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COMPOSING FOR A SINGER: THE VOCAL QUALITIES OF ADRIANA FERRARESE
DEL BENE EXEMPLIFIED THROUGH FOUR MOZART ARIAS

by

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TITLE: COMPOSING FOR A SINGER: THE VOCAL QUALITIES OF ADRIANA FERRARESE DEL BENE EXEMPLIFIED THROUGH FOUR MOZART ARIAS

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Douglas Worthen

Adriana Ferrarese del Bene played Susanna in the 1789 revival of *Le Nozze di Figaro* in Vienna, for which Mozart rewrote both arias sung by the character. She later became the soprano who premiered the role of Fiordiligi in *Così fan tutte*. In both instances, Mozart carefully considered the vocal abilities of Ferrarese when composing the arias for Susanna and Fiordiligi, including Ferrarese's powerful chest voice, ability to negotiate large leaps, and agility. Through melodic analysis of the four arias Mozart wrote specifically for her voice, an understanding of Mozart's ideal sound is apparent. Musical examples from each of the four arias are included to demonstrate specific moments in which Mozart highlight's Ferrarese's strengths.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

One of the great achievements of Mozart's career, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, originally premiered at the Burgtheater in Vienna in 1786. The production was such a huge success that the Emperor requested that it be done at his palace theater in Laxenburg. Also, late in the same year, a company in Prague produced the opera with rave reviews as well. However, it was not until August 1789 that the revival of *Figaro* took place in Vienna at the Burgtheater, and with some changes in casting. Adriana Ferrarese del Bene replaced Nancy Storace, who played Susanna in the 1786 production, and not only had drastically different vocal and dramatic capabilities, but was also a love interest of the librettist, Lorenzo Da Ponte. Because of her varying vocal strengths, Mozart composed two new arias to replace those sung by Susanna in the original score. In a letter to his wife in mid-August 1789, Mozart wrote, "'Figaro' is going to be staged again soon, and since I am to make some changes, I'll need to be here for the rehearsals."¹ Despite the change in arias, Vienna audiences loved the revised *Figaro* which the new cast performed eleven times in 1789, fourteen times in 1790 and three times in 1791.²

The decision to rewrite Susanna's arias for the 1789 Vienna revival was in part due to the demands of Adriana Ferrarese del Bene, but mostly because Mozart felt strongly about composing music that suited individual voices. In a letter to his father, Leopold, Mozart stated, "I like an aria to fit the singer like a well-made garment."³ Leopold later wrote to his wife about

¹ Robert Spaethling, ed. and trans., *Mozart's Letters, Mozart's Life: Selected Letters* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2000), 415.

² David Cairns, *Mozart and His Operas* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 176 and Tim Carter, *W. A. Mozart: Le Nozze di Figaro* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 126.

³ Patricia Lewy Gidwitz, "Mozart's Fiordiligi: Adriana Ferrarese del Bene," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 8, no. 3 (Nov. 1996): 202, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/823812>.

their son's reluctance to write an aria without knowing the singer's capabilities and vocal quality because he believed it necessary to "fit the costume to [the] figure."⁴ It was not uncommon in the theatre realm to make changes and substitutions to a production after its premiere, especially with the casting of different performers. Ferrarese requested of Mozart that he rewrite Susanna's arias to enhance her stature as a virtuoso singer.⁵ In place of "*Venite, inginocchiatevi*" in the second act was "*Un moto di gioia*" (K. 579) and in act four, "*Deh vieni non tardar, o gioia bella*" was replaced with "*Al desio di chi t'adora*" (K. 577). Because her acting capabilities paled in comparison to Nancy Storace who had originally played Susanna in 1786, Mozart chose instead to highlight the vocal qualities of Ferrarese. In a letter to his wife dated August 1789 Mozart wrote, "The ariette [*'Un moto di gioia'*] which I've made for Ferrarese should please, I think, if only she is capable of performing it naively, which, however, I very much doubt. She was very pleased with it, though..."⁶ Lorenzo Da Ponte backed Ferrarese on her instance of new arias because of their romantic relations. In his memoirs, Da Ponte wrote,

"Though I have always in general been most susceptible to amorous passions, I nevertheless made it a very solemn rule of my life never to flirt with actresses, and for the more than seven years I had the strength to resist every temptation, and observe my rule rigorously. But at last, to my misfortune, there came a singer, who without having great pretensions to beauty, delighted me first of all for her voice; and thereafter, she showing great propensity toward me, I ended by falling in love with her."⁷

⁴ Carter, *W. A. Mozart: Le Nozze di Figaro*, 126.

⁵ Gidwitz, "Mozart's Fiordiligi: Adriana Ferrarese del Bene," 202, 209.

⁶ Janet K. Page and Dexter Edge, "A Newly Uncovered Autograph Sketch for Mozart's '*Al desio di chi t'adora*' K577," *The Musical Times* 132, no. 1786 (Dec, 1991): 601, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/965791>.

⁷ Elisabeth Abbott, trans., *Memoirs of Lorenzo Da Ponte* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1929), 184-185.

The texts for both of the rewritten Susanna arias are thought to be written by Da Ponte, and because of the favors she performed for him, Ferrarese was well paid in return.⁸

After the success of *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Mozart and Da Ponte undertook another collaborative project, completing *Così fan tutte* in 1790. Adrianna Ferrarese del Bene premiered as the leading lady, Fiordiligi, at the Burgtheater in Vienna. Already being familiar with her vocal strengths after working with her for the Vienna revival of *Figaro*, Mozart capitalized on her abilities to a greater extent in his new opera.⁹ By comparison, the vocal line in “*Al desio di chi t’adora*” was very similar to both arias sung by Fiordiligi.¹⁰ It most closely resembled Fiordiligi’s second aria, “*Per pietà, ben mio, perdona*”, composed as another typical rondo, the form commonly used by Mozart and other composers in arias for Ferrarese.¹¹ The first of Fiordiligi’s arias in *Così fan tutte*, “*Come scoglio*” has an elaborately intricate vocal line.¹² According to author Edward J. Dent, “*Come scoglio*” was a typical soprano aria with a pompous introduction, wide leaps and plenty of coloratura.¹³ However, Ferrarese’s voice happened to fit that stereotype. Her most prominent vocal features included her powerful lower register, ability to negotiate large vocal leaps, and precision in her agility to maneuver fast and sustained melismatic passages.¹⁴ Lorenzo Da Ponte, being slightly biased because of his romantic

⁸ Page and Edge, “A Newly Uncovered Autograph Sketch for Mozart’s ‘Al desio di chi t’adora’ K577,” 601 and Edward J. Dent, *Mozart’s Operas: A Critical Study* (London: Oxford University Press, 1913), 198.

⁹ Cairns, *Mozart and His Operas*, 193.

¹⁰ Carter, *W. A. Mozart: Le Nozze di Figaro*, 126.

¹¹ Page and Edge, “A Newly Uncovered Autograph Sketch for Mozart’s ‘Al desio di chi t’adora’ K577,” 601.

¹² Eric Blom, “The Music of the Opera,” In *Mozart’s Così fan tutte*, ed. Eric Crozier (London: Morrison and Gibb Ltd., 1945), 35.

¹³ Dent, *Mozart’s Operas: A Critical Study*, 198.

¹⁴ Page and Edge, “A Newly Uncovered Autograph Sketch for Mozart’s ‘Al desio di chi t’adora’ K577,” 601 and Cairns, *Mozart and His Operas*, 193.

relations with Ferrarese, described her voice in his memoirs as ‘delicious’.¹⁵ Through analysis of melodic content in the four arias Mozart wrote for Ferrarese, an understanding of Mozart’s view of Ferrarese’s strengths becomes apparent, as well as the voice he intended for his character of Fiordiligi. By comparing the early arias Mozart wrote for the Vienna revival to the arias sung by Fiordiligi, the development of Mozart’s writing to highlight Ferrarese’s vocal strengths becomes clear. Understanding her assets more definitely after her performance in the the revival of *Le Nozze di Figaro* allowed Mozart to fully exploit her virtuosic capabilities in *Così fan tutte*.

CHAPTER 2

FERRARESE’S VOCAL QUALITIES

The first defining characteristic of Ferrarese’s voice that Mozart accentuated was her powerful chest voice. As seen in figure 1, Mozart not only extends the range of “*Al desio di chi t’adora*” down to B3, but writes a sustained C4 as well.

Figure 1



“*Un moto di gioia*” does not highlight Ferrarese’s chest voice in the same way, but Mozart again expands the range down to B3 shown in figure 2.

¹⁵Abbott, *Memoirs of Lorenzo Da Ponte*, 185.

Figure 2



These two brief instances featuring Ferrarese's prominent lower range only foreshadow Mozart's repeated use of B3, A#3 and A3 in both of Fiordiligi's arias. The vocal line in "*Come scoglio*" descends to Bb3 eight times, several being notes longer than two beats (see figure 3), and to A3 twice (see figures 4 and 5).

Figure 3

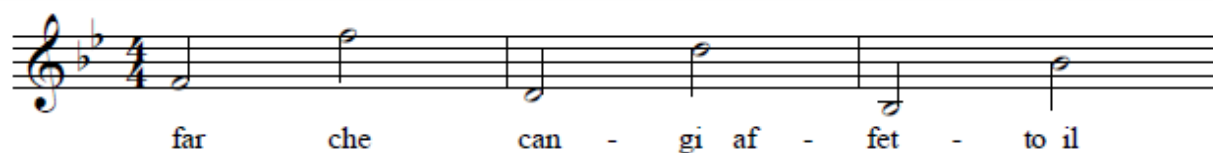


Figure 4



Figure 5



"*Per pietà, ben mio, perdona*" accentuates Ferrarese's lower register most frequently, with eleven instances of B3 occurring in the aria, one A#3 and two A3s. To further utilize the power of these pitches in Ferrarese's voice, Mozart writes many of them on accented beats and strong word syllables (see figures 6 and 7). A fermata over the final A3 in the aria gives Ferrarese one

last chance to showcase her chest voice capabilities before the conclusion of the aria (see figure 8).

Figure 6

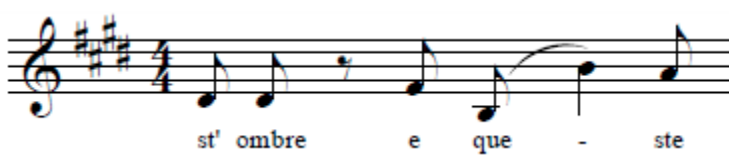


Figure 7



Figure 8



Not only did Ferrarese have a substantive lower register and chest voice, she also known for her ability to vocally negotiate large leaps, many of which are over an octave. Mozart features this attribute in his arias for Ferrarese, and while there are fewer examples of this technique in the rewritten Susanna arias, it was not ignored completely. The melodic content in “*Al desio di chi t’adora*” demands Ferrarese to easily flip between multiple registers in a short amount of time, shown in figure 9.

Figure 9



The short ariette “*Un moto di gioia*” contains several octave leaps, but only one interval of over an octave (see figure 10).

Figure 10



As with the extended lower range, Mozart fully utilizes Ferrarese’s ability to vocally manage large intervals in the arias for Fiordiligi. Mozart’s setting of “*Come scoglio*” includes leaps of over an octave between syllables in a single word making it unacceptable to breathe between the register shift. In the opening phrases of the aria, Mozart writes two of the largest leaps in the whole piece one right after another, the first being a 10th and the second a 12th (see figure 4). He also fills “*Per pietà, ben mio, perdona*” with intervals of over an octave that not only occur between syllables of the same word (see figures 11, 12, and 13), similar to “*Come scoglio*”, but in one instance, a leap of a 12th on one syllable (see figure 14).

Figure 11

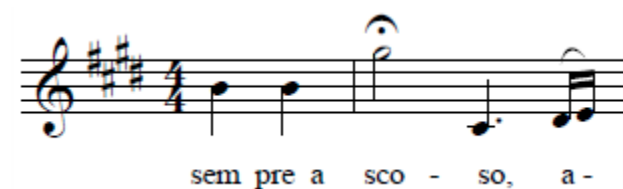


Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14



Mozart exemplifies the last defining feature of Ferrarese's instrument, vocal agility, through long melismatic passages which span her entire range and carry over several bars. The longest melisma in "*Al desio di chi t'adora*" covers the range of a 13th from B3 to G5 and lasts five full measures (see figure 1). Extending the range by a half step and length by two measures, the longest melisma in "*Come scoglio*" demands more vocal agility and finesse because of the rhythmic content as well as melodic construction. Where as figure 1 shows a passage more scalar in construction, the longest melisma in "*Come scoglio*" (figure 15) requires a different kind of agility from Ferrarese. The basic melodic theme, a series of thirds, steps and triads (figure 16) is ornamented with neighbor tones in a triplet rhythm. In order for each pitch to be heard accurately at the tempo marking of *più allegro*, Ferrarese's voice must have moved with great precision to cleanly distinguish each of the neighbor tones from the pitches outlining the melodic phrase.

Figure 15



Figure 16



The type of agility demanded of Ferrarese in Fiodiligi's final aria, "*Per pietà, ben mio, perdona*" more closely coincides with that of "*Al desio, di chi t'adora*", being mostly scalar. The final phrase of the aria contains a melisma that begins scalar and ascends in a triad spanning two complete octaves in less than four beats (see figure 17). Like the triplets in "*Come scoglio*", singing ascending triads requires more refined technique to achieve the same level of pitch accuracy as scalar passages.

Figure 17



CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION

Studying the literature written for specific singers leads to greater insight on the type of voice intended to sing a particular role. To quote Anthony P. Radford in his article about

Francesco Benucci, the baritone for whom Mozart wrote the role of Figaro, Radford stated, “Analysis of information regarding the singers for whom Mozart composed can help us better understand Mozart’s intentions and better prepare us to both sing and teach this repertoire.”¹⁶ This kind of study has larger implications for singers, teachers and musical directors. Because Mozart concerned himself with writing arias that fit individual voices, contemporary artists can construct a fairly accurate description of the voice Mozart intended through analyzation of specific arias. Any soprano singing the role of Fiordiligi must have a consistent tone throughout her entire range, including a powerful lower extension. With these vocal demands there must also be fluidity and agility in a voice that moves quickly and expansively in a short amount of time. Looking at the melodic content of Fiordiligi’s arias guide the ear of an artistic director or teacher toward a singer who possess the same vocal qualities as Adrianna Ferrarese del Bene. Accounts of Ferrarese’s vocal strengths, supported by the music Mozart produced for her to sing, indicate the quality of the sound Mozart expected for the character. There may not be recordings of Ferrarese premiering the role of Fiordiligi, but analysis of the melodic content in her arias creates an image of Mozart’s ideal sound.

¹⁶Anthony P. Radford, “Mozart’s first Figaro: The vocal skill of Francesco Benucci,” *Journal of Singing: The Official Journal of the National Association of Teachers of Singing* 66, no. 3 (Jan.-Feb. 2010): 281.

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