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The Marriage of Figaro as presented by Beaumarchais, Da Ponte, and Mozart: An Expression of Shifting Class Structure

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The Marriage of Figaro as presented by Beaumarchais, Da Ponte, and Mozart:
An Expression of Shifting Class Structure

By: Kelly Cassady

Presented as partial fulfillment of the Butler University honors program.

***The Marriage of Figaro* as presented by Beaumarchais, Da Ponte, and Mozart:
An Expression of Shifting Class Structure**

The social structure at the close of the 18th century was a picture of instability and change, as Europe watched the unfolding of the American Revolution, Napoleon redrew the map, and the Enlightenment swept across the face of the earth, bringing with it new political and social ideas relating to equality and the unfairness of the aristocratic class and government structure throughout Europe. This new awareness was expressed intellectually and passionately in the work of the artists, musicians, and writers of the time, as is demonstrated clearly in Pierre Augustin de Beaumarchais's radical play, "The Marriage of Figaro." The Enlightened ideas expressed in the comedy caused it to spread across Europe like wildfire in many forms, including as an opera in Mozart's grand "Le Nozze di Figaro." Analysis and comparison of these two works, including the libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte, the men behind them, and the cultural and political atmosphere surrounding their creation and their reception, illustrates that the middle class and the working class of Europe were on the rise and that cultural and political ideas found their outlet in the literature, music, and art of the times. Beaumarchais, Da Ponte, and Mozart all used the character of Figaro as an extension of themselves; through Figaro, they were able to present their own political and social identities.

Across Europe during the 1770's and 1780's, drastic changes were taking place. For centuries, wealth and power had come as a result of birth, and those in power were certainly reluctant to share it. However, a new boom in industrialization and commerce shook European society to its core. The middle class was instrumental in the growth of these new economic areas, and as they grew in wealth, so their desire for equality and recognition, and their impatience with elite dismissiveness grew.¹ Members of the elite were alarmed; they could no longer identify each other just through material wealth, resulting in very conscientious care of one's physical appearance, particularly among men.² The lines between the classes began to blur.

¹ Steptoe, Andrew, *The Mozart-Da Ponte Operas: The Cultural and Musical Background to Le Nozze Di Figaro, Don Giovanni, and Così Fan Tutte* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 16.

² Steptoe, *Mozart Da Ponte Operas*, 17.

Beaumarchais: A Life Designed For Revolution

Pierre-Augustin Beaumarchais was born into this shifting social landscape on January 24, 1732 in Paris.³ His early background is fairly humble; his father was a clockmaker, although a very accomplished one. What is most interesting about Beaumarchais's early family life is their religious identity as French Protestants and the impact that it had upon their social status. In 1721, André-Charles Caron, Beaumarchais's father, abjured his religion in response to the revocation of the Edict of Nantes of 1685.⁴ Protestants who did not abjure during this time faced grave societal consequences. "French Protestants had no legal identity. They weren't allowed to marry and their children died illegitimate. They were barred from most trades particularly those governed by the guilds—clockmaking, for instance."⁵ This forced submission to a societal hierarchy profoundly affected Beaumarchais. From the beginning, he was induced into a mindset of rebellion. Historian Frederic Grendel commented, "How could you respect a society that compelled responsible men to live a lie? How could you take it seriously?...No writer in the eighteenth century *protested* more than he did."⁶

³ Angermuller, Rudolph, and Phillip E.J. Robinson, "Beaumarchais, Pierre-Augustin," *Grove Music Online*, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/02438?q=beaumarchais&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firstthi>.

⁴ Grendel, Frédéric. 1977. *Beaumarchais: the man who was Figaro*. London: MacDonald and Jane's.

⁵ Grendel, Frédéric, *Beaumarchais: The Man Who Was Figaro* (New York: T.Y. Crowell, 1977), 1.

⁶ Grendel, *Beaumarchais*, 1.

Beaumarchais quickly made an impression on France. “Nobility, fortune, rank, position: how proud they make a man feel.”⁷ So says Figaro, and apparently Figaro’s creator was also driven by ambition to achieve exalted societal status. By the age of twenty-two, he had become an extremely skilled watchmaker, and he invented a mechanism that is still used in watches today to keep time accurately. His invention was stolen by the king’s clockmaker, and the man tried to pass it off as his own, but through a rather bold lawsuit, Beaumarchais reclaimed his invention and became the king’s clockmaker in one fell swoop. Historian Frederic Grendel commented upon this action, saying, “He had also struck a blow against the system, which could never be quite the same again.”⁸ This small victory against the upper classes was only the beginning of Beaumarchais’s rebellion against the aristocratic elite of France.

Beaumarchais took up with an older woman whose husband was ill, and when he died, Beaumarchais quickly moved in to fill the empty place at court. (This is the manner in which he assumed the name with which we all associate him; he acquired the manor Beaumarchais from his wife’s dead husband.)⁹ Beaumarchais went from tradesman to landed gentry to nobility in a matter of months. Although he used his title throughout his life, he never ceased to mock the frivolous nonsense that it took to become “noble” under the reign of Louis XV. In essence, it could be purchased. In reference to his own noble class he wrote,

⁷ Beaumarchais, Pierre-Augustin, Nicholas Rudall, and Bernard Sahlins, *The Marriage of Figaro* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1994), 124.

⁸ Grendel, *Beaumarchais*, 9.

⁹ Grendel, *Beaumarchais*, 14.

Take note that I can show proof of nigh on twenty years of nobility to date; that this nobility is truly mine – in good parchment, it is, sealed with the great seal in yellow wax; that it is not, like that of many people, uncertain and merely asserted, and that no one would dare to claim in from me, because I've got the receipt!¹⁰

Beaumarchais continued his rise in the French court by becoming the harp teacher to the four Bourbon sisters.¹¹ He quickly became quite a favorite among the royal family. He also met a very wealthy man of the court, Paris-Douverney. Paris-Douverney “opened his files, his coffers, and his heart to Beaumarchais.”¹² He supplied Beaumarchais with the means to become truly secure financially.

An incident that stands out as a representation of his role as a member of a rising Enlightened middle class involved a man named Ambroise Lucas, who he employed to be his valet. Lucas had fairly dark skin, and another man claimed that Lucas was a slave and that he owned him, which resulted in extended legal proceedings. Beaumarchais made quite a fuss about the situation, calling on his friends in the monarchy for help, and using all avenues to advertise the unfairness of the situation. He expressed his belief in equality quite eloquently:

A poor man by the name of Ambroise Lucas, whose only crime is to have almost as dark a skin as most of the free men of Andalusia and naturally curly hair, large black eyes and very handsome teeth – all of which is perfectly excusable – has been put in prison at the request of a man a little whiter than he...whose right of ownership over the darker man was approximately the same as that acquired by the Israelite merchants over the young Joseph once they had brought him from those who had no right to sell him.¹³

¹⁰ Grendel, *Beaumarchais*, 16.

¹¹ Angermuller, *Beaumarchis*, 2.

¹² Grendel, *Beaumarchis*, 20.

¹³ Grendel *Beaumarchais*, 43.

This statement of a belief in the equality of all mankind speaks to a rising sentiment throughout society at the time. I think that Beaumarchais's defense of the man is not only significant because of his race, but also because of his impoverishment. Perhaps he feels a connection to the man stemming from his own humble beginnings. You can see Figaro's denouncement of the ridiculous rights of the count in Beaumarchais's impassioned defense of Lucas. In Beaumarchais's play "The Marriage of Figaro," the Count feels that he should have access to any woman that he wants because of his rank. Beaumarchais feels that the upper-class white man in the incident involving Ambroise Lucas has a similar ridiculous belief in his own entitlement.

Throughout the following years, Beaumarchais's rebellious political beliefs continued to be revealed. He faced several run-ins with members of the aristocracy, was involved in legal issues, many of which seem specifically designed to humiliate him, and even spent a considerable amount of time under house arrest, quite without cause. When parliament was dissolved by Louis VX in 1770, and then reformed with ministers hand-picked for their obedience to the monarchy, Beaumarchais was left with few friends in the government to protect him, and he faced the full force of an aristocracy resentful of his humble birth and rapid success.¹⁴ All of this encouraged Beaumarchais's continued development as a representative of a people striving for equality. I am sure that the dissolution of Parliament was infuriating to Beaumarchais and his compatriots. Louis XV angrily issued a statement accompanying the dissolution of Parliament, which read, "We

¹⁴ Grendel, *Beamarchais*, 55.

receive our crown from God alone. The right to make laws to lead and govern our subjects appertains to us alone, without dependency and without participation.”¹⁵

By 1773, Beaumarchais had hit rock bottom. He was in prison, albeit a comfortable one, he had been stripped of his fortune in a rigged lawsuit (orchestrated by the family of a corrupt magistrate, Gozman) against his mortal enemy, and his wife and child had recently passed away, leaving him in a state of depressed and distraught grief. However, as with many of the most brilliant minds in history, it is in the depths of despair that Beaumarchais emerges at full strength. “He had realized that, for essentials, he could rely only on himself. After much thought, he would launch from his cell an apparently formidable onslaught against the Gozmans. But an attack on the Gozmans was an attack on parliament as a whole, hence on the government, hence on Louis XV.”¹⁶

Beaumarchais came up fighting. He got out of prison, provoked his enemies into a lawsuit in which he was accused of bribery, and took up his most valuable weapon: his mighty pen and his influence on public opinion. Beaumarchais turned the trial into an absurd comedy, dancing around his accusers and using his superior wit to humiliate them. The public adored him. He published his *Memoirs*, which were a huge hit from the beginning. They were riotously humorous, made even more so by the way that he never strays from the facts. His ridiculous depiction of the corrupt government of France and the aristocracy that perpetuated it were effective because they were not only engaging, they were true. “The secret of Beaumarchais’s extraordinary success lies in a single word—comedy. It is because

¹⁵ Grendel *Beaumarchais*, 55.

¹⁶ Grendel 86

he was clever enough to treat his enemies as characters, to write scenes in which they move and speak, and to stage himself as himself that Beaumarchais found an audience and reached the people.”¹⁷ The *Memoirs* are the predecessor to *Figaro*. Beaumarchais had found the most effective outlet to spread his message of the rights of the middle class and the preposterous pomposity and entitlement of the upper classes. The scenes in the *Memoirs* and its sequels were acted out all over the city.

Beaumarchais’s fight soon became the fight of the people of France. As the trial wound down and grew in intensity, demonstrations sprang up throughout Paris. “In the cafes, in the streets, people began to demonstrate for Beaumarchais and above all against parliament....One man’s fight against arbitrary authority had suddenly become almost everyone’s fight.”¹⁸ The protests were not against the King, not yet, but still they heralded the shifting social waters of France. The fight foreshadowed the upcoming disastrous French Revolution.

During his trial, which Beaumarchais did eventually come through only a little worse for wear, with the added bonus of having captivated the attention of Europe, he was writing *The Barber of Seville* and creating the character that is the subject of this study, Figaro. *The Barber* is lovely. It is a comedic masterpiece that still makes audiences laugh today. However, the superficial success of this play or of *The Marriage of Figaro* is not really what interests us here. The character of Figaro lies at the heart of Beaumarchais’s message. Using Figaro, he wrote himself and his own ideas into the stories. Particularly in the *Barber*, Figaro’s character is not really

¹⁷ Grendel 92

¹⁸ Grendel, *Beaumarchis*, 103.

crucial to the action. If you were to take out all of his monologues, you would still have a highly amusing plot that would make sense. However, Figaro is not a part of the play to contribute to the comedy. The comedy is there to contribute to Figaro, or rather Beaumarchais. "The appearance of Figaro marks a decisive turning-point in French literary history. With Figaro, the author comes on to the stage for the first time."¹⁹ Beaumarchais is at his best when writing about himself.

As an example of the sort of statement that Beaumarchais makes through this play, a precursor to *The Marriage of Figaro*, take this exchange between Figaro, the valet, and Almaviva, his former employer.

Almaviva: I recall that in my service you were not especially obedient.

Figaro: The poor have their weaknesses like everyone else, my lord.

Almaviva: Lazy, argumentative...

Figaro: To judge by the virtues demanded of a servant, does your Excellency know many masters who are fit to be valets?²⁰

This is typical of Beaumarchais's style. The passage is undoubtedly funny, but it also makes a social statement, disregarding the "morals" of the upper classes, portraying Figaro as witty, and assigning virtue to the middle classes. These themes can be seen throughout the Figaro plays.

There are many parallels between Figaro and Beaumarchais, so many that we cannot fail to understand that Beaumarchais was projecting his own personality and concerns through Figaro. He even makes references to characters from his own life in the plays, such as naming a villain "Gusman," a reference to his nemesis

¹⁹ Grendel, *Beaumarchais*, 137.

²⁰ Beaumarchais, Pierre-Augustin, and Thomas Harris, *The Barber of Seville: A Comic Opera in Two Acts* (Paris, 1818), 78.

Goezman.²¹ More obscurely, Beaumarchais includes in Figaro the ambiguity of his own vital position in the French court. “Almaviva can’t fire Figaro because he is indispensable – the master is more vulnerable than the valet. Figaro, knowing his strength, however fragile it may be, can do as he pleases.”²² Beaumarchais was invaluable to Louis XVI. He could never have been dismissed. Another example of one of the many clues that Beaumarchais left scattered throughout his plays that the author and the protagonist were one and the same comes at the conclusion of *The Marriage*. When discussing the course his life has taken, Figaro reflects upon his circumstances: “I was poor and people despised me. I showed some talent and was disliked for it. My wife and fortune apart—you are welcome to what I have.”²³ It would be difficult to deny the parallel between how Figaro describes his life and the life that we know Beaumarchais lived.

The Marriage was completed in 1778.²⁴ Between the premier of *The Barber* and the completion of its follow-up work, Beaumarchais continued to establish himself politically. He worked closely with high-ranking officials of all kinds, and advised the newly-reforming parliament, which Louis XV had recalled after Beaumarchais’s trial had made a mockery of the system. Beaumarchais was also deeply influential in involving France in the conflict between Great Britain and their colonies in what would become the United States. He convinced Louis XVI to become involved in the conflict, and he himself became a personal ally of the

²¹ Grendel, *Beaumarchais*, 140.

²² Grendel, *Beaumarchais*, 212.

²³ Beaumarchais, *The Barber of Seville*, 105.

²⁴ Grendel, *Beaumarchais*, 147.

Insurgents and provided them with arms.²⁵ His passionate support of the American cause, detailed in many letters between himself, the King, and the King's ministers, cannot go unremarked upon. Beaumarchais's feelings regarding American independence and their desire for a democratic government are a perfect example of his desire for class equality and of his role as a harbinger of these changes in Europe as well as in the United States.

The Marriage of Figaro was Beaumarchais's true "coming out" as Figaro. He had revealed himself subtly in *The Barber*, but in *The Marriage*, we receive the full confession. It was also even more political than his previous plays. When Louis XVI, who had long been fond of Beaumarchais, read the script for the first time, he said, "We should have to destroy the Bastille if a performance of this play was not to be a dangerous blunder. This man mocks everything that must be respected in a government."²⁶ When he was presented with the manuscript, Napoleon cried out, "If I had been king, a man such as he would have been locked up. There would have been an outcry, but what a service it would have rendered to society! *The Marriage of Figaro* is already the revolution in action."²⁷ Louis XVI tried to keep the play from being performed, and the battle that took place over the desks of the censors lasted for more than two years, but this served no other purpose than to make the play all the more popular. With all the fuss, people couldn't wait to get their hands on the manuscript. There were secret readings all over Paris, and soon all over the rest of Europe. Beaumarchais was fully aware of the inflammatory nature of the writing.

²⁵ Grendel, *Beaumarchais*, 169.

²⁶ Grendel, *Beaumarchais*, 212.

²⁷ Grendel, *Beaumarchais*, 220.

His first draft passed the censure, so he made drastic changes to make it more revolutionary. However, even though he wished for change, he never imagined the overthrow of the monarchy that would take place. "Beaumarchais was a reformer...he believed that the time had come to make France a constitutional monarchy based on the people, and to abolish privileges."²⁸

There are some important parallels to draw between the characters and situations in the play itself and Beaumarchais's life. We have established that Figaro represents Beaumarchais himself. For the purpose of this argument, Count Almaviva represents the upper crust and absolute monarchy. Bartholo, Bazile, and Brid'oison are representative of the king's lackeys, his ministers and hangers-on. The women of the story, Figaro's intended Susanna and the Almaviva's wife the Countess, are harder to assign, but Almaviva surely wants them both. His greed (the greed of wealthy society) knows no bounds. He is not content with what he is entitled to in his own class, he also wants the woman intended for Figaro.

Let us turn first to the heroes of the play. Throughout the plot, Beaumarchais insistently instills these characters with positive characteristics. One word that comes to mind in describing Susanna or Figaro is, ironically enough, "noble." Even from the beginning of the plot, we see solidarity among the servants of the household. When Almaviva comes bursting in upon Susanna in the dressing room, Suzanne hides Cherubino, taking his side even though he had just been teasing her. Against the greater power wielded by the Count, they are united.²⁹ Also early in the plot, Marceline waxes poetic about the virtues of Figaro. Although she is not

²⁸ Grendel, *Beaumarchais*, 212.

²⁹ Beaumarchais, *The Marriage of Figaro*, 21.

necessarily a great fount of accurate and unbiased knowledge in the context of the play, Beaumarchais still allows her to go into great detail about Figaro.

“Figaro...lively, handsome, never angry, always good-humoured, living for the moment, carefree and...generous as a lord!”³⁰ Although the last descriptive phrase in this list might not have necessarily been a compliment in the eyes of Beaumarchais, we get the point. Figaro, a commoner, a servant, is endowed with all of the characteristics of a man of very fine quality despite his ignominious birth. This may have been a little bit of ego stroking on the part of Beaumarchais, but it also makes the point that common birth does not have an impact upon character.

In another scene, we see Susanna take the lead again, this time over her social better, the Countess. Almaviva is busily accusing the Countess of infidelity (quite hypocritically, really), and Suzanne leads them all in a ruse to protect Cherubino and the Countess. She even tells the Countess to “pull herself together.”³¹ Beaumarchais endows Susanna with considerable positive leadership characteristics, far above and beyond those that he gives to the supposedly “superior” woman, the Countess.

The conclusion of the play is very telling. The Count is taught forgiveness and humility by his wife and his servants, supposedly lesser beings. The Count apologizes, and in the end everyone gets what they wanted. (Except for the Count, who, of course, wanted everything.) Still, Figaro forgives him, and he ends up relatively happy. If we consider the Count to represent the absolute monarchy of Louis XVI, we can see here the hopes that Beaumarchais had for his country. He saw

³⁰ Beaumarchais, *The Marriage of Figaro*, 16.

³¹ Beaumarchais, *The Marriage of Figaro*, 45.

clearly that one age, the age of the great totalitarian monarchs of the past, was coming to a close, and he wanted the people (represented here by Susanna, Figaro, and in some ways Cherubino) to rise. However, he and Louis XVI were fond of each other and I am sure that he hoped for the monarchy to remain stable, although changed for the better. Figaro's closing line, already briefly touched upon, should be examined in greater detail. "My wife and fortune apart, you are all welcome to what I have."³² This is a striking statement of equality and generosity, and it seems to represent Beaumarchais's hopes for a government of representation. Or, perhaps, this represents an attitude that he wishes the monarchy would take.

Even as Beaumarchais endows the humbly-born members of his production with virtues and outstanding characters, he presents the nobility as quite inept and even ridiculous. His depiction of the Countess is less than flattering. She yields to the Count again and again, despite his unfaithfulness to her. She even refers to her own reactions as "weak."³³ Susanna also mocks the idea of a gentler breed of women, saying "Sir, women of my station are not allowed to feel faint. It's a genteel condition found only in drawing rooms."³⁴ This mocking little zing is thrown in among the action and almost hidden, corresponding with Beaumarchais's subtle style.

Although the Countess is not cast in a particularly attractive light in *The Marriage of Figaro*, it is the Count who is really humiliated throughout the course of the mad plot. He is repeatedly deceived by his servants, creating a laughably

³² Beaumarchais, *The Marriage of Figaro*, 105.

³³ Beaumarchais, *The Marriage of Figaro*, 48.

³⁴ Beaumarchais, *The Marriage of Figaro*, 62.

ridiculous series of scenes on stage that make him the object of the audience's mockery and contempt. This all probably peaks when he accidentally kisses Cherubino in what must have been a riotously funny encounter in the play houses of Paris. His own personal values are also portrayed in a lecherous and greedy fashion. His insistence that it is his right to "sample" the charms of Susanna is disgusting to the audience, despite Beaumarchais's success in cloaking the concept in a veil of humor.

Figaro mocks the concept of being a courtier repeatedly throughout the play. When planning the complicated deception of Almaviva, he says, "Two, three, four threads at once – knotted and tangled besides. Ah, I am a courtier born!"³⁵ This implies that the noble class is manipulative. In another scene, he sneers, "Just suppose I'm better than my reputation. Are there many noblemen who could claim that?"³⁶ Not only does Beaumarchais comment on the nobility, he extends it to the government. The judge in the play that is called upon to sort out the mess that had developed is portrayed as comically inept. His judgment is able to be purchased, and in the end of the play he comes out and says "I don't know what to think," freely admitting his own ineptitude.³⁷ Perhaps Beaumarchais's inclusion of a corrupt judge in *The Marriage* is a comment upon the ridiculousness of his own nonsensical and unfounded court battles.

Not every statement that Beaumarchais makes about the rising middle classes is shielded by farce, however. Figaro's monologue, long considered to be the

³⁵ Beaumarchais, *The Marriage of Figaro*, 36.

³⁶ Beaumarchais, *The Marriage of Figaro*, 59.

³⁷ Beaumarchais, *The Marriage of Figaro*, 105.

cornerstone of the play and an honest representation of Beaumarchais's thoughts, is quite serious. The monologue is situated in Act 5, Scene 3. Figaro ranges over a wide landscapes of topics in the long passage, but he begins by commenting upon the plot.

No, Count, you shan't have her, you shan't have her. Because you're a nobleman you think you're a great genius. Nobility, fortune, rank, status: so much to glory in. But what did you do to get where you are? You took the trouble to be born, and that's all. Anyway, a pretty ordinary sort of fellow. Whereas I, by heaven, lost in the common crowd, had to lay out more gumption just to stay alive than the whole Spanish government have summoned in a century.³⁸

There is certainly no beating around the bush in this statement. Beaumarchais admonishes the nobility strongly. He questions what endows them with the right to rule, and praises his own rise from the "common crowd." In another passage, he references his own writing and the censoring process:

Providing I didn't mention religion, government, politics, morals, serving officials, approved institutions, the Opera, any form of theatre, or anybody who believed in anything whatsoever, I could write and print anything I liked quite freely, under the control of two or three censors.³⁹

We can see Beaumarchais's resentment of the restraints that he had to fight against.

Throughout the rest of his life, Beaumarchais continued his involvement with politics and the fight for equality. He was deeply involved with the French Revolution, spending his own money to secure arms for the troops from Holland.⁴⁰ When he was out of the country on a business trip, he was declared to be an enemy

³⁸ Beaumarchais, *The Marriage of Figaro*, 90.

³⁹ Beaumarchais, *The Marriage of Figaro*, 91.

⁴⁰ Angermuller, *Beaumarchais*, 2.

of the revolution by his enemies and was unable to return between 1794 and 1796, until his name was removed from the list. After that, he returned to Paris and lived the rest of his life in relative peace.

Beaumarchais seems to be frequently overlooked in the study of the turning tide of class power at the end of the eighteenth century because of the form that his political message took: comedy. However, the comedic nature of his message is what gave it strength. He was adored by the French people, and the popularity of his plays gave them a long life in the ears of the masses. The comedic nature of his work also seemed to protect him from monarchical retribution. How could he be punished for making jokes? He used his skill in entertaining to public to communicate his political goals.

Lorenzo Da Ponte: A Rebellious Priest and Mozart's Partner

Figaro's character next came to Da Ponte, one of Mozart's most-used librettists. Like, Beaumarchais, Da Ponte's life bears a certain resemblance to Figaro's. Lorenzo Da Ponte was born on March 10, 1749 as Emanuele Conegliano. Similarly to Beaumarchais, Da Ponte was forced to adopt a religion that was not his own early in life. His father, a Jewish leatherworker, wanted to wed a Catholic woman, and so converted, bringing his three sons along with him into the Church. In keeping with tradition, Emanuele, as the oldest son, adopted the name of the Bishop who baptized them, and so became Lorenzo Da Ponte.⁴¹

Da Ponte's background is quite humble; his family was poor. Because of this, the only option available to him if he wanted to pursue a scholarly or professional life was to study through the Church. So, under pressure from his family, Lorenzo entered the seminary. After some time at the seminary, his family's poverty forced Da Ponte's father to recommend that Lorenzo join the priesthood. "Entry into the priesthood was a gainsaying of all that the newly minted Lorenzo Da Ponte perceived as his make-up and imagined as his destiny. Yet there was no question of compromise."⁴² Da Ponte was a lover of the written word from a young age, and during his time as a student at seminary, this passion suited him well. He discovered some books in his father's attic and quickly devoured them at the age of

⁴¹ Bolt, Rodney, *The Librettist of Venice: The Remarkable Life of Lorenzo Da Ponte, Mozart's Poet, Casanova's Friend, and Italian Opera's Impresario in America* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Pub., 2006), 3.

⁴² Bolt, *Librettist of Venice*, 14.

ten.⁴³ Then, while at seminary, Da Ponte began writing while studying under an influential teacher, Gianandrea Cagliari, an innovative scholar that collected students that inspired Lorenzo. "Lorenzo set himself to studying Italian poetry with such ferocity that he barely stopped to eat, and within six months he knew Dante's *Inferno* by heart, as well as most of Petrarch's sonnets, and the choicest passages from Tasso and Ariosto."⁴⁴ Da Ponte quickly rose through the ranks and became a teacher. Soon, after taking up with a woman and creating a child, he left for Venice.⁴⁵

In Venice, twenty-four year old Lorenzo quickly acquired work as a tutor to two young boys. Da Ponte and Angela, the mother of his child and his companion in Venice, were swept up into a life revolving around the theatre, gambling, and night life. "Young Lorenzo Da Ponte, at youth's boiling point, was swept away into a life of voluptuousness and diversion, forgetting or neglecting literature and his studies entirely."⁴⁶ Despite the damage to his academic pursuits his time in Venice with Angela caused, he did learn something important that would help him to survive in the future. "Along the way he learned how to behave like an aristocrat, to pick a path past the pitfalls that surrounded social status to learn the manners that marked out a new territory."⁴⁷ Da Ponte rose quickly in intellectual circles in Venice, and he made what he thought were friends among the elite. For the purposes of this paper, there is one incident during his long stay in Venice that is worth relating. Da Ponte

⁴³ Bolt, *The Librettist of Venice*, 11.

⁴⁴ Bolt, *The Librettist of Venice*, 12.

⁴⁵ Holden, Anthony, *The Man Who Wrote Mozart: The Extraordinary Life of Lorenzo Da Ponte* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006), 23.

⁴⁶ Bolt, *The Librettist of Venice*, 27.

⁴⁷ Bolt, *The Librettist of Venice*, 29.

wrote a series of poems for a seminary ceremony every year, staying within academic guidelines but choosing his own subject matter. While he was writing these poems, the American Revolution began, and Da Ponte and his contemporaries had access to documents such as the Declaration of Independence.⁴⁸ The Reformation was sweeping across Europe, and Lorenzo was bored. For two years he had devoted himself studiously to his work, and he craved some of the hedonism that had become part of his life with Angela. That year, his subversive theme choice was “Is man happier in an organized society or in a simple state of nature?”⁴⁹

Da Ponte argued against the right of one person to have power over another. Historian Anthony Holden remarks that, “Da Ponte’s measured arguments that the state had no rights over its citizens, nor parents over their children, and that no laws served any useful purpose, caused no great fuss that day.”⁵⁰ The fuss was to come later. Da Ponte truly revealed himself in this poetry. Similarly to Beaumarchais, we see a man of the people, clearly distinguishable through his writing. In the third of the set, entitled “Frottola Anacreontica,” Da Ponte writes:

From the nymph, another gift,
I would certainly like to ask:
Into a different man from the one I am
I would like to be transformed...

To become the absolute monarch.

Then I would spread around
A universal law
Coming from the shore where the day is born
To the Western shore.

⁴⁸ Bolt, *The Librettist of Venice*, 44.

⁴⁹ Holden, *The Man Who Wrote Mozart*, 23.

⁵⁰ Holden, *The Man Who Wrote Mozart*, 26.

A law that, throughout the world,
Would end all other laws
That did not defend or give priority to
The well-being of suffering citizens.⁵¹

Enlightenment values place the welfare of man kind above the authority of government, and in this excerpt we can clearly see where Da Ponte's allegiance lies. He is a man of humble beginnings, and he believes in natural human rights.

Da Ponte was called before the Venetian Senate for a hearing over his poetry, and he was formally rebuked by his Bishop. However, he merely laughed it all off, managed to keep himself out of prison, and was able to escape from a restrictive priestly life as part of the bargain.⁵² Because of his womanizing ways and his rebellious politics, Da Ponte was banished from Italy in 1777, and traveled Europe. He met Mozart in Vienna in 1781.⁵³

⁵¹ Holden, *The Man Who Wrote Mozart*, 28.

⁵² Bolt, *The Librettist of Venice*, 45.

⁵³ Holden, *The Man Who Wrote Mozart*, 47.

Mozart: A Tumultuous Childhood and Undervalued Talent

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was born in Salzburg, Germany in January 1756.⁵⁴ Born to a musical father, Leopold, he was trained from a young age on a variety of instruments. His talent soon revealed itself and Leopold escorted the young Wolfgang and his sister Nannerl across the far reaches of Europe on performance tours. Mozart lived a tragically short life of only thirty-five years, but left behind one of the most important musical legacies of any composer. The biography of Mozart has been long-studied and analyzed, so it is unnecessary here to recount the story of his virtuosic youth and rowdy adulthood, but there are a few points in his history that are salient to our subject matter.

Mozart detested Salzburg, the city of his birth, and the place that his father was always trying to lure him in order to find work where he could be under Leopold's thumb. At the end of the eighteenth century, Salzburg was the epitome of a society stratified by class and wealth. In his detailed biography of Mozart's life, historian Robert W. Gutman remarks, "Mozart came from a moribund petty principality administered solely for the benefit of its administrators. Its court and populace had long evinced that passive mentality so destructive of artistic development."⁵⁵ Salzburg was ruled by an Archbishop, and during Mozart's time in the city this office was held by a fairly heartless fellow named Colloredo. The position of Archbishop of Salzburg was a lucrative one, and many men longed for it. "Many an archbishop used his years of authority simply to exploit his subjects and

⁵⁴ Holden *The Man Who Wrote Mozart*, 43.

⁵⁵ Gutman, Robert W, *Mozart: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999), 2.

to fill his and his family's pockets."⁵⁶ Colloredo was certainly no exception to this rule, and it seemed that he used his employ of Mozart as a display of power and wealth, something to hold up to other powerful men as a symbol of his own majesty. Gutman notes the dismissive possessiveness of Colloredo: "Colloredo's begrudging Mozart permission to work at another court as reflects both jealous awareness of his contribution to the archbishopric's reputation and a no less equivocal possessiveness."⁵⁷ Salzburg allowed Mozart to show his true talent in sacred music, symphonies, and concertos, but there was no demand for opera, which remained his "true ambition."⁵⁸ He very much longed for the freedom to explore the operatic medium. (He wrote *Idomeneo*, his first full-fledged opera seria, was written and performed while Mozart was "on loan" to another court.) The Archbishop eventually became frustrated with Mozart's well-documented rebelliousness and flippancy and dismissed him, sending Mozart scurrying to Vienna looking for work. This seemed to suit Wolfgang quite well. Mozart deeply resented having to work for Colloredo and a court that did nothing to inspire him creatively, treated him like a servant, and used him as decoration. During his time living at home with his father and sister, he wrote much less prolifically and seemed to generally be unhappier than when in Vienna or other parts of Europe. This treatment as a secondary citizen, as property, helped to shape Mozart's social views, and inspired such Enlightened opinions as those that we see expressed in *The Marriage of Figaro*.

⁵⁶ Gutman, *Mozart*, 6.

⁵⁷ Gutman, *Mozart*, 527.

⁵⁸ Holden, *The Man Who Wrote Mozart*, 46.

Although it is true that Mozart was much more artistically prolific in Vienna and that he was able to pursue opera, in many ways Vienna was no more open to his forward-thinking ideals than was Salzburg. The classes in Vienna were deeply divided, both socially and economically. Andrew Steptoe examines the atmosphere of Vienna in his study of the Mozart-Da Ponte operas, saying,

Any outline of the society in which Mozart made his living must acknowledge the immense gulf separating the nobility from other classes. The traditional position of the aristocracy endowed them with such economic power, educational and social superiority, that the forces of rationalism and enlightenment encountered fierce resistance.⁵⁹

Despite the relative artistic freedom that he found in Vienna from his father and from the Archbishop, Mozart still hovered at the edges of elite society, held back by his birth and rank.

We must also note that Mozart, like Beaumarchais and Da Ponte, came from humble beginnings. His mother's family worked as low-level German beaurocrats and in the textile industry.⁶⁰ His father's family worked in bookbinding, and Leopold abandoned a medical career to be a musician.⁶¹ The families that Mozart emerged from did not walk the court circles that his music eventually gave him access to. Like Beaumarchais and Da Ponte, Mozart had to earn what status he was awarded, for his birth did not earn it for him. Throughout most of his life, Mozart was forced to rely on his ability to attract wealthy patrons for his income, and he was not always successful in this. Even when he did have a patron, the status of a

⁵⁹ Steptoe, Andrew, *The Mozart-Da Ponte Operas: The Cultural and Musical Background to Le Nozze Di Figaro, Don Giovanni, and Così Fan Tutte* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 24.

⁶⁰ Gutman, *Mozart*, 10.

⁶¹ Gutman, *Mozart*, 12.

musician, even a *kappelmeister*, was not high, even though it brought some security. After touring Europe as such a young child, he had some difficulty distinguishing himself as an adult, particularly in Paris, where he had made such an impression at age seven. After failing to find enough work there to support himself, he wrote home to Leopold in disgust: "What annoys me most of all here is that the stupid French believe that I am still seven years old...Thus they treat me here as a beginner."⁶² This is partly the reason that he was forced to seek patronage in Salzburg. Much like the other men on whom this paper focuses, Mozart walked the halls of the elite, but he was not really one of them, even as a successful composer and performer. He was cut from more common cloth, making him sympathetic to the rising middle and working classes at the close of the eighteenth century.

Mozart's social circle also points at his Enlightened philosophy. His close friends were not from ancient families that were part of Joseph's court, but rather from an upwardly-mobile middle class. "They had reached their positions by ability, not hereditary tradition, and their sense of public duty was strong."⁶³ Mozart's most intimate circle mingled with the elite, but were from new money. They were aware of their more tenuous social position, as was the young composer. Mozart chose to ally himself with those who were self-made, like himself. This reflects the strong appreciation for individual value determining one's status much as it is presented in the writings of Beaumarchais. In a letter to his father from 1781, Mozart wrote, "It is the heart that ennobles the man, and though I am no Count, yet I probably have more honor in me than many a Count. Whether a man be Count or valet, the

⁶² Gutman, *Mozart*, xxi.

⁶³ Steptoe, *The Mozart-Da Ponte Operas*, 80.

moment he insults me he is a scoundrel.”⁶⁴ This assertion of personal dignity could have come straight from the dialogue of *Figaro*.

Many of the social circles that Mozart moved in in Vienna were associated with Freemasonry. As Steptoe says, “It is difficult not to disentangle Masonic principles about death, truth, love, and equality from Enlightened thinking as a whole.”⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Steptoe, *The Mozart-Da Ponte Operas*, 82.

⁶⁵ Steptoe, *The Mozart-Da Ponte Operas*, 82.

Le nozze de Figaro: Controversy and a Brilliant Collaboration

In some ways, Mozart and Da Ponte were very different. Da Ponte lived for pleasure, seeming to lack a certain seriousness about his art that Mozart already possessed, perhaps due to the intensity of his musical upbringing. Underneath his carefree exterior, Mozart reflected the impact of his childhood, which had been all work. Da Ponte's childhood and young adulthood, on the other hand, had been mostly play. However, they seemed to recognize in each other another artist, someone worthy of respect and collaboration. In his memoirs Da Ponte writes, "It was not long before numerous composers approached me for libretti. But there were only two in Vienna whom I considered worthy of my respect: Martin...and W. Mozart."⁶⁶

The first collaborations between these two men were small and largely unsuccessful. Mozart was, at first, leery of trusting "the Italian poet," as he referred to Da Ponte.⁶⁷ However, they soon founded a great musical partnership. Anthony Holden describes it well:

In defiance of operatic tradition, Mozart considered that the words should be the 'obedient daughter' of the music. If he took an unusually proactive role in the shaping of his libretti, Da Ponte gives him a stronger narrative structure, better-drawn characters, more wit and more elegant verse than any of his collaborators. Da Ponte's poetic gift combined with his sense of theatre to make the perfect match for Mozart's musical genius.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Holden *The Man Who Wrote Mozart*, 66.

⁶⁷ Holden, *The Man Who Wrote Mozart*, 70.

⁶⁸ Holden, *The Man Who Wrote Mozart*, 70.

Their partnership was unrivaled. It could be argued that the works that they produced together are unmatched by any that they produced independently of each other or in collaboration with other artists. Their three operatic contributions, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan tutte* have stood the test of time and are part of the backbone of the opera repertoire. Da Ponte, Mozart's "true phoenix," was flexible with Mozart, allowing Mozart's musical ideas to shape his poetry, thereby inspiring Mozart to unparalleled musical creativity.

The first significant, successful project that they worked on together was *The Marriage of Figaro*, and it was a subversive choice. The play itself was banned in Vienna. Emperor Joseph, who up until this point had professed no great love for Mozart's work, ("Too many notes!")⁶⁹ had heard of the play (as had most people in Europe by this point) and had forbidden the German Theatre Company in Vienna from running it, saying, "Since this piece contains a great deal that is objectionable, I shall expect the Censor either to reject it altogether or at least require such alterations to be made that he can be held responsible for the performance of the play and the impression it may make."⁷⁰ Emperor Joseph has long been hailed as a monarch with Enlightened ideals. He took many steps to modernize the Austrian government, including reforming the church system, creating a new centralized administration to streamline his government and make it less authoritarian, prohibiting child labor, establishing schools and hospitals, and abolishing the death penalty. Despite these progressive programs, he was surely aware of the social

⁶⁹ Steptoe, *The Mozart-Da Ponte Operas*, 67.

⁷⁰ Holden, *The Man Who Wrote Mozart*, 71.

movement that was growing and threatening his power and legacy. Beaumarchais's *Figaro* was revolutionary even for him.

Despite Joseph II's clear disdain and condemnation for the play, Da Ponte and Mozart still chose to use it for their first truly successful collaboration. Why? Why choose a story that forced them to work in secret when they could have chosen anything? They both had the favor of the Emperor, especially Da Ponte, and they lived in a city that allowed them quite a bit of artistic freedom. Why challenge the status quo? It is tempting to answer this question by ascribing their determination to use the play to its unprecedented popularity across Europe. Any opera entitled *The Marriage of Figaro* was guaranteed an initial audience. However, there is more to it than that. As we have already discovered, both Mozart and Da Ponte were children of the Enlightenment. They believed in principles such as equality, human rights, and status determined by merit. Although their reasons for choosing *Figaro* as the subject of their collaboration were probably many, one of them must have been their shared belief in its revolutionary message.

The changes that Da Ponte chose to make to Beaumarchais's work to make it suitable for opera are enlightening. Most obviously, the play had to be shortened considerably, for the five acts that Beaumarchais created would never have produced an opera of any appropriate length. Da Ponte removed several minor plot lines and focused on the main characters, ignoring many of the secondary participants. Da Ponte also made changes at the end of Acts II and III. In the play, these are fairly quiet finales, but Mozart was insistent that conclusions need to have

more impact. Da Ponte adapted the plot to fit this specification.⁷¹ Although these changes are significant in that they hint at the vast role that Mozart made in the libretto to make it musically compatible, they are small in comparison to the attentions that Da Ponte paid to the primary characters.

Both Almaviva and the Countess are stripped of many of their complexities. In particular, the Count is realized in a much more shallow fashion that allows the listener to more clearly identify his most distasteful personality traits. “The man portrayed in the libretto is little more than a bullying philanderer, with pride and lust his chief motives, except when occasionally overcome by guilt.”⁷² The Count is deliberately coarsened and villanized by Da Ponte, in such a pointed way to make it clear that it is not the result of adaptation for the opera. For example, when Almaviva discovers Cherubino hiding in the closet at the conclusion of Act II, Da Ponte alters the Count’s brisk anger in Beaumarchais’s version to a much more vindictive, brutal rage. In the libretto, the Count warns “Mora, mora, e piu non sia...” [He shall die, die, and I will be rid of all my torment.]⁷³ This threatening statement adds a certain level of calculated violence to the character.

Similarly, the Count’s aria “Vedro mentr’io sospiro,” is an interpolation by Da Ponte. In the play, this section of dialogue presented by the count communicates his distress at slighted affection. (For Susanna has rejected him in favor of Figaro.) Comparatively, Da Ponte’s text portrays the count as not wounded emotionally, but

⁷¹ Steptoe, *The Mozart-Da Ponte Operas*, 110.

⁷² Steptoe, *The Mozart-Da Ponte Operas*, 111.

⁷³ Bishop, Henry R., Christina Fuhrmann, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Thomas Holcroft, and Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, *Mozart’s The Marriage of Figaro: adapted for Covent Garden, 1819*, (Middleton, Wis: A-R Editions, 2012).

rather dismayed at the loss of his dignity, and indignant that his servant should have anything that the Count desires and cannot have.⁷⁴

The stripping down of these characters to make them less human, easier to despise (in the case of Almaviva) or dismiss (in the case of the Countess), even more bluntly expresses an Enlightened disgust of elite entitlement than Beaumarchais accomplished. Da Ponte's Count represents everything that there was to protest about the socially stratified life at the end of the eighteenth century.

Da Ponte also changed Figaro himself. Beaumarchais's Figaro was honorable, yes, but also self-deprecating, mischievous, and fundamentally flawed in ways that humanity itself is flawed. Beaumarchais's Figaro has a side to him that is less than suitable for polite company. Da Ponte plays down this part of the character considerably. "His disreputable side is subdued, and he is presented as an endearing and fundamentally honest individual."⁷⁵ Da Ponte's hero was more pure, and the audience could emulate him without misgivings.

Many of the changes that Da Ponte made to Beaumarchais's original play were certainly pragmatic. He had to condense a five-act colossus into something that Mozart could work into an opera. He also had to contend with Mozart's fairly finicky demands in regards to making the poetry compatible with his imagined music. Also, much of the outright political rhetoric that Beaumarchais was able to include was omitted in order for the libretto to clear the censor. However, it is Da Ponte's changes to the fundamental character of the primary characters in the story, something that the censor would be less likely to find fault with, that hints the most

⁷⁴ Steptoe, *The Mozart-Da Ponte Operas*, 112.

⁷⁵ Steptoe, *The Mozart-Da Ponte Operas*, 112.

at his desire to communicate a certain Enlightened message in his libretto. He truly villainized his aristocratic Count, and he glorified Figaro, the commoner, writer, and member of the rising middle class, much like Da Ponte himself.

Examining the music that Mozart used to set Da Ponte's opera, we can see easily how he used instilled humor into scenes to make the count seem unintelligent, greedy, and uncaring for those around him. The first scene in which this is clearly evident occurs in Act I, Scene VI. Cherubino has just finished reciting his love poem to Susanna when the Count suddenly knocks on her door. Cherubino hides behind a chair, and then throughout the scene must continually shift positions in the room, always keeping himself out of sight, when the Count has to hide from Basilio, who has also come knocking. Visually, this scene is quite humorous. Cherubino and Susanna (the commoners) are the only ones involved that really know what is going on, and the Count simply looks silly crawling around behind the chair. Susanna orchestrates the entire scene. Musically, Mozart gives the Count an overbearing demeanor. In their opening recitative interaction, Susanna tries to shoo the Count out to defend her virtue, but Mozart's recitative setting keeps him barreling through her protests. Rather than the rests used in a lot of recitative between speakers that reflects natural pauses in speaking patterns, there are virtually no rests between Susanna's words and the Counts insistent pursuit of her. This makes the Count seem uncaring and domineering.

Another subtle musical tool that Mozart uses to villainize the Count in this scene is subtle mode mixing. During the trio between Basilio, Susanna, and the Count, it is solidly in B Flat Major, but when the Count begins to tell the story of his

discovery of Cherubino with his wife, Mozart begins employing A flats, moving subtly to C minor for isolated moments. This makes the Count seem ominous and foreboding, particularly when surrounded by the major themes employed by the other participants in this scene (example 1).

**Example 1. "Terzetto," from *The Marriage of Figaro*, mm. 128-132.
Translation: [Because of her suspicion, I searched all over.]**

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system includes a Bass Solo part with lyrics and four instrumental staves (Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, and Double Bass). The second system continues the Bass Solo with lyrics and the four instrumental staves. The key signature is C minor (three flats) and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are: "gnar - do, cer - cum o - gni si - to ed al - can - do per - que - ni - no."

System 1:

- Bass Solo:** Bass clef, C minor, 4/4. Lyrics: gnar - do, cer - cum o - gni si - to ed al -
- Violin 1:** Treble clef, C minor, 4/4. Rest.
- Violin 2:** Treble clef, C minor, 4/4. Rest.
- Viola:** Alto clef, C minor, 4/4. Rest.
- Double Bass:** Bass clef, C minor, 4/4. Rest.

System 2:

- B. Solo:** Bass clef, C minor, 4/4. Lyrics: can - do per - que - ni - no.
- Vln. 1:** Treble clef, C minor, 4/4.
- Vln. 2:** Treble clef, C minor, 4/4.
- Vla.:** Alto clef, C minor, 4/4.
- Db.:** Bass clef, C minor, 4/4.

Another scene in which the audience is confronted with the malicious villainy of the Count is at the beginning of Act III when he expresses his anger over being tricked and plots his revenge in a recitative followed by an aria. The aria includes quite a bit of chromaticism, taking it far afield from its written key of D Major.⁷⁶ This gives the Count a very sinister aesthetic. Mozart also gives certain words great musical emphasis in this aria, particularly “deceived” when the Count is expressing his rage at being taken for a fool. It sounds as though the singer is spitting out the word in a fit of violent anger. This makes the Count seem quite foreboding and even dangerous. By the end of this aria, there is no doubt who Mozart intends the villain of this opera to be.

Following Figaro’s entrance, he embarks on one of the most recognizable arias from the opera: “Non piu andrai,” in which he advises Cherubino to give up his “prancing,” “dancing,” and “silks,” and answer the call of the military honorably. The language and intention is rather satirical, but the force of the aria and Mozart’s setting of the libretto here cannot be ignored. The melodic line, especially when Figaro speaks of the honor that can be had in war and Cherubino’s duty to answer the call, is striking. The ascending triads that Mozart employs require a good deal of virtuosity from the baritone, and result is rather breathtaking. The orchestral accompaniment at these moments is striking as well. Mozart breaks from his rhythmic pattern and accompanies the vocal line in unison, adding further emphasis. When sung well, these portions of the aria endow the listener with respect for Figaro, especially contrasted with Mozart’s setting of Figaro’s description

⁷⁶ Mozart, *The Marriage of Figaro*, 429.

of Cherubino's frivolous life currently, which is light, prancing, and mocking. The subject of the aria, honor, also makes Figaro seem honorable, in spite of his rather ironic use of the concept (example 2).

**Example 2, "Non piu andrai," *The Marriage of Figaro*, mm. 10-12.
Translation: [Gun at your back, sword at your side.]**

The musical score for Example 2, "Non piu andrai," from *The Marriage of Figaro*, measures 10-12. The score is arranged for Bassoon, Baritone Solo, Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, and Contrabass. The Baritone Solo part includes the lyrics: "bel-le tur-ban-doil ri-po-so, Nar-ci-set-to, A-don-ci-no d'a".

Mozart makes the countess seem frivolous and useless in a similar fashion to the way in which he makes the Count seem unintelligent and filled with malicious intent. At the beginning of the second act, the Countess is introduced to the audience for the first time. She sings a slow aria mourning the loss of her husband's love, calling "Bring him back or let me perish!"⁷⁷ Mozart uses a very slow rhythm throughout the aria, and the melody is filled with long phrases and suspended endings. This gives the aria a very indulgent, self-involved aesthetic that makes the

⁷⁷ Mozart, *The Marriage of Figaro*, 376.

Countess seem to be on the verge of fainting (as every woman of good breeding should be) as well as quite unaware of the Count's negative personality traits. The very slow tempo of the piece also makes the Countess herself seem rather slow. Later, when Figaro, Susanna, and the Countess plot together on how to foil the dastardly plot of the Count, she is overrun by her commoner cohorts. Once again, Mozart makes use of recitative to establish the power structure on stage, but this time in reverse. Figaro and Susanna discuss the plan to fool the Count, and the Countess occasionally interjects with phrases such as "My goodness!" and "What madness!"⁷⁸ Figaro and Susanna dominate the scene not just with their words, but also musically, giving them a position of superiority over the Countess, who is supposedly their social better. They run right over her sections of the recitative with barely a pause between them. Mozart uses the libretto well here, for Da Ponte had already given the meat of the dialogue to the two commoners (probably with Mozart's prompting and involvement.)

In Act IV, Scene IV, the plot of the opera is beginning to come to its most confusing moment. Figaro thinks that Susanna has betrayed him and is meeting the Count for a tryst. Mozart sets Figaro's expression of sadness, anger, and self-reflection with a recitative succeeded by an aria, "Apprite un po Quell'occhi."⁷⁹ Mozart uses these two musical episodes to explore Figaro's humanity, making him the most relateable character in the opera for the audience. The count and the countess are comic characters, and their emotions seem overdone and part of the act for much of the opera, but in this scene the audience is exposed to true emotion.

⁷⁸ Mozart, *The Marriage of Figaro*, 188

⁷⁹ Mozart, *The Marriage of Figaro*, 597.

The dramatic dynamic contrast that Mozart uses in the recitative make the words seem very speech-like and very realistic. For example, when Figaro is speaking of Suzanne, saying "Oh Susanna, Susanna, what despair you have caused me," Mozart marks a dynamic of pianissimo, giving the line a certain tenderness and vulnerability. In the very next measure, the music swells to forte as Figaro cries out, "Ah, who would not have trusted to such innocent features?" in anger. Mozart's careful setting of the words, respecting their poetic meaning and reflecting it in the melody, makes Figaro so very human. Mozart continues this technique of dynamic contrast in the aria. The text of the aria is dramatic and full of emotion, and Mozart allows the performer to truly express his passion. For example, when Figaro cries out, "No mercy, no no no no!" Mozart obliges the text with repeated quarter notes, allowing the singer to swell into each tone dramatically, communicating anguish (example 3).

**Example 3, "Apprite un po Quell'occhi," *The Marriage of Figaro*, mm.
Translation: [No mercy, no no no!]**

Cl.

Fg.

Cor.

VI. I

VI. II

Vla.

Fg.

Vc. e Cb.

tà, non sen - ton pic - tà, no, no, no, no, il re - sto, il re - sto noi

Da Ponte did not include very much of the long monologue that Beaumarchais included in the original play in this part of the plot; the monologue was far too long and generally irrelevant to the motion of the story, which did not need further complication. The action is difficult enough to follow as it is! However, the monologue in the play serves the purpose of revealing to the audience the true nature of Figaro. He becomes real to the audience, he becomes an inspirational symbol for equality and the power of humanity. While Mozart and Da Ponte were

forced to omit much of the monologue, they did not omit this important feature of the play. Figaro is not so explicitly revealed, but he is revealed nonetheless to be an honest, noble, good man with feelings and desires that the audience relates to. Mozart substitutes his own art (the music) for what must be lost of Beaumarchais's art (the words). The garden scene that we have been examining was the crux of Beaumarchais's message, and it remains so in the opera. It is in this moment in Mozart's drama when Figaro reveals his confusion and broken heart that the audience truly understands his superiority to the Count. The Count's anger and unhappiness are shallow, for they are based upon such shallow traits as greed, petty desire, and a delusional belief in his own importance. Figaro's broken heart, on the other hand, is very real. His anger is based upon his deep love for Susanna.

The conclusion of the opera has much the same effect upon the audience that the conclusion of the play has. When the count begs for forgiveness, we see that Suzanne and Figaro have taught him something. A member of the ruling elite has learned something from an underling. However, I would argue that Mozart and Da Ponte's Count was not the same man as Beaumarchais's Count, and that this affected the message of the opera somewhat in comparison with that of the play. Beaumarchais's Count was a man that the audience could forgive. He was comically inept, yes, and his pettiness and selfishness were to be scorned and abhorred. However, he was not a man that deserved a terrible fate; he did not deserve to be kept from happiness in the end. The Count was certainly the antagonist of the play and needed to be taught a lesson, but he was also a man. The audience is left feeling that they understand the Count and can wish him well in the future. In the opera,

the Count's humanity is never revealed to the audience. He is never portrayed by Mozart and Da Ponte as anything but a dastardly villain. His greed and cruelty overpowers any positive trait that he could possess, and it is somewhat dissatisfying that his wife and servants forgive him at the end and he is allowed to return to his life as usual. I would argue that this difference is a result of Beaumarchais's relationship with the French monarchy. Yes, Beaumarchais believed in freedom and equality, but he was also close to the monarchy, particularly Louis XVI. They supported him financially at different times throughout his life, and they consulted with him politically. I believe that Beaumarchais's Count represented the ruling elite as he perceived it: something that needed to be changed, something that needed to recognize the power of the people, but something that was an integral part of the system and deserved a certain measure of respect and consideration. This somewhat lighter treatment of the Count (and therefore of the aristocracy) is lost in the opera. The message of Mozart and Da Ponte is much more forceful because of it.

The Marriage of Figaro is reflection of reality at the close of the eighteenth century. Figaro himself is a reflection of the beliefs and values of the men that developed the character. Beaumarchais intended for Figaro to be his "coming out." He used Figaro to announce to the world his own beliefs, and he used his talent in comedy to spread the ideas that were most important to him; equality for all and the inadequacy of the current political systems. As we have discovered, Beaumarchais *was* Figaro in the original play. The Figaro of Da Ponte and Mozart was used in the same way. These two cultural giants could have chosen any story at all and created

a successful opera, but they chose to fight for Figaro. In a way, they also used him to “come out” to the world in favor of Enlightened ideals. These three men used Figaro as an extension of themselves. Figaro was gracious enough to allow them to shape his character to their liking in order to communicate their message of equality and the rights of the people.

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