ISBN: 9780143126065

Author: Paul Johnson

Mozart
A Life

Excerpt

Chapter Four

MOZART'S OPERATIC MAGIC

There are many extraordinary things about Mozart, but the most extraordinary thing of all is his work in opera. There was nothing in his background to prepare him for the stage. His father knew everything about the violin and was familiar with every aspect of church music, but opera was foreign territory to him. It is true that during their three visits to Italy, they had the opportunity to see opera, and Mozart (not his father) successfully absorbed various forms of Italian musical idiom. But until he began to grow up, Mozart rarely went to the theater, especially the opera. He seems to have acquired the instinct to make music dramatic, to animate people on stage, entirely from his own personality.

Yet his impact on the form was fundamental. He found opera, so called, in rudimentary shape and transformed it into a great, many-faceted art. He is the first composer of operas who has never been out of the repertoire, but is an indispensable part of it, a central fact in the history of opera. He forms, along with Verdi and Wagner, the great tripod on which the genus of opera rests, but whereas they devoted their lives to the business, opera is for Mozart only one part of his musical career; not necessarily the most important part, either.

Mozart composed twenty operas, by one computation, twenty-two by another. Opera was evolving fast in the eighteenth century, and definition is difficult. To begin with, it was composed in four main languages, Italian, French, German, and English. Opera seria, or tragic opera, was the first main type to emerge with its particular forms: arias, choruses, and recitative. An intermezzo developed to provide comic relief, or buffa. This expanded until it became a work in its own right, an opera buffa, or comic opera. There was a good deal of class consciousness in these musical forms. Opera Seria took tragic themes from antiquity on Latin or Greek models and was performed at court on solemn occasions, usually in the top court theater. Hence it was also called grand opera. Opera buffa could be done in a commercial theater to a bourgeois audience. But in England and northern Germany (and elsewhere), a popular or plebeian opera, or rather plays punctuated by songs and performed in the vernacular, was

also blossoming and proved irresistible. The Beggar's Opera ran in London for years and was taken to Germany, and there blended with local versions to produce a form of music drama called singspiel. By the time Mozart reached maturity, there were thus three main types of musical drama on stage: opera seria and opera buffa, both in Italian, and singspiel in German.

But Mozart's evolution as a stage composer was more complicated. His first effort, given May 13, 1767, when he was eleven, was Apollo et Hyacinthus. This was, strictly speaking, an intermezzo, inserted in the interval of Rufinus Widl's Latin play Clementia Croesi, given to an academic audience in the auditorium of Salzburg's Benedictine University. It was also in Latin but sung by two sopranos, two contraltos, a tenor, and bass, and scored for strings, two oboes, and two horns. He enjoyed this enormously, and so, it seems, did the audience. So in 1768–69 he tried his hand both at an opera buffa, La finta semplice, and a singspiel. The first was ultimately derived from a Carlo Goldoni comedy, the second from a tale by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. There followed in 1770 his first opera seria, Mitridate, re di Ponto, written for four sopranos, an alto, and two tenors, and scored for strings, two flutes, two oboes, two bassoons, and four horns (K. 87).

Mozart was gaining experience, and not all his efforts for the stage were operas. In 1771 he wrote a festa teatrale for the wedding of Archduke Ferdinand with a Modena princess. This was called Ascanio in Alba and had a large number of singers. The orchestra was big and included a serpent, the only time Mozart used one (K. 111). His dull celebration of Colloredo's installation was described as a serenata, and K. 208, Il re pastore as a dramma per musica. But there was a regular opera buffa of a sort, La finta giardinera (K. 196), written in 1774, and Lucio Silla (K. 135), an opera seria, from 1772; Semiramis, described as a duodrama, is lost and may never have been started. Thamos, König in Ägypten was "a play with music" (K. 345), but again had a large orchestra. Zaide (K. 344) is a singspiel but is incomplete. Mozart wrote fifteen numbers to be sung, and had only the final scene to write (plus the overture) when he dropped it—we don't know why. There is no libretto, so no spoken dialogue has survived, though various modern attempts have been made to stage it.

These operas, if finished, were put on in various places—private houses, the archbishop's palace, the ducal theater in Milan, and the Assembly Rooms in Munich. Not one has a decent libretto. Almost all contain fine music. Much of the action on stage is highly improbable, and some of it makes little sense. The Italian operatic tradition, which pervades them, took little account of probabilities. Mozart had an instinct for realism, an urge to make music and drama correspond, to some extent at least, to ordinary life as he and his contemporaries knew it, but he was too young and inexperienced as yet to break through the conventions and take charge.

The change came with Idomeneo (K. 366), which Mozart was commissioned to write in 1780 when he was twenty-four and which was presented in Munich on January 29, 1781. This was to some extent the product of the Mannheim revolution in music inspired by Elector Carl Frederick, whose court oscillated between Mannheim and Munich and whose orchestra—which Mozart's father said was the best he had ever heard—traveled with the court. It had clarinets, to Mozart's delight, and a whole range of expert instrumentalists. The elector, who played the flute and the cello himself, was always encouraging and

aimed at the highest standards, and among the Mannheim crowd, as he called them, Mozart felt all his powers put to the test.

What matters about Idomeneo is not the libretto, which despite all Mozart's changes and improvements remains a ragged and implausible affair, but the music. Opera at the beginning of the last quarter of the eighteenth century—even opera seria—was a scrappy business. There were literally scores of composers, countless librettists or would-be librettists—Mozart told his father he had read through "over a hundred" looking for something suitable—and endless opera houses or halls used as such, the length and breadth of Italy. Operas were put together from different texts and scores, arias inserted at a whim or at the request of a particular singer, scratch orchestras hired at the last minute, and cuts and additions made without reference to the composer or author. An opera performance was as much a social as a musical event, more so in most cases. Mozart became aware in Mannheim what an opera could be, and he began to write Idomeneo accordingly. As he wrote, his perfectionist daemon took over, and he lost consciousness of the dusty, threadbare, lackadaisical opera performances he was used to and found himself inhabiting a perfect world of brilliantly accomplished singers and instrumentalists, fine stage sets and acoustics, all well rehearsed with a thorough knowledge of the music and with himself in charge, possessing absolute power over the whole.

This is the only explanation for the quality of the score, which is a whole category above anything he had written previously for the stage, an adventure into new territory. It has ten characteristics we associate with mature Mozart opera. First, emotional intensity. This is so marked, almost from the first bars, that in another composer one would be tempted to declare that he must have been exposed to a haunting or overwhelming experience—love, bereavement, tragedy, a violent or searching change in his entire lifestyle—to produce such a searching effect on his output. But that is not, I think, the way he worked. Events in his life did not transform his music. What did so were events in his imagination. He had the gift of taking a dismal or routine story and a poverty-stricken libretto and allowing his imagination to fill them with emotional dynamite that produced the most glorious music.

The emotional intensity of the music is high throughout but reaches periodic climaxes. This is achieved by the next three characteristics, three particular musical devices: the use of the woodwinds to follow and emphasize the voice in recitative, an innovation of Mozart's; the use of trombones at particular points, notably when the oracle speaks; and the use of brass mutes during the march in Act Two. The fifth characteristic is the careful, rich, and discriminate scoring of flutes, oboes, bassoons, and trumpets. Sixth is the way different sections of the orchestra talk to each other, especially tremolos in the strings responding to the muted trumpets. Perhaps Mozart's greatest single gift as an orchestral musician was the way in which he made different instruments respond to, mingle, and contrast with one another, and here in Idomeneo it comes into full play with the added dimension of the singer or singers or chorus on stage.

Seventh is the use of key changes to advance the musical action. The harmonies move all the time, and even in the recitatives, there are constant harmonic progressions and retreats, and the tonalities cover a great deal of ground. Eighth is the way in which Mozart produces a seamless garment, moving swiftly from one passage to another, scarcely leaving time or a natural interval for applause. Ninth is the

deliberate arrangement of tonalities from the beginning to the end of an act, which produces a sense of continuity and unity. Finally, he binds all together by introducing motifs that the listener/spectator gets to know and recognize and welcome. What Mozart is doing is giving the opera its own kind of sonata form and so the sense of organic growth. All these changes and improvements, taken together, give the sense that writing an opera is being taken out of the hands of amateurs and put into the safe custody of a professional who knows exactly what he is doing.

None of this, of course, was a formula for success in Mozart's lifetime. There were three performances of the initial production of Idomeneo, and a concert production by amateurs in the palace of a prince in Vienna. Mozart considered a proposal to revive it "in the French style," with a German text and various changes in the singing roles, but nothing came of it. The next production was not until 1806, a quarter century after Mozart's death. It has never been exactly popular, an opera to be revived rather than a standard in the repertory, but it has a substantial place in musical history.

By contrast, Die Entführung aus dem Serail (The Abduction from the Seraglio), a singspiel produced eighteen months later in the Vienna Burgtheater, July 16, 1782, was not a revolution in opera making but proved a distinct success with the public. Emperor Joseph II had created the Burgtheater as a German national theater but had been disappointed by the response of German playwrights and had had to be content with adaptations from the French. He was delighted, thus, to have Mozart, whom he admired, working for him on a libretto by Johann Gottlieb Stephanie the Younger. This tale of goings-on in a Turkish harem was dramatic, topical (the Turks were still threatening Vienna), and lent itself to East-West culture contrasts in musical idiom, so Mozart fell on it with enthusiasm and composed three arias on the first day of work. A letter to his father gives an insight into his musical-dramatic mind at work. The villain's part of Osmin, he wrote, was intended for the bass, Fischer, who certainly has an excellent bass voice. . . [and] has the whole Viennese public on his side. . . . so he has been given an aria in Act I, and he is to have another in Act II. I have explained to Stephanie the words I require for the aria—indeed I had finished composing most of the music for it before Stephanie knew anything whatever about it. I am enclosing only the beginning and the end, which is bound to have a good effect. Osmin's rage is rendered comical by the use of the Turkish music. In working out the aria I have (in spite of our Salzburg Midas) allowed Fischer's beautiful deep notes to glow. The passage 'Drum beim Barte des Propheten' is indeed in the same tempo, but with quick notes; and as Osmin's rage gradually increases, there comes (just when the aria seems to be at an end) the allegro assai, which is in a totally different metre and in a different key; this is bound to be very effective. For just as a man in such a towering rage oversteps all the bounds of order, moderation and propriety and completely forgets himself, so must the music too forget itself. But since passions, whether violent or not, must never be expressed to the point of exciting disgust, and as music, even in the most terrible situations, must never offend the ear, but must please the listener, or in other words must never cease to be music, so I have not chosen a key foreign to F (in which the aria is written) but one related to it—not the nearest, D minor, but the more remote A minor.

This letter of September 26, 1781, goes on to explain how he expresses Belmonte's "throbbing heart" by "the two violins playing octaves. . . . I wrote it expressly to suit Adamberger's voice. You see the trembling—the faltering—you see how his throbbing breast begins to swell; this I have expressed by a

crescendo. You hear the whimpering and the sighing—which I have indicated by the first violins with mutes and a flute playing in unison."

This letter and others are priceless glimpses into the composition of a work of art and are quite unique in musical history. They remind us that not the least of the valuable habits Leopold Mozart instilled into his son was the regular writing of detailed letters about his activities.

The opera was well rehearsed and got its first performance on July 16, 1782, to general applause. An attempt to hiss it down by the claque paid to support opera in Italian only was a failure. The emperor attended and gave his approval but added, "It is too beautiful for human ears, my dear Mozart, and has an unconscionable number of notes." "Too many notes" was a charge often brought against Mozart in his day—and after—though never by true musicians. What it usually means is that the music, especially the orchestration, is complex, difficult, and rich; in the sense that a huge amount of thought has gone into its harmonies and each instrument has a role to play each in unison. Mozart's knowledge was so deep and his instinct for quality so powerful that he could compose in this way almost without a positive intellectual effort. A combination of sounds that it would take a lesser man hours to produce (and then might not work) was for him a matter of minutes: The labor lay in getting the notes on the page. This was particularly true of the wind instruments, which Mozart was discovering held the key to operatic subtleties—they gave magical stage directions and explanations all the time. The ordinary operagoer found himself obliged to listen hard all the time and was confronted by a density and complexity of sound he had to unravel. It was hard work: hence the complaint "too many notes," the only way they could express it.

Nevertheless, approval was overwhelming, and the success spread throughout the German-speaking world. The piece was played regularly at the Burgtheater until the end of the season, early in 1783, and was then revived in 1784–85 with Mozart's sister-in-law Aloysia playing Constanze—the subject of many ribald jokes by the composer. It was produced in Prague in 1782, to great acclaim. In 1783 it was put on in Bonn, with young Beethoven, then thirteen, giving a helping hand in the orchestral pit and behind the scenes, then produced in Frankfurt, Leipzig, and Warsaw. The next year Mannheim, Cologne, Carlruhe, and Salzburg saw it, with Munich and four other German cities in 1785. Translations appeared in Dutch, Polish, and French. Over forty German-speaking cities saw it even in Mozart's lifetime, and it may be said to have made him a famous figure in the German world for the first time. A man might be known for his concertos in musical circles, but it was only when the chattering classes of the opera stalls began to talk about him that his popular fame took hold. So there were immediate and long-term financial by-products of the success, but that was all. All Mozart got directly was his original fee of 100 gulden—no royalties. This is one reason he felt at liberty to criticize productions over which he had no control and from which he derived no benefit. A print exists showing a diminutive Mozart, standing among a crowd in the pit, vociferously denouncing a travesty production of the work in Berlin, on May 19, 1789—a time when the world was excited anyway, for the French Revolution was turning up the political heat in Paris. This was Mozart's first appearance in the prints as a public character.

In the meantime, Mozart had met his great partner, the Abate Lorenzo Da Ponte. The letter (May 7, 1783) in which he tells his father, "I have looked through at least a hundred libretti and more, but I have

hardly found a single one with which I am satisfied," also says he has met the new fashionable poet in Vienna, Da Ponte, who "has promised . . . to write a new libretto for me." The emperor had decided to abandon singspiel in 1783 and embrace Italian opera again, and he put Da Ponte in charge of the words. Da Ponte was a converted Jew, the son of a tanner, who had embraced Christianity in 1763. He had led a bohemian life, as a teacher, a priest, a lascivious escort of married women in the Venetian fashion, a friend of Casanova, expelled from Venice for sexual depravity, and thereafter making his living as a translator and writer in the theatrical world. He had an extraordinary gift for languages, rather like Mozart himself but on a much more comprehensive scale, and seemed to think multilingually.

Da Ponte wrote the librettos for three Mozart operas, The Marriage of Figaro (K. 492, presented May 1, 1786), Don Giovanni (K. 527, October 29, 1787), and Cosi fan tutte (K. 588, January 26, 1790), and the collaboration between the two men must be accounted one of the most successful in the history of opera. By almost universal agreement, Figaro and Giovanni are Mozart's two best operas, though a small minority argues that Cosi contains the best music and superb staging and that a first-class production can make it the best evening's entertainment.

The two men worked successfully together for two reasons. First, they both understood that creating an opera was collaboration and that composer and librettist both had to know when to give way; sometimes words must yield and sometimes notes. The truth is, of course, that Mozart was extremely adept at words as well as music, and often he took over as librettist, Da Ponte acquiescing. This raises the second point: Both men were good tempered, used to hard knocks, nasty words, and intense arguments. They had the admirable habit, essential to success in the theater, of drawing a firm line over a disagreement, once it was resolved, and moving on quickly to the next problem. Mozart's good nature was absolutely genuine and went to the root of his being. He was incapable of real malice or the desire to wound (the one exception was the archbishop, and there, too, hatred was expressed in words rather than deeds). Da Ponte was a much more flawed creature. He was a fearful liar, to begin with, and his various volumes of memories are not to be trusted at all. His subsequent career after he left Vienna and went to New York, becoming a trader, a bookseller, a bankrupt, a poet, and other things, shows that his commitment to the stage and to music—drama, particularly—was not total.

Moreover, it is not clear that he recognized quality in opera. He thought the best composer he worked with was Vicente Martín y Soler, and he had the most fulsome praise for Antonio Salieri. The implication was that both were Mozart's superiors as musicians. Both were more successful commercially at the time, and their operas were performed more frequently than Mozart's—so were those of many other composers, at least eleven by my reckoning. But both were so inferior to Mozart by any conceivable artistic criteria as to cast doubt on Da Ponte's musical understanding. And it is a significant fact that his three Mozart operas are the only ones whose libretto he wrote that have remained in the repertoire or that anyone has heard of today.

Hence the inescapable conclusion is that Mozart was the dominant figure in the collaboration. Da Ponte understood or learned from Mozart the need to keep the drama moving by varying the musical encounters and groupings, by altering the rhythms of vocal speech, and by switching the moods. He may even have understood the great discovery in the writing of opera that we owe to Mozart—the way in

which character can be created, transformed, altered, and emphasized by entirely musical means taking possession of the sense of words. But the magic touch is always provided by Mozart as music dramatist.

This is particularly true of Figaro, on which Mozart worked harder than on anything else in his entire life. The word "effortless" is constantly applied to his work, and sometimes it seems appropriate. But there was nothing effortless about Figaro. It was all hard, intense application of huge knowledge and experience, sometimes illuminated by flashes of pure genius. The original play by Pierre Beaumarchais was a consciously radical assault on aristocratic privileges and pretensions and ran into trouble everywhere for precisely the reason that it showed humble-born persons as morally superior to aristocrats and getting the better of them for that reason—having higher intelligence, too. That is what initially attracted Mozart so strongly to the project, for it gave him its emotional dynamism. All his troubles with the archbishop, from the humiliation of the servants' table to the brutal kick up the ass from Count Arco, were to be musically expunged in an apotheosis of justice and decency on stage. That was the plan. But Mozart, first unconsciously, then quite deliberately and systematically, transformed the play into a comic epic of forgiveness, reconciliation, and final delight. Score settling became peace with honor, and revenge melted into content.

Figaro is thus the embodiment of Mozart's emotional nature in music. He was a fundamentally easygoing person, whose brief spasms of hot temper and outbursts of grievances were mere cloudlets racing across a sunny view of life. He enjoyed existence and wanted everyone to be as happy as he. He believed they could be, too, if only they were sensible. Figaro, in the end, shows everyone more or less being sensible, decent, and forgiving—and so happy. That is why it is not only Mozart's best opera but the one people love, probably more loved than any other in the repertoire.

The decision to do the Beaumarchais play was almost certainly Mozart's own. He had been impressed by the success of an opera based on Beaumarchais's earlier play, The Barber of Seville, by Giovanni Paisiello—a composer now virtually forgotten—which had been a huge success in Vienna in 1783 and then everywhere else it was staged. This was based on an old play of 1775, but Figaro was new. It was written and put on in 1784 in Paris only after tremendous opposition from the censors and a row between the king and queen of France, Louis XVI being against and Marie Antoinette in favor. Her brother, Emperor Joseph II, was likewise in favor of putting it on, at any rate in opera form. So Mozart knew he had a sensational property on his hands. He admired Beaumarchais for his ability to create a furore and advertise himself—his armorial device was a drum with the motto Non sonat nisi percusso—and he too, as he put it, wanted "not just to write music, but to make a noise in the world." The creation of Figaro was a characteristic example of Mozart's controlled frenzy, writing with all deliberate speed, completing the draft vocal score in a mere six weeks and adding the orchestration in sudden rushes late in the night. This helps to explain why the music has a sense of unity in tone and harmony, so that individual arias spring out of a living body of sound, which builds them together.

Figaro has a complementary virtue: realism. Dr. Johnson two years before had dismissed opera as "an irrational entertainment." Mozart would have agreed that this encapsulated the vast majority of operas in Italian and most singspiels too. It was impossible to believe in either the story line or the characters. In both his harem opera and Idomeneo, he had been moving toward plausibility of action and speech. In

Figaro he completed the process. It was a lighthearted opera buffa, of course, aiming to amuse and delight. But it also raised social issues about conduct and manners and, above all, dealt with people you could believe in. There was a real parallel here with the world of the novel emerging in England. In fifteen years, Jane Austen was to write social comedies that entertained by showing young men and women—older ones, too—behaving and talking like real people. Mozart pioneered the process on the stage, using the human voice backed by living instruments. The success of Figaro is often attributed to the skill of the original cast that presented it. True enough, but what is often overlooked is the delight with which these experienced performers, used to acting and singing nonsensical roles, got to grips with parts in which they could believe and into which they could put their hearts and their intelligence. Everyone loves playing Figaro, even the comics and the minor parts, Bartolo, Don Basilio, Don Curzio, and the gardener.

Figaro's success led the emperor to ban "excessive applause," which prolonged the evening past his bedtime, though he allowed arias to be encored. But there were only nine performances in Vienna, because those in charge of the scheduling preferred to bow to the popular taste for Martín y Soler's Una cosa rara, and other Italian tidbits. It aroused more enthusiasm in Prague where, Mozart reported, "They talk about nothing but Figaro. Nothing is played, sung, or whistled but Figaro. No opera is drawing like Figaro—nothing, nothing but Figaro!" He was so exhilarated that, tired from overwork as he was, he burst into characteristic nonsense. They had been calling each other names, he recorded: "I am Punkitititi. My wife is Schabla Pumfa. Hofen is Rozka-Pumpa. Stadler is Notschibikitschibi. My servant Joseph is Sagadaratà. My dog Goukerl is Schomanntzky. Madame Quallenberg is Runzifunzi. Mlle Crux is Ramlo Schurimuri."

The success of Figaro in Prague led directly to Mozart's commission to write Don Giovanni, for which Da Ponte again provided the libretto. It was presented in Prague on October 29, 1787, and was an immediate success. It is a buffa and its original title was Il dissoluto punito. It is sometimes felt to be a tragedy, with Giovanni being sent to hell at the end—the final scene, making the moral point and striking Mozart's typical note of forgiveness, being sometimes omitted. It is a notable fact that, just as musicians generally, depending on their temperament—saturnine and serious or jovial and optimistic—prefer Beethoven to Mozart, so those who love Mozart are emphatically in favor of Figaro or the Don. Apart from the harem opera, the Don was clearly Mozart's most popular work for the stage during his lifetime, though its theatrical history is extremely complicated, as it was done as a singspiel in German, in two different Italian versions and three French ones, and was much altered and knocked about. As Mozart said, "No opera is sacrosanct," and he was used to knocking his about himself.

Don Giovanni is tender and exuberant. It is a love farce, a horror shocker, a ghost story, and a moral tale. Unlike Figaro, which is true to life, it is a wild tale that succeeds because it makes the heart leap and the brain reel: you don't disbelieve it because you do not have time to think carefully. It is, as it were, lovably shocking. Mozart's late operas bring to a head one of his most notable gifts: economy of means, which he exercises without even giving the impression of being in a hurry or shortchanging you. Just occasionally the audience feels Why wasn't that aria longer? Especially when Don Giovanni himself is singing. But then, it can always be encored. No one ever felt a Mozart aria too long. And there are never too many—with the duets, quartets, and ensembles this impression is enhanced. If Figaro or the Don

produces a longueur, the fault is always with the production, for if it is difficult to produce Figaro badly, it is not, alas, impossible, as even Glyndebourne has proved, and I believe Don Giovanni has been massacred even in Prague.

The fascination of Don Giovanni is its contrasts: light and shade, comedy and tragedy, fun and horror. Mozart had always felt sympathy for the trombone and given it good notes to play, mainly in sacred works. But in the Don, with the coming of the "stone guest" to dinner, he gives it an apotheosis, one of the best moments in opera. The Don also goes down to hell in splendid form, inspiring Goethe to try to better it in Faust (he does not succeed, but he has a splendid try). The soprano part of Donna Anna is particularly well written, and when the opera was put on in Vienna was sung by Mozart's sister-in-law, Aloysia, the woman he might have married. The characterization in the opera, though not lifelike, as in Figaro, is extremely complex and interesting, and it is no wonder the Don was Freud's favorite opera. It has attracted a lot of commentary from intellectuals, such as Kafka, Shaw, and Sartre. The notion of the irresistible force (Giovanni) crashing into an immovable stone object (Commendatore) is a glorious one, well spelled out by some of the best music Mozart ever wrote.

Among professional musicians, especially producers, Figaro has the reputation of "the opera that can't go wrong," Don Giovanni as "miracle or disaster." It is certainly difficult in all kinds of ways, particularly for the conductor, who is faced with contrasting rhythms at certain key points and finds that in the singing even the most experienced performers need constant guidance and support. Because of his early training and exceptional musical intelligence, Mozart found most things easy and loved creating problems for himself and so, inevitably, for singers and players. As his letters to his father show again and again, he knew exactly when he made his work hard to play and harder still to get exactly right. It is not true to say that he invented hard passages entirely for their own sake—that would have been perverse and unmusical—but to get an effect, he was always ready to make the orchestra "sweat," as he put it, and the singers to give their utmost.

These two great operas had one essential thing in common: for the first time in history, a composer drew on all the possible musical resources at his disposal. This was particularly true of the orchestra. In pre-Mozart operas, even in Handel, Gluck, and Domenico Cimarosa, the work was a glorified play with music, in which famous singers performed celebrity solos and the band tagged along. But now Mozart made it an integral part of the play—human voice and instruments became a seamless garment clothing the story, and he brings in all the orchestra exactly as and when necessary to create the sounds he wants. David Cairns's admirable book on Mozart's operas contains a statistical calculation of the way the orchestra is deployed in Figaro:

Flutes, oboes, horns, bassoons, and strings—the basic group—are used in eleven of the forty-five movements or sections, and the full complement, including clarinets, trumpets, and drums, in four. The remaining thirty involve no fewer than fourteen permutations.

The involvement of the entire orchestra is just as complete and detailed in Giovanni, and the two works, musically, are on a level plateau. But there is an important moral difference that reflects the two sides of Mozart's character. Figaro is an essay on happiness and how it may be attained by forgiveness and

reconciliation: Nobody needs to be unhappy if they are sensible. Giovanni makes a moral point: that wicked behavior must be punished because it destroys as well as offends God. Mozart was a Catholic, and his treatment of the Don Juan myth is essentially a Catholic one. The damnation is real because Giovanni is given the chance to repent and save his soul but refuses it.

The Don is a genuine character as well as a legend, because one can see that philandering had a certain appeal to Mozart, even though he rejected it. He had always "had fun with girls," to use his own expression in a letter to his father, and there was no doubt about his attraction to women all his life. "He was very popular with the ladies, in spite of his dimunitive size. . . . His face was intriguing, and his eyes could hold the ladies spellbound." This was the view of Luigi Bassi, who played Giovanni in the Prague production.

It is possible to see the completion and first performance of Don Giovanni as the summit of Mozart's career, and it was certainly a happy time for him. Jokes abound, both in the music and in operatic legend. The rehearsals were conducted in an atmosphere of hectic gaiety, with players and composer improvising and agreeing on changes up to the last moment—as it should be. It is said that Mozart sat up all night writing the overture so it would be ready for the dress rehearsal and that Constanze, who was with him, kept him awake with coffee. He conducted the first performance himself, and the local newspaper reported that the orchestra gave him three cheers at the beginning and end of the performance. Considering the demands the work makes on the musicians and Mozart's own perfectionism, the rapport between him and the band was extraordinary. There is no doubt musicians loved him as a person and loved to work with him. And why should they not? What person who knows and loves music would not give anything to help a Mozart to create a masterpiece?

There was a gap of over two years between this glorious episode and the first performance of Mozart's next and third Da Ponte opera, Cosi fan tutte (K. 588), at the Vienna Burgtheater on January 26, 1790. This was very much Da Ponte's own work—it is an original libretto, even if Boccaccio and Shakespeare's Cymbeline provide ideas—although Mozart inevitably gave it shape. It is notable that it was rehearsed in Mozart's Vienna apartment with the help of Joseph Haydn, who made suggestions, at Mozart's request. Da Ponte got his mistress Adriana Ferrarese del Bene the plum soprano role, and an atmosphere of scandal has always surrounded this piece, which was at the time, and often since, denounced as immoral. Well, that is what it is about. Beautiful women behave badly if they get the chance. Yet there is something very moral about Mozart's music, as if Da Ponte wrote a ribald tale in words, and it was re-edified in notes.

Cosi is not loved in the way Mozart's other Da Ponte operas are. Few ever say it's their favorite. It feels artificial. The characters are archetypes rather than real people. You don't care what happens to them. The spirit of the libretto is misogynistic. But that is not true of the music. The women sing of love, and when Mozart gets women on the subject of love, he makes their voices sound truthful and their emotions genuine. Much of the music is ravishing, the tenderness of the vocal line reinforced by the delicious harmonies and the whispering of the woodwinds. The horns are erotic, the trumpets intimate, and as always, Mozart makes the bassoons speak a special language. Some people feel that the score of Cosi is worthy of a better story. But repeated hearings of this opera produce a different impression. If it

were fundamentally artificial, familiarity would disgust. But the fact is, Cosi grows on one. The much more frequent performances of the last half century and the existence of excellent recordings have raised it in the repertoire of preference. Great singers, too, now want to make their mark with it. Like anything into which Mozart put his heart and mind, it has a life of its own, which expands and reaches out when exposed to the sunlight of performance. Cosi is unlikely to be loved in the same way as Figaro or the Don. But it is now essential Mozart. You are not fit to judge him until you have seen it and, buffa though it may be, taken it seriously. And the significant thing is that its most vociferous fans are women.

Mozart now turned to another singspiel at the request of an old family friend, an impresario called Emanuel Schikaneder, who ran an operatic theatrical company and orchestra in a suburban theater. His standards were high, and he attracted a cross-section of Viennese society, doing good business. He wrote the libretto himself, though as usual Mozart was a coauthor and ultimate boss. There are many mysteries about Die Zauberflöte, because it is a presentation of Masonic love in the form of an allegory. The essence of Masonry is secrecy, and that is precisely what attracted Mozart to its practices. The piece has to be seen against its background: the opening of the French Revolution. In the 1770s and 1780s, Europe had faced two alternatives: reform from above or revolution from below. The enlightened despots had tried reform, not least in Austria. Many of them were Masons, one such the Prussian warlord and king, Frederick the Great, who died in 1786. The idea was that, if everyone in key positions were a Mason, rational reform would go through and revolution would be unnecessary. But by the time Zauberflöte was given its first performance on September 30, 1791, events in Paris had passed the point of no return. The revolution was proceeding on a violent momentum of its own, with the legitimate rulers of Europe already planning armed intervention in France.

Zauberflöte is a striking combination of pantomime and high seriousness, with an appeal both to the child in us and the spiritualist. Both sides lived in Mozart—very much so. My belief is that he got more simple pleasure writing this opera than from any other major work, except possibly the Sinfonia Concertante. He was clearly in a state of high excitement during the final week of composition and during the rehearsals, making jokes and puns and playing tricks. He even took over the percussion during an actual performance. This was by no means unusual. Although he normally conducted from the keyboard, he was capable of taking over an instrument and playing it to correct the balance of the orchestra—horn and trumpet, violin and viola, oboe and bassoon. Once it happened because there was a missing musician—disgracefully late—during the first act. But this is the only occasion we hear of him trying the glockenspiel. It got laughs from the audience, and he liked that. One of the most endearing things about Mozart is that he saw music and laughter as inseparable. Nobody took music more seriously. Nobody got more jokes out of it. He had a wonderful gift of timing—having fun, then at precisely the right second, switching to deadly seriousness. But it was a serious note that was never solemn.

How deep the Masonic imagery goes in this strange and exotic work, no one will ever know. It keeps its secrets, as Mozart intended. But one aspect is striking. It has virtually nothing in common with his religious music. It is as though he lived in two quite distinct universes, which he kept entirely separate, intellectually and emotionally. They are never allowed to meet because that would be sinful. Mozart was fully aware of the possible conflict between Masonry and Catholicism and was determined to avoid it at all costs, at any rate in his case. For him, Masonry was an intellectual conviction, entirely of this

world. Catholicism was a supernatural conviction, looking toward the next. The music in Zauberflöte and a Mozart Missa Solemnis, still more his Requiem, seem to come from different planets. The high priests' chorus has a quite different sound from the Sanctus or Agnus Dei from the Coronation Mass (K. 317) or K. 427, written in 1783. Sarastro's "O Isis und Osiris" is a splendid piece of pagan pageantry, but it does not evoke eternity as does Ave Verum Corpus (K. 618). It is part of Mozart's genius that he could dwell simultaneously, without any sense of discomfort or uneasiness, on two quite different planes of sensibility—rather as he could switch from a carom in billiards to write five bars of a string quartet, then back again, without trouble.

This gift for resolving opposites in harmony was part of Mozart's most useful practical capacity: instant concentration. It is hard to think of any great creative artist who exhibited such speed in switching off one activity and turning to another, quite different one. Leonardo da Vinci must have come close, and Victor Hugo. It is an impressive fact that while Mozart was still working on Zauberflöte, he began his last stage work, an opera seria, La clemenza di Tito, which was actually put on first, September 6, 1791, three weeks before the singspiel. This opera was written in a hurry. But what work of Mozart's was not? Besides, hurry is not a word that can accurately be used about Mozart, because there was a still, calm center in his mind, however quickly he was jotting the notes down on to the page. Written at speed, then. Tito had a lukewarm reception in Prague, then a tumultuous one on the final night of the run. Why? We do not know. Constanze, who loved it, took a leading part in its promotion and arranged first for extracts, then the entire work, to be given concert performances. Her sister Aloysia took part in a benefit performance for the widow on December 29, three weeks after Mozart's death. Then Constanze herself took it to Leipzig, Graz, and Berlin and sang the part of Vitellia. So it was a family affair. It was the first Mozart opera to be performed in London, on March 27, 1806, with Charles James Fox in the audience. Indeed it played all over Europe in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, then went out of favor until quite recently.

I have never heard anyone call Tito a great opera. But no musician rates it less than good. It has some astonishing numbers, especially Vitellia's reaction to the news that the emperor, whom she plans to murder, wants to marry her. The final sextet and triumphal chorus is Mozart at his rambunctious best and (I have heard) is a prime favorite among experienced timpanists. Sir Thomas Beecham said that anyone who read the score wanted to produce it, and Toscanini learned it by heart in a single, forceful session (but that was nothing to him). It is full of short, snappy arias, one only twenty-five bars and half a dozen sixty or fewer, as opposed to over six hundred in the chain finales of the buffas. It was written for the coronation in Prague of Leopold II and was dismissed by the Empress Maria Louisa as "una porcheria tedesca," which I suppose could be translated "fit only for German pigs." We would know how to value this remark better if we had the lady's comments on operas by Martín y Soler, Paisiello, or Salieri, the three most popular and frequently performed during the 1780s. Tito is incomparably better than any of them by any conceivable standard.

Of the three great opera composers, Mozart, Verdi, and Wagner, Mozart is the most enviable because he was not an opera composer: rather, a composer who wrote operas. Of his contemporaries who worked in the theater, virtually all wrote nothing else. Many produced a hundred operas or more, sweating away a lifetime in the tawdry backstage where the rags and tatters of musical showbiz

staggered from one gruesome compromise to the next. Mozart had just enough experience of opera for it to remain fun, without disgusting him. With predecessors of the quality of Henry Purcell, Handel, and Gluck, he cannot be said to have created opera as an art form. What he did was to bring opera into real life—and life as lived in the 1780s onto the stage in music. He thus created a completely new theatrical and musical experience. And he loved doing it. He was never happier. The last three letters of his that have survived, written amid the bustle of putting on Zauberflöte and Tito in one tremendous month, show him at the top of his form and prove three things beyond doubt: that he loved his wife, enjoyed his life, and regarded himself as a very lucky fellow. But there were many other things in his existence: glorious, overwhelming, tragic.