a person of his rank (the next will be for the Countess, although in the fourth act Mozart will exalt both Figaro and Susanna by granting them accompanied recitatives before their arias). The Count, who has no intention of being tricked by his servants, will rule in favor of Marcellina, so that Figaro will not succeed in paying off Marcellina and hence will be unable to marry Susanna.

The Count's aria is in two parts, an “Allegro maestoso” followed by a quicker “Allegro assai.” Although it shares tonality (*D major*) and accompaniment—employing trumpets and drums—with Bartolo's “La vendetta” (N. 4), this is no mock revenge aria: it is a serious, vocally resplendent composition that closes with complex vocalism (a cadential section featuring triplets and trills). The two parts of the aria are very different. The first, in which the Count works himself into a frenzy as he imagines being played the fool by his servants, features a section in the tonic and another—to the same text, but with more lyrical music—in the dominant. In the second the Count is determined to have his way: he sings of his “tormento” (with inflections in the minor) and finally of the revenge that “quest'anima consola e giubilar mi fa.” The music develops a frightening strain of gaiety that makes his threats seem anything but trivial.

N. 18. Sestetto

It is time for the trial. Marcellina, Figaro, and Bartolo enter with the stuttering lawyer, Don Curzio, who tells Figaro (to the delight of the Count) “o pagarla, o sposarla.” Figaro resists, insisting that he can't marry without the consent of his noble parents. He knows they were noble, because he was stolen by robbers and left as a foundling, dressed in rich clothing with jewels and gold. He also mentions a curious birthmark on his arm. Marcellina now recognizes the truth: Figaro is her illegitimate son with Bartolo, her “Rafaello.”

An amusing and touching sextet of recognition begins, leading to a passage of “stupore,” in which the five characters alternate phrases like “sua madre?” “suo padre?” “Figlio amato,” and so on. Susanna (the sixth) enters: she has received money from the Countess to pay back Marcellina, whom she now sees embracing Figaro! She calls him faithless and slaps him, a slap he accepts with pleasure. This is the time for explanations. As Figaro introduces her to his parents the previous section for five characters becomes a passage for six, as the incredulous Susanna asks everyone in turn “Sua madre?” before turning directly to Figaro with “Tua madre?” Mozart plays the same game with “Suo padre?” The six voices join in an opulent conclusion, in which the Count and Don Curzio still hope to be revenged, although their maneuvering room has been severely reduced.

N. 19. Recitativo ed Aria (Contessa)

Bartolo not only recognizes his son, but is willing to marry Marcellina in a double ceremony (with Figaro and Susanna). As they all leave joyously, Barbarina and Cherubino enter. He has *still* not left, and Barbarina plans to bring him home so they can dress him as a girl and he can join in giving flowers to the Countess. They depart, leaving the stage empty for the recitative and aria of the Countess.

As for her husband's solo piece, Mozart begins with an elaborate accompanied recitative. The Countess impatiently awaits Susanna's return, but deeply regrets pretending to be her own servant: that is where the Count's betrayals have led her. “Dove sono i bei momenti” she sings in the first part, “Andantino,” of her two-part aria. It is constructed as an ABA: the A section consists of lyrical reminiscences of her happiness in a radiant *C major*, the B section explores the sadness of her actual situation, with the music inflected chromatically. (The A theme is derived from the “Agnus Dei” movement in Mozart's Mass, KV 317). Instead of completing the repeat of A, the Countess moves directly into a concluding “Allegro,” a musically assertive passage in which she hopes for a happier future. While not ostentatiously difficult, the vocal line's purity of style and dramaturgical clarity require supreme artistry.

N. 20. Duetto (Susanna and Contessa)

Antonio reveals to the bemused Count that Cherubino has not yet left for Seville, but is with Barbarina, being dressed as a girl. As they depart, the Countess and Susanna enter. The latter has explained the new situation to her mistress, who is still contemplating the Count's invitation to Susanna for that evening. To

make the situation even clearer, she asks Susanna to write a note to the Count, a “Canzonetta sull’aria...” that will make explicit the place for their *rendez-vous*.

Mozart has again written a piece that describes to perfection an action: the Countess dictates a letter, and as her melody is repeated by a solo oboe and bassoon, Susanna writes down the phrase, repeating only the tail end of each phrase. Not everything needs to be said, though, because “il resto capirà.” Then they reread the letter together, line by line, but sung in overlapping phrases, before concluding a 2 “il capirà.”

N. 21. Coro

They seal the letter with a pin, and add on the outside of the letter that the Count should return the pin. Barbarina enters with the peasant girls (among them Cherubino). In another simple chorus (reminiscent of the peasant’s chorus in Act I), they offer the Countess flowers to represent their love.

N. 22. Finale

Barbarina introduces Cherubino as “una mia cugina,” but Antonio soon removes his disguise. The Count begins to demand an explanation for what happened in the finale to the second act, but Barbarina stops him by recalling how many times, when the Count embraced and kissed her he promised she could have anything she wanted: well, she wants Cherubino as her husband. Embarrassed, the Count assents. Figaro, too, enters in time for the double ceremony. As the Count and Countess sit on two thrones, the two couples (Susanna and Figaro, Marcellina and Bartolo) enter to an orchestral March. While approaching the Count, Susanna slips him the letter. A song in honor of the Count for having given up the *Droit de Seigneur* is sung first by two young girls, then by the entire chorus. A dance (a Fandango) is played, during which the Count reads Susanna’s letter (pricking his finger on the pin), while Figaro notices that he has received a “biglietto amoroso” sealed with a pin, without knowing that it came from Susanna. In recitative the Count invites them all to a feast that evening in honor of the two married couples. A repetition of the previous chorus brings the act to a close.

Act IV

The final act takes place in the garden, where the masquerade takes place. Figaro is at first also deceived, believing Susanna to be unfaithful, but in the end everything is sorted out, the Count begs forgiveness, and the Countess graciously accords it.

N. 23. Cavatina (Barbarina)

This is the only fully minor-mode piece in *Le nozze di Figaro*. In a brief cavatina in *F minor*, accompanied by strings alone, which leads directly into the following recitative, Barbarina tells us she has lost the pin she was supposed to return to Susanna. Her lament is overheard by Marcellina and Figaro.

N. 24. Aria (Marcellina)

Barbarina explains to Figaro the whole story of the pin, but he already observed the events at the end of Act III. What he had not previously known, however, was that Susanna wrote the letter. Figaro gives Barbarina another pin to take the place of the one she lost, and she goes off to deliver it to Susanna. He expresses his anguish to Marcellina, who tries to defend Susanna and encourage her son not to jump to conclusions. Left alone, however, she muses on the oppression women face at the hand of men.

Accompanied by strings alone, her two-part aria, “Il caprio e la capretta,” though often cut in performance, is a lovely piece and quite difficult vocally. In a first part (“Tempo di Menuetto”) she sings of the happiness that most creatures in nature feel with their mates; but in the second part (“Allegro”) she laments that only women have to deal with perfidy and cruelty from their husbands. Marcellina’s aria is a pendant to the aria Figaro will sing later in the act accusing women of faithlessness. Mozart even anticipates a melody that Figaro will sing later (notice the orchestra at the first repetition of “Sol noi povere femmine”).

N. 25. Aria (Basilio)

Barbarina reenters, carrying fruit and cake to bring to Cherubino, who is supposed to meet her in an arbour. Figaro appears, and Barbarina hides herself. He greets Basilio and Bartolo, whom he has invited to witness the perfidy of Susanna with the Count. He tells them to hide until he whistles for them, at which point they are to come forward. Basilio is cynical about the whole operation: with the powerful, you have no choice but to do their bidding.

Basilio now sings his three-part aria (also frequently cut). In an opening “Andante,” he tells Bartolo how, when he was younger, he too was hot-headed; with age he mellowed. As a youth he met a fairy who presented him with an ass’s skin. In a “Tempo di Minuetto” Basilio explains that it soon began to rain and he put on the skin to protect himself. When the rain ended a ferocious beast came up to him, but, offended by the odor of the ass’s skin, the beast fled. You see, Basilio concludes in a final “Allegro,” put on an ass’s skin and you can escape all the troubles of the world. The aria is amusing, and pleasant enough, but it lacks that specificity of character and dramaturgical precision that marks the rest of the opera.

N. 26. Recitativo and Aria (Figaro)

As they too hide, the stage is empty for Figaro’s return. In an accompanied recitative, he laments that he must now learn the “mestiere di marito.” To trust a woman, he concludes, “è ognor follia.” Figaro’s “Aprite un po’ quegl’occhi,” is in a single tempo, but with an extraordinary level of detail. The first quatrain is sung over an active, mocking accompaniment figure. When he continues that women are called “dee,” a kind of ironic majesty is invoked in the music. Then he lists their traits: “Son streghe che incantano per farci penar,” they are sirens, owls, comets, roses with thorns, masters of plots, liars who “non senton pietà.” As the accusations pile up, the music builds in intensity (Mozart invokes the melody already heard in Marcellina’s aria). With a quieter cadence on “il resto non dico, già ognuno lo sa,” the section comes to a close. The composer now goes through the entire text again, but with many surprises. After the first four accusations, he interpolates a repetitive musical figure to “il resto nol dico”; and when Figaro sings “già ognuno lo sa” the orchestra informs us exactly what everyone knows. The horns (yes, the horns of cuckoldry) respond: that is the fate of men! Figaro, too, now hides.

N. 27. Recitativo and Aria (Susanna)

Susanna, the Countess, and Marcellina enter. Marcellina has told Susanna of Figaro’s jealousy, and they are about to begin their masquerade. Marcellina hides. Susanna asks the Countess for permission to remain among the pine trees, and the Countess “permits” her to do so. As the furious Figaro comments from his hiding place, Susanna is intent on feeding his jealousy.

In an accompanied recitative that begins with a beautiful theme for the strings, Susanna anticipates the coming meeting with “l’idol mio.” Her splendid nocturnal aria, accompanied mostly by pizzicato strings and an occasional wind solo, “Deh vieni, non tardar,” incites Figaro’s jealousy. It is excellently constructed. The most beautiful melodies emerge unexpectedly (listen to “Vieni ben mio, tra queste piante ascoso”); and notice how the arpeggiated opening melody (“Deh vieni, non tardar”) recurs without words in a higher register toward the end, at “ti vo’ la fronte incoro-nar.” This is another way in which Mozart’s art, in its seeming simplicity, penetrates every emotion, even here where Susanna’s words are part of an elaborate masquerade.

N. 28. Finale.

Cherubino enters in search of Barbarina. When the disguised Countess appears, Cherubino thinks she is Susanna. Now everyone (some in disguise) has arrived in the magical garden: it is time to sort out the complications that have emerged during this mad day.

The Finale of the fourth act, like that to the second act, is a series of movements in varying keys and meters, the whole beginning and ending in the same key (*D major*, also the key of the overture). In an opening Andante, Cherubino tries to woo the person dressed as Susanna, really the Countess. Over a delicate orchestral accompaniment of strings and occasional winds, the Countess tries to restrain him, while Cherubino suggests he knows why “Susanna” is there and whom she is waiting for. The Count appears to similar orchestral material, while the vocal lines remain fragmentary. Susanna (dressed as the Countess) and Figaro also are seen. Cherubino tries to kiss “Susanna” (the Countess), but ends up kissing the Count instead, who promptly tries to hit Cherubino (who immediately departs), but hits Figaro instead. The four remaining characters join in a delicious ensemble. Figaro and Susanna step aside, allowing the Count to woo the person he *thinks* is “Susanna” (but is actually the Countess). A new orchestral melody is heard, played by the first violins and bassoon (we’re now in *G major*, and the tempo is faster). It is a more “popular” tune, as befits the person the Count thinks he is wooing, while Figaro (who still thinks the Count is wooing Susanna) comments in unison with the strings “Che compiacente femmina! che sposa di buon cor!” The wooing continues, and the Count—after giving “Susanna” a ring as proof of his love—tries to lead her off to a bower. But Figaro makes noise and the Count (to the same music Figaro used before) asks “Chi passa?” to which Figaro replies, memorably, “Passa gente!” Off goes “Susanna” (the Countess), while the Count promises to join her momentarily.

Now the music leaps from *G major* to *E-flat major*, and it is time for Figaro to get revenge by wooing the “Countess” (Susanna). Susanna thinks she’ll have her revenge by showing up her faithless Figaro, but she neglects to disguise her voice on one occasion, so that Figaro soon knows he is actually addressing his beloved Susanna. With joy, then, he continues the masquerade. The tempo is quick (“Allegro di molto”) and the 3/4 meter lively. Figaro now sings exaggerated vows of affection and revenge (“Eccomi a vostri piedi”) and the furious “Countess” (Susanna) plays along. When he asks for her hand, she slaps him and he laughs and laughs: “o schiaffi graziosissimi” he sings, to the same music with which he vowed affection before.

The “Countess” (Susanna) and Figaro, laughing at their folly in a new section in *B-flat major*, “Andante,” and 6/8, declare their everlasting love. The Count, however, is deceived and believes that Figaro is actually making love to the Countess. The music jumps again, back to *G major*, “Allegro assai,” and 4/4). In a fury the Count seizes Figaro (the Countess has left the stage) and calls for help. In come Basilio, Don Curzio, Bartolo, and Antonio, all wanting to know what has happened. And here Mozart’s music performs its final miracle. The section starts quickly, with pompous music, it quickly changes character. The Count accuses Figaro of betraying him, and thinks to bring out the other culprit. Instead out come Cherubino, Barbarina, Marcellina, and the “Countess” (Susanna), who begs him to forgive her. Even when everyone pleads with him he refuses, but one last voice is heard. The Countess herself, still dressed as “Susanna,” steps forward, hoping that perhaps *she* can be heard. Now the music changes completely. The key moves to *G minor*, the violins play a chromatic line over simple chords in the rest of the orchestra, and the masks fall. As the music returns to *G major*, in a sudden Andante, the Count begs his wife for pardon. The musical line is simplicity itself, a balanced phrase with lovely chromatic appoggiaturas, whose beauty has resonated across the ages. Even the Countess is moved and forgives him in a phrase that answers his, but independently consists of six measures (an expansion of his four). The entire ensemble, with full orchestra, repeats her phrase and intensifies its expression in a final cadential phrases. It is sublime. (That there are those who expect the Count to be back at his old tricks the next day is to be expected, but Mozart gives us no hint of any such future.)

One more step returns us to *D major*, for a final “Allegro assai”: as all sing “Corriamo tutti a festeggiar” over running figurations in the tonic, the *giorno di follia* comes to a close in reconciliation and love.