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A PERFORMANCE PERSPECTIVE:
"UN'AURA AMOROSA" FROM MOZART'S *COSI FAN TUTTE*

BY
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MUSIC

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performer appears on stage and with glassy eyes, minimal motion and no focus gives a performance that is, frankly, not well received by the audience. The subsequent performer provides clear focus and interacts heavily with the audience and himself, bringing the audience to its feet in a standing ovation. Herein lies the difference between a performer who has done his research and integrated it into performance and one who has not.

Hefty people, helmets with horns and glass-shattering sounds are just some of the images that today's society stereotypically associates with the opera. Time has changed these perceptions drastically. From the familiar tune of the classic "La donna e mobile" from *Rigoletto*, to the more modern *Nixon in China*, opera has evolved from the stereotypical into the unpredictable. However, most elements of opera can be analyzed using the same basic interpretive principles. People who portray characters in opera have unprecedented freedom to augment the shapes of the characters they become. The methods used to define these choices have not changed much, if at all, through the extensive history of the operatic genre. While their choices are theoretically unrestricted, performers tend to drift towards using the same methods to identify with their characters. There are common themes that performers investigate in evaluating a character. They include: the history surrounding the opera, especially of the composer and librettist; devices employed in the opera; the relationship between its characters and, of course, examples of past performances. Each of these will be equally applicable to a performance of the aria "Un 'aura amorosa" from Mozart's opera *Così fan tutte*. All of these elements form a cohesive template for observation of how to give a performance of the piece.

The long history of *Così fan tutte*, with score by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte, leaves much information to the advantage of the performer, including copious amounts related to the aforementioned ideas. As such, the performer has not only his views to consider but those of many decades of previous performers, unlike those operas that have been composed relatively recently. Resources that give information on the opera tend to focus on a few main themes. A large percentage focuses on the history of the opera, composer and librettist, and showing the opera in light of its historical context. Other sources directly engage the opera itself, identifying the devices and emotions that Mozart and DaPonte used within the opera. Another large portion of the sources deals with character relationships. These relationships are relative to other characters as well as the composer and librettist and as such, they partially tie in with the first historical theme. For performance purposes, sources that expound upon the methods of past performances and their critiques are especially useful.

Julian Rushton (2011) provides an excellent backdrop for historical context. He expounds upon the historical events of Mozart's time and how they factor into *Così fan tutte*, including the plot. He mentions that the opera was believed by some to be "based on a 'recent' Viennese scandal "but instead "has a mythological and literary ancestry in the Procris story, and in Boccaccio, Shakespeare (*Cymbeline*) and Cervantes, all of whom anticipate elements of the plot: the trial of female constancy and the wager." While Rushton focuses on historical culture and society, Peter Branscombe (1981), on the other hand, focuses on the politics of the time. He includes reference to the country's leaders of the time, namely, Emperor Joseph II, a patron of the arts who

sponsored many of Mozart's other works. He also includes a brief timeline of the events preceding the opera. He tells how the roles were created for specific people including one of the leading female roles written for DaPonte's mistress, Adriana Ferrarese del Bene. Deviating from the strictly historical events surrounding the operas conception is Bernard Zelechow (1991), who observes the evolution of the general opera as a genre. There are two principle genres of opera: *opera seria*, the "serious" or dramatic opera, and *opera buffa*, the comic opera. Specifically, Zelechow highlights today's popular notion that opera was for the elites and the upper echelons of society. He cites numerous historical examples that show the error of this assumption. In fact, he directly denounces the notion that opera was created by elites for entertainment (at least the genre of opera buffa). He argues: "The urban masses created opera buffa outside of official culture and without magisterial sanction."(87).

Daniel Hertz (1995) explores the relationship between Mozart and DaPonte. He highlights their differences – Mozart, a well-respected experienced composer, and DaPonte, a novice to the genre of opera. He was experienced as a poet but had never before staged a libretto before his collaboration with Mozart. Their relationship continued not solely throughout the production of *Così fan tutte*, but later through many other works. He provides notes on how they worked together in producing numerous operas, such as *Le Nozze Di Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*, and in doing so provides a contrast between those and *Così fan tutte*. Elements in its construction that differ from the others can then become apparent. Andrew Steptoe (1981) has done tremendous research on the origins of the libretto itself. Many have argued as to the authenticity of its origins – whether or not it was original or loosely based on another production.

DaPonte's style was routinely to adapt the earlier stage works of another author or playwright; if he had composed the libretto for *Così fan tutte* unaided, it would have been unusual. Ann Livermore (1965) likewise has observations about the librettist. She analyzes his writing style and realizes that many psychological aspects of DaPonte's life are present in the opera and uses some of his personal history as corroboration. She demonstrates how the characters fit with Da Ponte's own psychoanalyses of the characters while keeping them relevant to all audiences. In contrast, Alan Tyson (1984) compiles notes on the composition of the music. Tyson studied the original autograph score of the opera to determine the significance of watermarks in the autograph score. He also used the score to recognize patterns and similarities between music within the various arias and the orchestral accompaniment.

Gallarati and Herklotz (1989) present an interesting analogy in revealing the devices that the opera employs. They offer the idea of the characters in the opera wearing "masks" to portray their emotions. The characters in these collaborations between Mozart and Da Ponte have such deep emotional connections and are ever-changing and have to constantly change their "masks". Emotions in the opera are constantly shifting from seriousness to comedy and take a variety of different forms, and the characters must be able to adapt quickly and effectively. The concept of wearing "masks" helps the audience to make sense of the constant emotional shifting.

Expanding on the idea of constant emotional shift, Rodney Farnsworth (1988) details the specific employment of the comedic plot devices of parody and burlesque plot devices of the parody and burlesque. The parody allows the freedom to "[copy] a model, whose plot and characters are retained, while the style is changed", in essence

allowing for a “lowering of subject matter, without a corresponding lowering of style” (52). It becomes more of a broad encompassing atmosphere to the action of the opera. The burlesque is a comedic device that uses language to call attention to specific instances of parody and comedy. These were both, in fact, leading contributors to the rise of the genre of *opera buffa*.

Over the years of the genre of opera, there have been many different performances for which a precedent has been set. Roger Pines (1991) has compiled a list of past casts of performers of *Così fan tutte* and proceeds to evaluate many of them, including portrayals of Ferrando, the character who sing the aria “Un’ aura amorosa”. He describes at least briefly the experiences of a few different people who, at least in his opinion, had a mixture of success and failure in the role. Having done extensive research, Pines’ opinions are definitely valid, yet, still are *his* opinions which should be taken into account when following his advice and perceptions on a performance.

Research that deals with the specifics of opera and its characters is available en masse. However, the sum total of research needed to investigate a character and opera is seldom compiled into one resource. It would arguably be impossible for it to exist fully formed. Each aspect of an analysis has seemingly endless possibilities for implementation. Sources can give extensive insight to specifics related to *Così fan tutte* – such as its history – but a broad overview would be exactly that – broad. It would not have the capacity, at least within a reasonable length, to address fully all issues necessary to present a respectable performance. Nevertheless, a concise exposition of each of the major points would suffice to give valuable understanding to a performer

without being overly tedious and providing a more than adequate basis for a performance.

The easiest and arguably the most revealing way to analyze this opera's characters would be to observe its history and the history of its conceivers. Lorenzo Da Ponte was the creator of the libretto, or the story and plot, of *Così fan tutte* specifically; however, many have argued as to the authenticity of the libretto being his original work. It is noted that, while the story itself seems somewhat unique, it contains a "symmetrical plot [that] derives from themes long established in European literature" (Steptoe 1981). This is significant because it belies the assumption that solely the composer and librettist would have influence over the opera, music and characters and suggests that outside influences, the purveyors of such literature, would have an accidental impact as well. Even Mozart, as the original composer of the score, would have been indirectly affected as he relies on the story and plot to acquire his inspiration for composing. This entire incidence of the libretto's ambiguous originations, seen by many as "the fusion of two traditional stories...developed in light of current stage fashions", serves to further supply evidence that Da Ponte drew from external sources in his authorship. These external sources are worth considering in order to portray a character in the opera to achieve a full realization of the opera's influences.

In contrast, Mozart's score is completely original, to his own works. When Mozart started composing the music for the opera, the libretto would not have been completed at all points. Mozart would have begun with most of the libretto intact as his basis. In the libretto, "passages with short lines and rhymes would show where an aria or ensemble was intended" (Tyson 1984). He would compose the arias and ensemble

numbers first based on the text provided, while also providing input as to the direction of the text at these points and suggesting changes to the librettist. He would then return and place in the recitative sections of the opera. In composing the arias first, before the recitative, he was able to create a broad emotion or two for the aria itself. It would then be easier to create the recitative bridging the gap between the emotional or plot differences in arias or in some cases between spoken dialogue and arias. People within the opera have to use these changes effectively to immerse the audience with their characters. Even within the realm of solo singing, out of context of the opera, one should recognize the importance of not only the events and emotions of the song being performed but those of the songs and plot before and after. In fact, this is even more important out of context as the performer has to tell a story in much less than the traditional length of time of the opera. Even if the story is only a portion of the opera the performance can only be intensified by a true understanding of the entire production, but especially the immediately preceding and subsequent action.

Mozart and Da Ponte are well-known individual figures in musical circles but they are especially well-known as a pair. Their relationship produced some of the most renowned works of the Eighteenth Century. This is surprising because of the fact that Mozart's career by the time of their meeting had been largely successful, having already composed and produced many operas in varying languages. Da Ponte's in contrast was weaker. He had never produced anything for the stage. It is interesting to note, as a performer that this is not typical of relationships between a composer and librettist. Typical partnerships would include two who had approximately the same amount of

experience – either two highly experienced collaborators or two that were both virtual amateurs.

The idea of character relationships can almost entirely be interpreted solely within the plot of the opera. The character of Ferrando is elated when he sings “Un’ aura amorosa” at his realization that his lover will be faithful to him after she has had a chance to be unfaithful. He is alone at this point, although the relationship between him and his lover, Dorabella, is significant. He feels strongly for her and must carry his feeling of elation from the moments preceding the aria, all the way to the end of the aria and closing the end of the scene. This is an excellent example of the aforementioned idea of characters wearing masks as well. Such emotions – love and elation – are not expected to be depicted in *opera buffa*, at least not in the serious context in which they are sung. Furthermore, it is not expected that Ferrando would have such an emotion. Characters in comic opera tend to be shallow with only superficial qualities and feelings. His relationship as the lover of Dorabella in these circumstances and the unanticipated mask which he dons can easily provide a layer of intensity to the performance of his aria.

There is no better place to look for inspiration on performance than the performances of those before you. Roger Pines (1991) in his evaluations ruminates of a previous Ferrando “[he sounded] perpetually plaintive and whining” and notes that his performances have not worn well even having once been widely successful (224). Of another he mentions that a performance “falters in [a] generalized portrayal of Ferrando” (225). These suggest that the Ferrando’s aria need not be general and monotonous but intense and melodic. It also highlights again that this aria is unexpected

for this character and further that idea by performing it passionately instead of simply generally. Pines also makes note that the timbre of a singer's voice does well to mix with those of the other characters and opines that this is a great benefit to the performers as well as the audience. These examples of past performances are likely among the most greatly used factors when drawing upon material for performance. This is especially relevant in our modern age with quality audio and visual media which allow us to study the other performances and their evolution over a wide span of time.

Preparing for a performance requires understanding of fundamental music principles as well, in taking into account the research presented here. The research has to be translated into practice. The focus of this aria in the opera leads me to adopt a light and easy timbre or tone quality. Tone quality is the essential difference between two notes of the same volume and pitch. I am not addressing the words of the aria to anyone else on stage; therefore, there is no need to have an intensity of low, core sound. All singing requires a strong base of core tone, but in this instance the core tone can be used as a base to achieve a flowing of sound that is not percussive but legato and smooth in nature. This approach should especially be used in the first and last repeating sections and to a lesser extent during the central section. The central section should still employ that basic use of sound but approach a fuller sound by increasing breath flow and support. It can also be intensified simply by using a louder volume, though that alone wouldn't serve very well musically and certainly would not promote musical development.

The idea of changing masks also occurs within the song itself and not throughout the opera. Recognizing this change is essential for me to completely express how the

character is shown to feel through the song. The music accompaniment itself changes in the second section from a slow pulse to quick rhythms. This is in response to the character clarifying one of his feelings. He sings of solace being granted to his heart immediately before this section, then transitions into a description of his heart as “fed by hope of love” and “[having] no need for better nourishment”. At this point it is as if the character makes a very subtle mask change – from a general loving feeling to a revelatory declaration. As the character, I am experiencing a recognition and clarification of feelings. I could most easily convey this change by adopting a more intense grounded sound transitioning into this section. Articulation of sound is yet another factor. Adding percussive consonants and placing a slight accent on the necessary important beats will help me to express the characters sureness and resolution in making a very intense statement regarding the nourishment of the heart.

The final section is simply a repeat of the first section with some slight variation. Repeating the beginning section in songs of all types is fairly common, for example, the refrain of a hymn; however, there is *always* a reason for doing so. It is never the case that the composer ran out of ideas or any such notion but that the message is such an important one that it bears repetition. In this case, it is the theme of the song. My character, having just been reassured of his lover’s faithfulness, voices that her loving breath comforts him. He repeats this again at the end in the same melodic manner as the beginning. There are however a few moments where Mozart has written ornamentation or a slight changing of the written line while keeping the same harmonic pattern. It is generally accepted and almost expected, that anytime a line is repeated that the performer can take liberty to ornament it however he or she sees fit. In the case of this

song, it seems likely that at first Ferrando sings this section as the feelings overwhelm him, then repeats the section now knowing how he feels and reveling in this knowledge and his emotions. At the conclusion of the piece, my character repeats the very last line “will grant sweet solace to the heart” multiple times”. This ultimate conclusion is a temporarily new melodic line. This is yet another way of reinforcing the theme of the song by repeating the same line and can also signify another slight change. As this moment is the climax of the piece it should signal Ferrando’s most intense feeling, even if the feeling is the same as before. It should be more definitive and final, like an “Amen” to a prayer. In keeping with that analogy, the musical finale of the accompaniment would be equivalent to the answering “Amen” by a group of people once the prayer has concluded. Once the character has sung the final note and statement, the performance is not yet over. The piano or orchestral accompaniment then reiterates the theme to the conclusion of the piece. Even while the singer has stopped singing the emotion and feelings should carry over into the final orchestral chord and even beyond into the action following.

The absolute depth of information available on the details of specific operas pays homage to the idea that a performer is as free now as ever to shape his or her views of what a performance should and can become. Authors have done exceptional amounts of research to corroborate their beliefs and add to scholarship of information. While it is ultimately the responsibility of the performer to research operas and characters for performance, the widespread nature of its existence becomes inconvenient. It is especially noted that most performers do not record their methods and research for a

performance. To compile this research into a single, easily accessible source is to lighten the burden of a performer.

Clearly to anyone, there is no point in which research can be or should be discontinued when learning of a particular performance. Following various pathways can lead to virtual mountains of research. It is only reasonably required that a performer should do only as much as necessary to clearly identify with a character and to understand the motives of his or her character.

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