Le Nozze di Figaro: Mozart and Marriage

Mozart's buffa masterpiece, like most buffa operas, is full of scheming. And what is this scheming about? Marriage. Now, 'will true love prevail?' is the plot of any buffa opera, but in this one we have some different issues. Can servants stop masters from abusing their power? Can a male noble admit his moral deficiencies? Can aristocrats collaborate with their servants to achieve their ends?

The main plot is the plan to keep the Count from re-instituting the old custom of the "droit de seigneur" – the right of the lord to have the bride first on the night of the wedding. The custom is both pure exploitation of the lower class and an insult to the institution of marriage, a sacrament of the church. Then there are the Count and Countess, she wondering if she can rekindle the Count's conjugal love and attention against his philandering. Then there is Marcellina, scheming to hold Figaro to an old contract of debt — if he doesn't pay, he has to marry her.

Except for Figaro and Cherubino, the adolescent page, the male characters all reek of male prerogative: the Count is extremely jealous and suspicious of his wife's fidelity, but he thinks a different code for himself is only his right. The music master, Basilio is happy to further his schemes by conveying messages and inducements to Susannah, the Count's intended conquest. Dr. Bartolo thinks he has the right to any kind of revenge against the Count for marrying the ward he had his own designs upon (see *The Barber of Seville,* a later, unintended prequel). Her wishes were not a consideration. He joins forces with Marcellina to force Figaro to marry her, abetting a loveless match, and depriving Susannah of her fiancé. They are all threatened by Cherubino's emerging preoccupation with the female sex.

The opera is based on Beaumarchais' play, written during the time of revolution in France, the main point of which was the subversion of class privilege. It was banned in some places, including Vienna where *Le Nozze* premiered, and DaPonte had to delete many overtly seditious aspects in order to convince the Emperor Joseph to allow it.

Mozart was neither a feminist nor a revolutionary, but a conservative Catholic who hated Voltaire, so what inspired him to write to this libretto, which he probably helped to create? Well, Mozart obviously did not despise the lower classes, and he had a view of marriage which was untypical of the time.

He had a tortured and ambivalent relationship with his father, who attempted to control every aspect of his life for fear of losing his influence over his son, and his participation in the material benefits of his success. But Mozart had also had close relationships with various women, his cousin in particular, his mother, and his sister, and wanted to marry in spite of his father's opposition. He finally escaped his father's grasp by moving to Vienna from Salzburg, a difficult break, not without suffering. There he married Costanza, the sister of a woman he was formerly in love with (which woman ultimately rejected him, perhaps because she was astute enough to recognize the father's controlling influence). Mozart persistently attempted to obtain his father's blessing on the union but failed.

Whatever shaped it, Mozart believed in companionate marriage, based on choice, love, respect and duty. This is made manifest in the relationship between Figaro and Susannah in the opening scene. They are affectionate and teasing with each other, express their feelings, listen to each other, and can work together to solve their problems. When Figaro sarcastically calls the Count "Signor Contino" in his short aria after Susannah leaves, it tells us that the usual relationship between master and servant is not going to be the norm. But to resist the Count's lechery fits right in with Mozart's defense of marriage. They are not agitating for shorter hours and better pay, merely countering the Count's corrupt attempt to abuse his power and renege on his abolishment of a feudal privilege.

Relative to the Count and Countess, he also believed that mature love is based on mutual promises, not romantic infatuation; the promises cannot be abandoned when the infatuation wears off. Therefore, the Count is justifiably humbled and must seek forgiveness from the Countess for his infidelity and neglect.

As to Marcellina, marriage cannot rightly be brought about by financial duress. (Ha! So many marriages were contracted among aristocrats precisely for this reason.) But this plot to foil the marriage is dealt with by a traditional buffa ploy (one that has survived the 18th century; see, e.g., Gilbert & Sullivan). Figaro's parents are ostensibly unknown, but it gradually emerges that he is the illegitimate son of Bartolo and Marcellina: he can't marry his mother, contract or no contract!

In this opera, both the Count and the Countess confess to being humiliated by their dependence on their servants to create and carry out their plans, and this merely serves to point up the servants' resourcefulness, and the ordinary human reaction of their master and mistress.

Indeed, Mozart surpassed even his usual skill in this opera in creating believable characters with believable inner lives. He also gave us something completely new – an adolescent male in the throes of that stage of life. There had been nothing (am I on a limb here?) like Cherubino previously in opera, and his arias are perfect portrayals of his teen-age turmoil. And they illustrate another feature of the opera: Mozart's arias here are almost always sung to someone. In addition to telling us about the role's emotions and character, they are informing another character, thereby forwarding the plot, and deepening their significance and relationship to the whole.

So, here we have Mozart at the height of his powers, writing and composing with warmth and humanity, the qualities that distinguish him from other composers of opera buffa — even other geniuses such as Rossini, who has barely a love duet in his entire oeuvre. It is one of the amazing blessings of the human race that we are periodically graced with such artists — and we fortunate enough to live after them.