DRAMMA GIOCOSO
FOUR CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON THE MOZART/DA PONTE OPERAS

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DRAMMA GIOCOSO

Four Contemporary Perspectives on the Mozart/Da Ponte operas

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Sergio Durante
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COLLECTED WRITINGS OF THE
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PREFACE

At the end of Mozart and Da Ponte's *Dramma giocoso*, the titular anti-hero, Don Giovanni, confronts his fate and exits the stage in a dramatic plunging into hellfire. In the 'Prelude' to *Joseph and his Brothers*, aptly subtitled 'Descent into Hell', Thomas Mann sets the scene for his re-telling of the familiar Biblical story, in which he contemplates the mysterious, ultimately ungraspable nature of human history. Describing its characteristic of receding from our comprehension just as we sense that we are gaining understanding, Mann articulates a dilemma, which we find today at the heart of much research:

> For the deeper we sound, the further down into the lower world of the past we probe and press, the more do we find that the earliest foundations of humanity, its history and culture, reveal themselves unfathomable. No matter to what hazardous lengths we let out our line they still withdraw again, and further, into the depths. Again and further are the right words, *for the unresearchable plays a kind of mocking game with our researching ardours [my emphasis]*; it offers apparent holds and goals, behind which, when we have gained them, new reaches of the past still open out – as happens to the coastwise voyager, who finds no end to his journey, for behind each headland of clayey dune he conquers, fresh headlands and new distances lure him on'.[1]

Scholars will always be 'lured on' by the 'fresh headlands and new distances' of the Mozart-Da Ponte operas; we, in turn, will continue to have opportunities to travel with these thinkers as they let out their scholarly line to greater – and sometimes doubtless hazardous – lengths in the hope of illuminating new layers of the apparently endless depth of these works.

In the current volume, the work of the four contributors explores what lies 'behind each headland' of three of the strong concerns

1. Thomas Mann, *Joseph and his Brothers*, tr. H.T. Lowe-Porter, (New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1984), p. 3.

of music scholarship today: the enfranchisement of performers in discussions on music analysis; the search for more holistic approaches to theoretical systems; and the quest for a more richly contextualised space in which to assess the nature of operatic work – including shifts between conception and final realisation of works according to the effects of performing works in specific national contexts.

The collection opens with Julian Rushton's analysis of opera arias. Rushton issues an important reminder that opera is a particularly 'collective' endeavour, and that Mozart's tailoring of operas to specific singers is a cue for us to note more carefully, and through detailed studies, the emergence of characterization as a process of collaboration. With recourse to specific examples from the Mozart-Da Ponte operas, and a deeper examination of aspects of specific arias from *Don Giovanni,* Rushton demonstrates how establishing a strongly-anchored historical basis for the discussion reveals ramifications for today's musical performances in the act of collaborative re-creation. His ideas about collaboration are also echoed in the second and third articles of the collection.

Stefan Rohringer's contribution concerns *Don Giovanni's* Don Ottavio, inviting us, both as analysts and performers, to look again at this problematic character. Using this as a starting point, Rohringer outlines the important role of 'tone' – that of the tenor voice – in generating characterization, and how this was to undergo transformation during the progression of the history of opera. Returning to Don Ottavio, Rohringer anchors his theorizing through a provocative reading of the aria, *Il mio tesoro*, concluding that it functions both in terms of the specific character, and as a symbol of the 18th century tenor's increasing disunity in terms of implied social role and dramatic function.

This aspect of 'situatedness' is given broader scope in Sergio Durante's historical contextualisation of the libretto of *Don Giovanni*, in which he reminds us of the importance of such figures as E.T.A. Hoffmann in transforming the reception of opera in the 19th century. More significantly, Durante explores the ramifications

of the impossible quest for a 'universal standard text' – a concept that undoubtedly 'plays a kind of mocking game with our researching ardours'. For Durante, though, the problems of this search become a lens through which we can view and better understand the links between opera and cultural identification, demonstrating once again the need to provide contexts, rather than to read musical works – and in particular operas – in isolation.

Taking up this call, but with a more pronounced emphasis upon music analysis, James Webster argues for a more comprehensive, contextual kind of study – one that releases works from strictly monadic readings and places them more vividly within both their own contemporary social and historical contexts and those in which they are eventually read. In common with Rushton, Webster cautions against analytical approaches generated by the desire to understand 'absolute music', and their concomitant models of 'unity'. His own analysis, focussing upon Act IV of *Le Nozze di Figaro*, posits acceptance of open (unresolved) rather than 'closed' readings.

The collective endeavours of the authors of this volume, contemplating, as most of them have done, Don Giovanni's own 'descent into Hell', confirm the Mozart-Da Ponte operas as 'becoming' the same human history that they prompt their listeners to contemplate. Their complex, ultimately unfathomable, nature invites us into difficult but instructive reflections on that history, and into speculations about our own present day and our own states of being. If Don Giovanni's 'fall' comes about, in part, because of his inability to change, then we are aptly invited to think differently through contemplation of this and other works that allow us, from our own historical standpoints, to project forwards as to how we might approach opera in the future. As Thomas Mann implies, the fact that definitive truths endlessly withdraw 'again and further into the depths' need not be, for us, and our research ardours, a descent into Hell but, instead, an alluring prospect richly stocked with fresh headlands and new distances.

Darla M. Crispin

'BY THEIR ARIAS SHALL YE KNOW THEM': CHARACTERIZATION IN ARIA-BASED OPERA

Julian Rushton

When a student, and thus easily influenced, I read the first edition of Joseph Kerman's *Opera as Drama*.[1] 45 years on, I still broadly agree with his dictum that in opera 'the imaginative articulation for the drama is provided by music'.[2] But the music of an opera does not come into being in creative isolation, and in Mozart's time composers had to accommodate the views of patrons; the theatre management; the poet; and, not least, the singers. From the start of Mozart's operatic career, he liked to fit arias to singers as a tailor fits a suit of clothes.[3] One aim in showing such concern for singers was to get them on his side. That was because the effectiveness of the performance depended on their commitment; and that in turn might produce another commission. Thus I can hardly suppose that Mozart's concern for singers was unusual. Possibly he accommodated them better than other composers; but then he did most things better than other composers.

An operatic character was thus a collaborative creation. To put it simply (perhaps too simply), both the poet (who usually acted as stage director) and the composer collaborated with the singer for whom the role was intended. This practice may never have been universal, but it continued into the nineteenth century. Since then, changing theatrical practices, not least the concentration of the repertory on older works, has reduced the amount of direct collaboration with singers, but their involvement can still be a factor in newly composed operas, for instance those of Benjamin Britten. In Mozart's time it was routine to compose with a particular singer in mind. The composer carefully studied

1. Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama*, New York 1956.
2. Kerman, *Opera as Drama*, new revised edition, London 1989, pp. 1 and 7.
3. Leopold Mozart's letter of 24 November 1770.

the range, tessitura, agility, power, and dramatic flair of the singers intended for the opera's first production.[4] With Mozart at least there are well documented instances of singers' influence on his work in *Idomeneo* and *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, and there is no reason to regard these as atypical; we know of them rather than others merely because, when working on these operas, he was writing regularly to his father.[5] In Vienna in the 1780s, other operas had greater success than Mozart's, and that could hardly have come about unless (for instance) Salieri and Martín y Soler also studied the singers assiduously. They were in most cases the same as those who sang Mozart's works.

Nevertheless, operas also succeeded when revived or performed in another city, with a new cast. New productions and revivals involved various kinds of compromise. In such cases, what becomes of the notion of the singer as collaborator? Paisiello's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, premiered in St Petersburg in 1782, was a great success in Vienna when performed by the local opera buffa troupe. The cast included singers who later took part in its sequel, *Le nozze di Figaro*. *Figaro*'s triumph in Prague led in turn to the commission for *Don Giovanni*. Thus when composing *Don Giovanni* for Prague in 1787, Mozart knew nearly all of the singers from their roles in *Figaro*.[6] Nevertheless, it is virtually certain that he also bore in mind the need to accommodate the singers in Vienna, where *Don Giovanni* was produced in May 1788.

Thus when composing *Don Giovanni* he probably had in mind the original cast of *Figaro*. But by May 1788, several members of the *Figaro* cast were no longer in Vienna. Nancy Storace and Michael Kelly returned to England early in 1787, so Mozart knew they would not be available for *Don Giovanni*. The original Count

4. Mozart did have difficulties with some singers when as a boy he composed *Mitridate* for Milan (1770), and *Lucio Silla* (1772) when the title role was recast for an inexperienced singer at the last moment. His problems with the castrato Dal Prato in *Idomeneo* (1781) are documented in his letters. See Julian Rushton (ed.), *The New Grove Guide to Mozart's Operas*, New York 2006.

5. See the essays by Stanley Sadie and Mark Everist in Julian Rushton (ed.), *W. A. Mozart: Idomeneo*, Cambridge 1993, and Thomas Bauman, *W. A. Mozart: Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, Cambridge 1987.

6. The main exception was Baglioni, the Don Ottavio.

Almaviva, Stefano Mandini, left for Naples in January 1788, after creating a role in Salieri's *Axur, re d'Ormus*.[7] So in 1787, when composing *Don Giovanni*, Mozart probably expected Mandini to play the title-role in the Vienna production. Moreover in Vienna, as Stefan Rohringer has reminded us, there was a tenor problem.[8] Mozart might have expected Vincenzo Calvesi to be available for Don Ottavio, but he too left for Naples early in 1788, returning to Vienna in time to create Ferrando in *Così fan tutte*. Mozart wrote a new aria for tenor, 'Dalla sua pace', perhaps to make way for the extra scene for Catarina Cavalieri ('In quali eccessi … Mi tradì'), although it is usually assumed that the new tenor, Morella, was unequal to the demands of 'Il mio tesoro'.[9] The inclusion of both arias, however, merely strengthens our impression of Ottavio's essential weakness.

I would argue that in later productions, even those without the benefit of the presence and participation of the composer and poet, singers are still collaborators, albeit now in an act of re-creation. However minor the changes in musical performance, and however well the singers adapt to material designed for others, they will always affect the perception of character. Sometimes, if the composer was absent, singers suited themselves by using someone else's music, a fate that befell several of Mozart's works after his death; but this is a part of reception history beyond the scope of the present discussion. Most singers taking over

7. After the first performances in January and February 1788, there was a gap before *Axur* was presented again, in April, when another singer must have taken over Mandini's role. Data on performances from Dorothea Link, *The National Court Theatre in Mozart's Vienna*, Oxford 1998, 23–190.

8. Stefan Rohringer, 'The two Don Ottavios: Mozart's modified perspective on his primo uomo in the Vienna version of Don Giovanni', paper delivered at the International Orpheus Academy for Music & Theory, 26 March 2008, and published in this volume in revised form as 'Don Ottavio and the History of the Tenor Voice'.

9. Dexter Edge deploys persuasive evidence from the Vienna orchestral parts, which contain both tenor arias, to suggest that the decision to cut 'Il mio tesoro' need not have been a consequence of adding 'Dalla sua pace', in 'The Orchestral Parts from the First Viennese Production of *Don Giovanni* in 1788', paper read at the Annual Meeting of the American Musicological Society, Toronto, 3 November 2000. A new review of the evidence has been undertaken by Ian Woodfield, *The Vienna* Don Giovanni, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2010.

roles composed for someone else would adapt their performing techniques as necessary. Where Vienna is concerned, some caution is needed, as we do not always know who sang which role; the Burgtheater operated a repertory system, and roles were often shared.[10] In Paisiello's *Barbiere* both Nancy Storace and Luisa Laschi sang Rosina (the only female role) in different performances. No wonder, when Mozart composed the sequel, there was some uncertainty about which of them would sing the Countess and which Susanna. Mozart was involved in early revivals of both *Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*. *Figaro* was taken over intact for Prague, but when *Don Giovanni* came to Vienna it was enlarged with a comic duet for Zerlina and Leporello, designed for singers who had appeared in *Figaro*, Laschi and Francesco Benucci.[11] Mozart also composed new arias for the Vienna *Don Giovanni* in 1788, for the revived *Figaro* in 1789, all for singers new to the opera buffa troupe. With *Figaro*, it is likely that the original singers were used where possible.[12] However, the new, and highly paid, prima donna, Adriana Ferrarese, possessed different talents from those of Storace. For her Mozart composed 'Un moto di gioia', although he doubted whether she could sing simply enough, and 'Al desio di chi t'adora', which probably suited her well.[13] 'Al desio' is a rondò; and, like Anna's 'Non mi dir', it is the last aria before the finale, the exalted position proper to a prima donna's rondò. *Figaro* was performed more often with Ferrarese than with Storace, so 'Al desio' was heard more often in Vienna in Mozart's lifetime than the music it replaced, 'Deh vieni non tardar', which is virtually always preferred today.

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10. Link, *The National Court Theatre*, pp. 487–8.

11. Benucci was the first Figaro; Laschi (also known by her married name, Mombelli), was the first Countess in *Figaro*.

12. Besides Benucci, the original Bartolo and Cherubino were available (Francesco and Dorotea Bussani). All three were in the original cast for *Così fan tutte* (Guglielmo, Alfonso, and Despina).

13. On 'Un moto di gioia', letter of 19 August 1789: on 'Al desio', Zinzendorf's diary for 7 May 1790 praises her singing in the 'letter' duet and the 'rondeau'; see Link, *The National Court Theatre*, p. 355. In emulation, rondò arias were designed for her in Salieri's *La cifra* (December 1789) and in *Così fan tutte* (January 1790). See Mary Hunter's review of John A. Rice, *Antonio Salieri and Viennese Opera*, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 125/1 (2000), p. 125.

Presumably other singers were better than Ferrarese at adapting themselves to existing roles. By now Laschi too had left Vienna, so Caterina Cavalieri (the first Konstanze) sang the Countess. Minor changes to her shorter rondò ('Dove sono') may have been made to accommodate her.[14] Thus in 1789, other than the role of Susanna, *Figaro* was not radically changed, even with new singers involved. This, however, does not mean that the 1786 cast was less important in shaping the roles in the first place; and it also means that the characterizations, especially of Susanna, are likely to have seemed a little different in 1789.

* * *

Operas arise as a union of words, music, spectacle, and the minds and bodies of the original singers. For us, the original spectacle is mainly lost; and the original singers are dead. But we can try to reconstruct singers' capabilities by studying what they performed, with particular attention to arias actually written for them.[15] Arias are more significant than ensembles, because, as Mozart insisted at the time of *Idomeneo*, ensembles are the domain of the composer.[16] But arias tell us what a particular singer could do effectively; and the outcome is an operatic persona, a character. The presentation of a rounded personality in opera is inextricably involved with the voice. I have suggested elsewhere that Mozart's understanding of this point is demonstrated even when he deliberately did not exploit all the capabilities of a particular singer well known to him.[17]

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14. Alan Tyson, *Mozart: Studies of the Autograph Scores*, Cambridge (Mass) 1987, pp. 319–21. The changes make the aria shorter, with a short rather than a sustained a", but with a new florid passage whose difficulty falls far short of what Mozart composed for Cavalieri in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*.

15. In addition to published scores, see Dorothea Link (ed.), *Arias for Nancy Storace, Mozart's First Susanna*, Middleton, Wisconsin 2002, and *Arias for Francesco Benucci, Mozart's First Figaro* Middleton, Wisconsin 2004.

16. Mozart refused to change the Quartet to accommodate the tenor Raaff; see his letter of 27 December 1780.

17. Julian Rushton, 'Buffo roles in Mozart's Vienna: tessitura and tonality as signs of characterization', in J. Webster and M. Hunter (eds.), *Opera Buffa in Mozart's Vienna*, Cambridge 1997, pp. 406-425 (cited p. 425).