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## THE AMBIVALENCE OF MOZART'S COUNTESS

*by Richard Will*

*In memory of Lenore, teacher and friend*

I heard the music of true forgiveness filling the theater,  
conferring on all who sat there perfect absolution

—Peter Shaffer, *Amadeus*<sup>1</sup>

At the end of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's and Lorenzo Da Ponte's *Le nozze di Figaro*, the Countess forgives her husband his infidelities and leads the cast in a prayer for happiness. Her actions resolve a famously complicated plot, but their significance has long been taken to outstrip dramatic function. Since the nineteenth century critics have argued that her mercy is sincere, bringing about true reconciliation with the Count rather than merely satisfying social or comic convention. Recent writers claim that the scene further provides universal absolution, as imagined by Peter Shaffer's Salieri, or reveals profound truths about Christian redemption, Enlightened selfhood, and the human condition. Performers, too, while making less specific claims, have typically played the scene in a manner consistent with critical tradition, slowly and solemnly so that it resembles church music or—a favorite point of comparison for critics—the mock-sacred rites in Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*. The tableau of forgiveness transcends the drama to conjure an apotheosis of grace.

My essay explores a more down-to-earth interpretation, not to chip further at the battered image of Mozartean transcendence, but to try reconciling the final scene with the rest of the opera, and especially with its much admired emotional and social complexity. Transcendent absolution leaves no room for mixed feelings or the innumerable contests for power that occupy the plot until the final scene. All is brought into harmony, eliminating difference and requiring the Countess, in particular, to abandon every misgiving and redeem the cast through self-sacrificing

1. *Amadeus*, directed by Milos Forman, screenplay by Peter Shaffer (Warner Brothers Pictures, 1984). The line, which does not appear in Shaffer's original stage play, is spoken while Antonio Salieri watches a performance of the absolution scene from *Le nozze di Figaro*.

forbearance. I believe Mozart's and Da Ponte's characterizations of the noble couple, and Mozart's handling of the absolution, support an alternative reading. Rather than be purified by mercy, the relations between the characters remain ambiguous, and the feelings of the heroine, ambivalent.

### APOTHEOSIS

The scene of forgiveness inspires music of undeniable and in many ways unexpected beauty. It follows the opera's last great imbroglio, in which the Count trumpets his discovery of Figaro with "the Countess" (Susanna in disguise), they beg his mercy, he refuses, the real Countess appears, and everyone stands astonished. There as in other comic scenes, the characters exchange short, differentiated statements over scurrying subdivisions. When the Count begs mercy, however, the tempo changes from *allegro assai* to *andante*, the texture simplifies into four-part homophony, and the vocal style, which has been quick, rhythmic, and, in the case of the Count, bombastic, becomes lyrical (see example 1). Unlike anything he has sung elsewhere, his plea flows smoothly in a pair of phrases suggestive of humility and hope; humility, in the retreats downward from his bold leaps to scale degrees  $\hat{3}$  and  $\hat{4}$ , and hope, in the ascent from  $\hat{3}$  to  $\hat{4}$  and the conclusion on a chromatically emphasized  $\hat{3}$ . Equally startling, since the couple has been at odds musically as well as dramatically throughout the opera, the Countess continues in the same vein, adopting the rhythm and lyricism of the Count's melody and taking the next sequential leap upwards, to  $\hat{5}$ . She rises further to  $\hat{6}$  before descending, then stretches the descent so as to pause twice on  $\hat{3}$  before falling to  $\hat{1}$  (mm. 426, 428). The delays suggest that she does not want to capitulate too easily, but still her music collapses the opposition between the protagonists and leads to a further lyrical outpouring in which the entire cast repeats her melody and adds a consequent (mm. 436–38, expanded in mm. 439–45). Temporarily at least, the competing interests of the characters do seem to give way to agreement.

The sudden beauty of the scene has undoubtedly encouraged critics to assume the best of its principals. The idea that they act in good faith dates at least as far back as Otto Jahn, who, having concluded from the Countess's arias that she is a "gentle quiet sufferer" possessed of "the clarity and calm of a noble, self-possessed soul," argues that her action in the finale remains in character: "The music renders the conciliatory and calming impression of her gentleness and goodness so tenderly and bewitchingly, that the earnestness of the reconciliation must be believed."<sup>2</sup> Joseph Kerman comes to a similar conclusion, writing that "The Countess has never been more lovely and true to herself [than in the finale], or less caught in the artificialities of her existence."<sup>3</sup> As for the Count, Kerman speaks of "a moment of realization, almost an epiphany . . . [he] shows an unsuspected capacity for contrition," while Hermann Abert contends that his

2. Otto Jahn, *W. A. Mozart*, 4 vols. (Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1856–59), 4: 231–32, 248. Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

3. Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama*, 2d ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 87.

Example 1. Mozart, *Le nozze di Figaro*, Act 4 finale, mm. 420–36.

*Andante*

La Contessa  
Più do - ci - le jo

Il Conte  
(in tono supplichevole)  
Con - tes - sa per - do - no! per - do - no! per - do - no!

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Susanna/La Contessa  
*sotto voce*  
so - no, e di - co di sì, e di - co di sì. Ah tut - ti con -  
Barbarina/Cherubino/  
Marcellina  
*sotto voce*  
Ah tut - ti con -  
Basilio  
*sotto voce*  
Ah tut - ti con -  
Il Conte  
*sotto voce*  
Ah tut - ti con -  
Antonio/Figaro  
*sotto voce*  
Ah tut - ti con -

*p*

*cresc.*

*p*

Example 1. *continued*

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Sus. La C.  
ten - ti sa - re - mo co - si, sa - re - mo co - si.

Bar. Cher. Marc.  
ten - ti sa - re - mo co - si, sa - re - mo co - si.

Bas.  
ten - ti sa - re - mo co - si, sa - re - mo co - si.

Il C.  
ten - ti sa - re - mo co - si, sa - re - mo co - si.

Ant. Fig.  
ten - ti sa - re - mo co - si, sa - re - mo co - si.

*cresc.*  
*p*  
*cresc.*  
*p*

supplication “is no longer the galant plea for forgiveness of a *Grandseigneur*, such as an Italian ‘contino burlato’ might have smilingly expressed in a finale, but a warm outburst of genuine human feeling.”<sup>4</sup> The Count reforms, the Countess stays true to form, and together they drive away bad feeling.

More recent criticism looks beyond feelings and attributes far-reaching significance to the characters’ interactions. Like Jahn and Abert, Stefan Kunze feels that Mozart’s collaborations with Da Ponte depict “human reality” with uncommon insight.<sup>5</sup> Unlike his predecessors, though,

4. Kerman, *Opera as Drama*, 87; Hermann Abert, *W. A. Mozart*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1919–21), 2:300.

5. “The approach to a ‘purely human’ appears to be carried furthest there . . . Mozart’s music comedies allow human reality to be transparent to a degree not matched before or after”; Stefan Kunze, *Mozart’s Opera* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1984), 224.

he finds evidence not in the naturalism of the individual character portraits but in the truths revealed by their exchanges. The biggest revelation of *Figaro* comes in the scene of absolution and the grand pause that separates it from the preceding discoveries (i.e., m. 420):

In this great moment, in which the characters and the world hold their breath, time stands still, and change and reflection happen simultaneously, in a flash. New awareness of all that has happened brings further awareness that happiness and fulfillment can only be experienced through the express affirmation of temporality . . . The fermata over the quarter-note rest shows that the flow of time is actually suspended here. What occurs silently, in the deepest interiority of the characters, becomes public in the Andante that then begins. In this passage Mozart's music unveils its great, deeply human message. Through the music, knowledge of the irretrievability of the moment of fulfillment appears as the true foundation of being.<sup>6</sup>

As we shall see, his description broaches an enduring theme in arguing that the scene stops time. Equally important, Kunze locates its meaning not in the Count's and Countess's inner states, but in the illustration of a fundament of the human condition, a paradox whereby contentment, which can only happen in time, is forever conscious that time will erode it. This bittersweet realization fuels a "hyper-elevation" (*Überhöhung*) in the music, which surpasses even the "solemn religious genre" with which it is sometimes associated and "transcends the boundaries of the comedy, indeed of the theater."<sup>7</sup> Characters, plot, and genre recede as the moment assumes a philosophical gravity.

Ivan Nagel assigns the passage a different but no less profound meaning. In his view, *Figaro* and *Die Zauberflöte* represent new, Enlightened conceptions of individual autonomy that endow communities of free agents with powers previously reserved for rulers. Most far-reaching is the power to grant mercy. In *opera seria*, this is the prerogative of a patriarch heading the social order, but the comic genres distribute the authority more widely, and *Figaro* executes a particularly obvious transfer by having the patriarch who should exercise clemency instead have to beg for it. The Countess's assent triggers a vision of secular and democratic coexistence:

Society, in these very measures, constitutes itself as pure immanence, a world of free men and women . . . reconciliation prevails as a purely immanent force: no transient bridge between above and below, but rather the daily interaction of equals as a test of possible humanity in the world of human beings—the only world they have. They know of nothing external to it; no god, no sovereign, no esoteric order, no 'quite unexpected things from outside' will come powerfully and wonderfully to their help.<sup>8</sup>

6. Ibid., 265.

7. Ibid.

8. Ivan Nagel, *Autonomy and Mercy: Reflections on Mozart's Operas*, trans. Marion Faber and Ivan Nagel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 33–34.

Again the absolute transcends the plot to signify universal experience, although Nagel figures the “interaction of equals” as a social ideal rather than a philosophical truth. On the other hand, he shares Kunze’s impression that the moment suspends time, which leads him to conclude that the harmonious community is not, in fact, entirely secular: “Mozart’s rescuing vision, at the end of *Figaro*, preserves the divinity of mercy within the humanity of forgiveness . . . in such interruption of human time the irruption of the timeless lives on, as wonders do in the wonderment of the ensemble.”<sup>9</sup> Alongside the ideal of egalitarianism, an evocation of the sublime lifts the characters from the garden onto higher planes.

Recent English-language critics have tended to make less elaborate claims; more often they simply assume the sincerity or sublimity of the finale, sometimes contrasting it with the comedy or cynicism of other parts of the opera.<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Till, however, adds the new twist of an overtly religious interpretation that also evokes gender roles. He begins with a demystification that would have made Jahn wince, portraying the Countess as a victim of “the self-deluding powers of sentimental love,” a woman who would rather indulge her sorrow at losing her husband, as in her first aria, “Porgi amor,” than act on her own behalf. Subsequently she takes control of her fate, and by the time she and Susanna write the letter that will entrap the Count (“Che soave zeffiretto”), she is “employing her own sentimental language manipulatively, still believing in its potency and effectiveness, but able to distance herself.”<sup>11</sup> This new maturity prepares her to be even more empowered in the finale, where she is “not simply exercising a prerogative of mercy, but rather, true Christian forgiveness.” Till reaffirms the Countess’s sincerity while also, unlike Kunze or Nagel, emphasizing her agency; it is her action, not mercy or revelation in the abstract that restores harmony between the characters. And yet a paradox emerges as he elaborates on the source of her strength:

Constancy . . . remains a female virtue, that has the power to redeem the unsettled, improvident male worlds of business and politics with its promise of transcendent certainty and ultimate forgiveness. The marital fidelity upheld by the Countess . . . is an emblem of God’s own covenant to keep faith with mankind.<sup>12</sup>

The Countess matures only to become a vessel for something larger, an expectation of wifely devotion that bears the stamp of divine approval. The scene is once again transcendent,

9. *Ibid.*, 34.

10. Stefano Castelvocchi, “Sentimental and Anti-Sentimental in *Le nozze di Figaro*,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 53, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 21; Richard Andrews, “From Beaumarchais to Da Ponte: A New View of the Sexual Politics of ‘Figaro,’” *Music & Letters* 82, no. 2 (May 2001): 223.

11. Nicholas Till, *Mozart and the Enlightenment: Truth, Virtue, and Beauty in Mozart’s Operas* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 156, 158–59.

12. *Ibid.*, 171.

but its elevation depends on the heroine's willingness to embrace a role defined by social and religious convention.

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Performances suggest meanings similar to those of written commentaries, although the scene is too rich in signifiers for every spectator or listener to come away with the same impression, and the possibilities multiply when the evidence consists only of sound recordings, as in many of the examples discussed here. Nevertheless, given the critical consensus on the seriousness and sublimity of the absolution, it is striking that so many performers seem intent on solemnizing the moment and, even more, on rupturing the flow of time.

This is most obviously an effect of tempo. The allegro assai preceding the absolution, although written in common time, is properly *alla breve*, with all the melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic emphases on the half note. In a sampling of twenty-two audio and video recordings, dating from before WWII into the era of historical performance practice (see table 1), the tempo nearly always falls in a range of  $\text{♩} = \text{MM } 120\text{--}132$ . When the Count begins to plead and the tempo changes to *andante*, the meter becomes a true common time, with emphases on the quarter note. Here the great majority of performances slow to a range of  $\text{♩} = \text{MM } 45\text{--}55$ , and most slacken the pace further by lingering over the notated fermatas at the end of the Count's statement (m. 424), stretching the rests within both the Count's and the Countess's statements (mm. 422, 426), and adding *ritards* to the fourth-beat anacrusis (mm. 430, 432, 434, 443) and melodic descents (mm. 437–38, 440–41) in the tutti. As a result, a spectacular change of pace accompanies the stylistic and textural shifts between *imbroglio* and absolution: the governing pulse drops to less than half of what it has been, and rapid-fire dialogue gives way to sonorities so drawn out that the contours of the characters' statements only gradually become clear. The shift seems to realize Nagel's conception of the *andante* as an "irruption of the timeless," its virtual stasis in comparison to the allegro suggesting that time has indeed ceased to pass. Or perhaps the correlation is better seen the other way around: when Nagel and others write of a temporal suspension they capture a familiar effect of performance tradition.

Although elements such as phrasing, dynamics, and vocal timbre pose more challenges of interpretation than tempo, they suggest further if less precise parallels between performance and criticism. Between allegro and *andante* the voice of the Count usually goes from forcefulness to lyricism, whether full-voiced warmth (e.g., John Brownlee 1940, Tom Krause 1979) or restrained sweetness (Jorma Hynninen 1986, Håkan Hagegård 1987, Simon Keenlyside 2003). The impression is of arrogance giving way to humility, and recalcitrance to cooperation as the character ventures into a musical world previously inhabited by the women, particularly the Countess. Most performances drive the point home by recalling her characteristic tone just before the *andante* begins, at her entrance in the allegro (mm. 398–402). Every performance slows down at this point, sometimes a little (Fritz Busch 1934–35, Arnold Östmann 1987) but more often a lot, so much so that time already seems to rupture (John Pritchard 1973, Herbert von Karajan 1979, Riccardo Muti 1986, René Jacobs 2003). Taken together with a stepwise and chromatic melody,

**TABLE 1** RECORDINGS CONSULTED

<b>Sound Recordings</b>	
1934	Fritz Busch (conductor), Aulikki Rautavaara (Countess), Roy Henderson (Count), Chorus and Orchestra of the Glyndebourne Festival. Mozart Opera Society.
1940	Ettore Panizza (conductor), Elisabeth Rethberg (Countess), John Brownlee (Count), Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Chorus. Metropolitan Opera Association.
1953	Wilhelm Furtwängler (conductor), Elisabeth Schwarzkopf (Countess), Paul Schöffler (Count), Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, Vienna State Opera Chorus. EMI.
1955	Erich Kleiber (conductor), Lisa Della Casa (Countess), Alfred Poell (Count), Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, Vienna State Opera Chorus. London.
1959	Erich Leinsdorf (conductor), Lisa Della Casa (Countess), George London (Count), Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, Vienna State Opera Chorus. Decca.
1959	Carlo Maria Giulini (conductor), Elisabeth Schwarzkopf (Countess), Eberhard Wächter (Count), Philharmonia Orchestra and Chorus. Angel.
1960	Herbert von Karajan (conductor), Elisabeth Schwarzkopf (Countess), George London (Count), Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, Vienna State Opera Chorus. Odeon.
1964	Otmar Suitner (conductor), Hilde Güden (Countess), Hermann Prey (Count), Dresden State Opera Chorus, Staatskapelle Dresden. Seraphim.
1968	Karl Böhm (conductor), Gundula Janowitz (Countess), Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (Count), Chorus and Orchestra of the German Opera Berlin. Deutsche Grammophon.
1970	Colin Davis (conductor), Jessye Norman (Countess), Ingvar Wixell (Count), B.B.C. Symphony Orchestra and Chorus. Philips.
1979	Herbert von Karajan (conductor), Anna Tomova-Sintow (Countess), Tom Krause (Count), Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, Vienna State Opera Chorus. London.
1981	Georg Solti (conductor), Kiri Te Kanawa (Countess), Thomas Allen (Count), London Philharmonic Orchestra and Chorus. London.
1986	Neville Marriner (conductor), Lucia Popp (Countess), Ruggero Raimondi (Count), Academy of St.-Martin-in-the-Fields, Ambrosian Opera Chorus. Philips.
1987	Riccardo Muti (conductor), Margaret Price (Countess), Jorma Hynninen (Count), Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, Vienna State Opera Chorus. EMI.
1987	Arnold Östman (conductor), Arleen Auger (Countess), Hakan Hagegard (Count), Drottningholm Court Theatre Chorus and Orchestra. L'Oiseau-Lyre.
1993	John Eliot Gardiner (conductor), Hillevi Martinpelto (Countess), Rodney Gilfry (Count), English Baroque Soloists, Monteverdi Choir. Archiv.
2003	René Jacobs (conductor), Véronique Gens (Countess), Simon Keenlyside (Count), Concerto Köln, Collegium Vocale Gent. Harmonia Mundi France.

TABLE 1 *continued*

Video Recordings	
1973	Peter Hall (director), John Pritchard (conductor), Kiri Te Kanawa (Countess), Benjamin Luxon (Count), London Philharmonic Orchestra, Glyndebourne Festival Chorus. Video Arts International.
1976	Jean-Pierre Ponnelle (director), Karl Böhm (conductor), Kiri Te Kanawa (Countess), Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (Count), Vienna Philharmonic. Deutsche Grammophon.
1991	Peter Sellars (director), Craig Smith (conductor), Jayne West (Countess), James Maddalena (Count), Arnold-Schönberg-Chor, Wiener Symphoniker. Decca.
1993	John Eliot Gardiner (director and conductor), Hillevi Martinpelto (Countess), Rodney Gilfry (Count), English Baroque Soloists, Monteverdi Choir. Archiv.
1994	Jean-Pierre Vincent (director), Paolo Olmi (Conductor), Janice Watson (Countess), Ludovic Tezier (Count), Lyon National Opera Chorus and Orchestra. Kultur International Films.

the ritard reminds listeners of the lyrical seriousness that the Countess has evinced in her two arias and will reprise in the andante. Much as in critical interpretations, she appears to remain true to character in the absolution, while the Count undergoes a transformation.

Some performances complicate this pattern, although usually with a similar result in the end. On stage, the Count's appearance may belie his singing, as in the film by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle (1976) where Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau sounds perfectly contrite but, once forgiven, looks smilingly on the Countess as if he expected nothing less; never does he gaze abjectly downwards as other Counts do (Benjamin Luxon 1973, James Maddalena 1991, Ludovic Tezier 1994). Still others do not alter their vocal tone for the andante, retaining their earlier forcefulness as if to suggest the character has learned nothing from his embarrassment and would demand rather than plea for mercy (John Brownlee 1940, Paul Schöffler 1953, Ruggiero Raimondi 1985). In one remarkable instance, led by the always idiosyncratic Wilhelm Furtwängler (1953), such stubbornness derails the absolution, for the overbearing insistence conveyed by Paul Schöffler triggers un-lyrical curtness from Elizabeth Schwarzkopf. She ignores the rest and fermata between his statement and hers, accelerates through her phrases, and sings with a noticeable lack of emotion, making the reconciliation into little more than a nod to social convention. By contrast, other unrepentant Counts produce a heightened lyricism that seeks to enfold them in warmth. After Ruggiero Raimondi lumbers through the Count's plea, swooping between pitches and accenting each downbeat with volume and vibrato, Lucia Popp takes a long breath and responds in a pure, unmistakably heartfelt tone that breaks slightly on higher pitches and caresses the phrase-ending appoggiaturas. Bluster is countered by a sincerity that makes rapprochement seem at least possible. More obviously, replying to a brisk and offhand plea by Roy Henderson (itself the continuation of an unusually hurried rendering of the allegro), Aulikki Rautavaara pauses for a full two

seconds before answering in a slower tempo, using a rich and velvety tone and emphasizing the final “si” with a further ritard and portamento (1934). Her reading audibly strives to restore the Count to the social fold, undermining his hastiness with deliberation and expressive intensity. Where the Count does not immediately show remorse, performances take special pains to highlight the Countess’s generosity and the consequent probability of reconciliation.

The concluding tutti tends to reinforce whatever emotional register the Countess has established: where she is fervent, singing in full voice with vibrato and rubato (Rautavaara 1934–35, Jessye Norman 1971, Gens 2003), so too the cast, and likewise when she is more restrained (Elisabeth Schwarzkopf 1960, Anna Tomova-Sintow 1979, Hellevi Martinpelto 1993). Thanks to slow tempos and the hymn-like texture, often the passage conveys a quasi-religious gravity, particularly in more restrained performances where the observance of Mozart’s *sotto voce* marking produces a kind of hushed reverence. Stagings enact a comparable seriousness while also suggesting the transcendence, or at least the sense of remove from the surrounding plot, that so many critics attribute to the scene. In the production by Peter Sellars (1991), a transformative exchange between a previously vicious Count and Countess, who are now visibly moved, leads to bewilderment; apparently pushed beyond the limits of comprehension, the singers stare blankly at the audience, unable to muster the Sellars-ian physical and facial animation that characterizes the rest of the production. They return to form only in the ensuing allegro, a celebratory melee complete with hand claps and the wave. More traditionally but to similar effect, stagings such as Peter Hall’s (1973) or John Eliot Gardiner’s (1993) freeze a tableau of the Count and Countess reunited and surrounded by the other characters. Stasis on stage reinforces stasis in the music, dissociating the scene from the action of before and after.

Most dissociative of all is Ponnelle’s film, which combines stasis with rapture to produce a palpable sense of elevation. The scene begins with a hint of comedy, a visual gag whereby the cast rises as the Count kneels to plea. There is no joking, however, with Kiri Te Kanawa’s Countess, who is portrayed throughout the film as deeply emotional and possessed of a part sexual, part angelic radiance. Filmed in soft focus and dressed in diaphanous, seductive finery, she nevertheless also keeps the trappings of Catholic devotion in her bedroom and, for the act 4 finale, wears a white veil that she lifts on emerging into the garden, looking for all the world like a bride or first communicant. The two sides of her characterization converge at the absolution, where—veil lifted, tears streaming down, eyes looking heavenward rather than at the Count—she confirms at once her depth of feeling and her trust in divine mercy. Te Kanawa’s vocal delivery dispels any hint of insincerity by throbbing on every note and dying away in apparent emotional exhaustion; here as elsewhere her rendering is among the slowest and most expressive on record. As the camera then pans across the cast, each character or pair of characters displays an enrapturement suitable to their station: comic, for Basilio and Don Curzio; innocent, for Barbarina and Cherubino; grateful, for Marcellina and Bartolo; wise, for Susanna and Figaro. From them the view shifts to the garden, which dissolves out of focus to leave an after-image of social harmony divorced from time and place.

## POLARIZATION

The urge to solemnize the absolution, and to cast the Countess as uncommonly sincere and forgiving, is inspired by two aspects of Mozart's and Da Ponte's text. One is the sheer beauty of the music, noted above and discussed further below. The other is the purification of the heroine vis-à-vis her portrait in the opera's source, Beaumarchais's stage play *Le mariage de Figaro*. The opera burnishes her morality to such an extent that she indeed seems capable of redeeming both the Count and society as a whole. There is a risk, however, in drawing too many consequences from her characterization, for the Count undergoes equally radical changes, his conduct worsening even as hers improves. The opera's revisions of Beaumarchais open a gulf between the couple that is harder to bridge than the critical and performance traditions suggest.

The most striking change to the Countess's character is the frequently-noted removal of her extramarital attraction to Chérubin.<sup>13</sup> Beaumarchais has her flirt with the page and return as the mother of his child in the third play of the Figaro trilogy, *La mère coupable*. Mozart and Da Ponte eliminate the flirting and add two soliloquies, "Porgi amor" and "Dove sono," in which she is seen dreaming of regaining the Count's affections. More subtly, the libretto protects her displays of selflessness, which include intercession as well as forgiveness, from Beaumarchais's corrosive wit. The play abounds in people intervening for others—Bartholo for Marceline, Bazile for the Count, the Countess for Figaro, Suzanne, and Chérubin—but such advocacy is repeatedly satirized, most pointedly in the trial scene where Figaro denounces lawyers. That speech also disappears from the opera, as does any suggestion that the Countess's intercessions have ulterior motives; when she defends Cherubino, whom she no longer desires, it is out of compassion rather than self-interest. A revision to the final scene reiterates her willingness to put others first, for at the moment she emerges from hiding, she does not ask to be numbered among those begging for her own pardon, as in the play ("Au moins je ferai nombre"), but rather pleads to intercede for the others ("Almeno io per loro/Perdono otterrò"). The request is ironic—it is the Count who needs mercy—but also ennobling, a recollection of earlier kindnesses.

Mozart's music supports the ennoblement, especially in the arias. Their texts endow the Countess with the passivity that Rousseau and others demanded of virtuous women, who were to influence those around them through exemplary behavior rather than action or reproach.<sup>14</sup>

13. Wye Jamison Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart: "Le nozze di Figaro" and "Don Giovanni"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 104; Andrew Steptoe, *The Mozart-Da Ponte Operas: The Cultural and Musical Background to "Le nozze di Figaro," "Don Giovanni," and "Così fan tutte"* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 111; Daniel Heartz, *Mozart's Operas*, ed. with contributing essays by Thomas Bauman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 109–10; Andrews, "From Beaumarchais to Da Ponte," 221–24. Mary Hunter, in "Rousseau, the Countess, and the Female Domain," in *Mozart Studies 2*, ed. Cliff Eisen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 10, points out that productions often revive the attraction between the Countess and Cherubino. Such is the case in Ponnelle's film, which makes the ultimate transcendence of the Countess seem all the more dissociated from the preceding action.

14. Hunter, "Rousseau, the Countess, and the Female Domain," 6–7.

“Porgi amor” pleads with Love to restore the Count or bring death, and “Dove sono,” less melodramatic but in some ways more revealing, turns from anger against his “infidelity, jealousy, and disdain,” to a prayer that constancy will reform his “ungrateful heart.” Eventually the Countess does write the letter that entraps the Count, but while alone she maintains a proper feminine modesty. In the music, echoes of earlier, both secular and sacred supplications reinforce the image of an afflicted soul trusting higher powers. Familiar from *opere buffe* influenced by eighteenth-century sentimentalism, other such figures include Cecchina in Niccolò Piccini’s *La buona figliuola* (1760), Sandrina in Mozart’s *La finta giardiniera* (1775), the Queen in Vicente Martín y Soler’s *Una cosa rara* (1786), and, most importantly for *Figaro*, Rosina in Giovanni Paisiello’s *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (1782).<sup>15</sup> An adaptation of the first play in the Figaro trilogy, *Il barbiere* was popular throughout Europe, and Mozart’s Countess would have been viewed by many audience members as a further development of Paisiello’s heroine. Significantly, the composer and his librettist (probably Giuseppe Petrosellini) had already given Rosina two arias in which she evinces a seriousness not found in Beaumarchais. The texts lack the extreme pathos of Da Ponte’s: “Lode al ciel” rejoices that the jealous guardian Bartolo has allowed her to open the windows, and “Giusto ciel,” though it asks heaven to grant peace to her “pure heart,” borders on hypocrisy given that she sings it while deep in intrigue with Figaro and Almaviva. Paisiello’s music, however, combines lyrical sincerity with images of steadfastness in a way that prefigures Mozart’s arias; Rosina does her pleading in song-like phrases over regularly pulsing accompaniments, and, as will be the case in *Figaro*, enjoys the support of woodwind solos that decorate and punctuate her prayers. Indeed, as Daniel Hertz has shown, “Giusto ciel” was clearly on Mozart’s mind when he composed “Porgi amor,” for beyond the rhythmic and affective characteristics of other supplications, the two arias share key, meter, prominent clarinet and bassoon parts, a distinctive sensuousness evoked by chromatic neighbor tones, and similar emotional trajectories.<sup>16</sup> In effect, Paisiello set the stage for Mozart to create a still more complex and serious Rosina in the Countess.

As Hertz further notes, the Countess’s arias also have connections to Mozart’s church music.<sup>17</sup> “Porgi amor” shares a thematic incipit, key, and rhythmic foundation with the “Agnus Dei” of the Mass in C, K. 337 (1780), and “Dove sono” has a similar incipit and voice-woodwind dialogue to the “Agnus Dei” of the Mass in C, K. 317 (1779). More important than specific resemblances, though—neither case seems to involve direct modeling—is Mozart’s frequent setting of the “Agnus dei” to the same mixture of solo lyricism and pulsating backdrop

15. On *buffa* and sentimentalism see especially Hunter, “Pamela: The Offspring of Richardson’s Heroine in Eighteenth-Century Opera,” *Mosaic* 18 (1985): 61–76; and Edmund J. Goehring, “The Sentimental Muse of *opera buffa*,” in Hunter and James Webster, eds., *Opera buffa in Mozart’s Vienna* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 115–45.

16. Hertz, *Mozart’s Operas*, 140–42.

17. Hertz, *Mozart’s Operas*, 119–20.

found in sentimental arias; there are examples not only in K. 337 and K. 317, but also in the Masses K. 194 and K. 259, and in the Litanies K. 125, K. 195, and K. 243. As in secular contexts, the agent of prayer is an exposed voice singing heartfelt, songful, mildly sensuous music. Also significant are the pastoral overtones of many “Agnus dei” movements, in which prominent woodwind solos and inner-voice murmurings evoke the aura of rural innocence surrounding the “Lamb of God.” Arias for sentimental heroines play on similar associations; devices such as woodwinds in thirds, passages of simple tonic-dominant harmony, and addresses to Love transport them at least partway to the idyllic countryside where the heroines of sentimental literature retired to protect their virtue. Religious and secular penitents alike can plead their case in the secure refuge of the pastoral.

\* \* \*

As with the Countess, the character of the Count changes considerably between play and opera, but in the opposite moral direction. Repeatedly Da Ponte and Mozart remove or edit scenes from Beaumarchais’s play in which he appears charming, amiable, and even introspective—if still fundamentally immoral.<sup>18</sup> They include what Richard Andrews calls a “lesson on marriage,” delivered near the end to the Countess in her guise as Suzanne: “if we husbands pursue elsewhere the pleasure which eludes us with our wives, it’s because they don’t give enough attention to the art of holding our interest, of renewing affection, and, so to speak, reviving the charm of possession with the spice of variety.”<sup>19</sup> However repellent its ideology, the statement shows a measure of self-awareness that the operatic Count lacks. He loses an even more reflective soliloquy from act 3, as well as a joking exchange with Suzanne about the *droit du seigneur* from act 1. A further blow comes in revisions to the act 3 encounter with Susanna, which put him in a position where he is unwittingly but characteristically callous. In the play they meet alone, but in the opera Susanna enters together with the Countess, whom the Count does not see but who overhears, according to the stage directions, his ensuing raptures over the projected assignation. He is no longer just a philanderer but an egoist, so consumed with self-interest that he does not perceive its effects on himself or others.

Again as with the Countess, Mozart’s music reinforces the new characterization. Wye Jamison Allanbrook demonstrates the Count’s consistent association with assertive, often alla breve march rhythms, an appropriate style for his social standing, but one that begins to sound coercive as it recurs again and again in situations where he claims authority.<sup>20</sup> His profile softens only at the beginning of act 3, where Allanbrook hears a “flicker of honest passion” in the minor-key, declamatory, pathos-laden beginning of his duet with Susanna.<sup>21</sup> Later he bursts into soaring melody (mm. 29–32 and ff.) and even exchanges “si-no” banter with Susanna (mm. 37–53).

18. Steptoe, *The Mozart-Da Ponte Operas*, 110–12; Andrews, “From Beaumarchais to Da Ponte,” 218–21.

19. Beaumarchais, *The Marriage of Figaro*, trans. John Wood (Baltimore: Penguin, 1964), 206.

20. Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart*, 89–92, 116–23, 140–45, *et passim*.

21. *Ibid.*, 138.

The fun stops, however, when he discovers her deception: his revenge aria, “Vedrò mentr’io sospiro,” overflows with signatures of upper-class power, including *alla breve* rhythms, sweeping *tirades* reminiscent of the French overture (mm. 41, 48; cf. mm. 83–86), powerful orchestral sonorities with trumpets and timpani, and valedictory vocal roulades (mm. 141–46). In addition, Allanbrook finds evidence of the “near-dementia of Almaviva’s jealousy” in the distorted rhythms of key phrases; “tu non nascesti, audace” is stretched beyond a prevailing two-measure pattern so as to create unexpected three-measure groups (mm. 92–97), and the verb “ridere,” the imagined laughing of Figaro, is repeated so as to create another anomalous three-measure group (mm. 101–3).<sup>22</sup> So infuriated does the Count become that he loses control of the privileged, martial authority on which his vengeance depends.

At his moment of triumph, Mozart and Da Ponte reprise essential aspects of the characterization. “M’ha tradito, m’ha infamato,” he shouts of Figaro, and of Susanna disguised as the Countess, “la perfida è quà.” The second phrase, uniquely for the scene, is repeated for emphasis (mm. 378–81). Throughout the passage he sings dotted rhythms in an *alla breve* meter marked *allegro assai*, just as he has earlier (cf. the act 1 trio, the beginning of the act 2 finale, and the second half of the act 3 aria). At one point the other characters even echo the counter-rhythm of the act 1 trio, two half notes followed by two quarters ending on an offbeat, which sets the Count’s more assertive rhythms and downbeat endings in relief (“Cosa sento,” mm. 16–21; act 4 finale, mm. 352–55). More striking, just before the Countess emerges his style again threatens to spin out of control (see example 2). First Susanna, then Figaro plea for mercy, answered by curt denials that fill out four-measure phrases in the key of the dominant, D (mm. 382–89). Now the entire cast sings “Perdono,” to which the Count responds with a simple “no,” shrinking the exchanges to two measures. But the ensemble will not relent, growing louder and transforming the D chord from a tonic into a dominant seventh as if to force a resolution (mm. 390–94). Evidently this pushes too far, for the Count lunges up a step to E, crying a defiant “no” that he repeats some five times while staggering down a *vii*<sup>7</sup> arpeggio to the other end of his range (mm. 395–98). Intemperate in its own right, the outburst also recalls the setting of “tu non nascesti, audace” in “Vedrò mentr’io sospiro” (mm. 95–96), another range-spanning arpeggiation of the dominant set to half-note rhythms and accompanied by winds and strings in unison. Faced with resistance, the Count forgets all decorum, abandoning march rhythms and metric regularity to assert the sheer power of his voice. He becomes as rude as the Countess does pure—in Kerman’s words, “Mozart’s most savage creation.”<sup>23</sup>

### AMBIVALENCE

The polarization of the couple creates a dramatic problem not found in Beaumarchais. Possessed of similarly flexible moralities, his characters reunite easily and amidst the same ironic merriment

22. *Ibid.*, 141–44.

23. Kerman, *Opera as Drama*, 90.

Example 2. Mozart, *Le nozze di Figaro*, Act 4 finale, mm. 382–402.

Susanna  
(s'inginocchia ai peidi del Conte.)

Per - do - no! per - do - no!

Il Conte

No no, non spe-rar - lo.

Figaro  
(s'inginocchia.)

Per - do - no! per -

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Susanna e Barbarina  
(s'inginocchiano.)

*p* *cresc.*

Per - do - no! Per -

Cherubino e Marcellina  
(s'inginocchiano.)

*p* *cresc.*

Per - do - no! Per -

Basilio  
(s'inginocchia.)

*p* *cresc.*

Per - do - no! Per -

Il C.

No no, non vo' dar - lo. No!

Figaro e Antonio  
(s'inginocchiano.)

*p* *cresc.*

do - no! Per - do - no! Per -

Example 2. *continued*

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Sus. *f*  
Barb. do - no! Per - do - no!

Cher. *f*  
Marc. do - no! Per - do - no!

Bas. *f*  
do - no! Per - do - no!

Il C. (con più forza)  
No! No! no, no.

Ant. *f*  
Fig. do - no! Per - do - no!

*f p f sf sf sf*

La Contessa  
(esce dall' altra nicchia e vuole inginocchiarsi, Il Conte nol permette.)

397 *pp*  
Al - me - no io per lo - ro per - do - no ot - ter - rò.

Il C.  
no, no, no!

*sf sf sf p pp*

that pervades the rest of the play. The Countess laughs as she grants forgiveness, followed by Suzanne, Marceline, and Figaro granting forgiveness as well, which prompts Figaro to a witticism about echoes—and so on. Soon the Count himself is laughing, while the Countess, having given up a ribbon coveted by Chérubin, is suggestively “absorbed in her thoughts.”<sup>24</sup> Such a conclusion would be unthinkable in the opera, where she suffers deeply from the Count’s failure to uphold her standard of fidelity, and he shows no inclination to treat deception—others’ or his own—as a game. If there is to be reconciliation for the couple, much less for the society they lead, it will require no less than what many critical readings and performances assume: an epiphany for the Count and an act of true, redemptive mercy from the Countess.

But what if that is not what happens? Unlike the play, the libretto grows very terse after the Count has denied the other characters’ pleas for pardon. The Countess’s appearance, the reaction, and the absolution are dispatched in ten matter-of-fact lines, and the concluding summons to revelry in another eight. The words give little clue as to whether the ending represents a transformation or, as often in comedy and certainly in Beaumarchais’s original, only the restoration of a still unstable social order. The burden of proof shifts to the setting, and it projects ambiguities of its own. While extensive compared to the text, the music, too, is notably concise; only 101 measures lie between the Countess’s appearance and the end of the opera, of which seventy-five are marked *allegro assai* and pass quickly. The remaining twenty-six, the scene of absolution, are marked *andante*, a point that deserves reflection. As we have seen, the impressions of gravity, religiosity, and temporal rupture left by performances of this passage stem in large part from very slow tempos—much slower than the marking seems to justify. On the contrary, nothing from the eighteenth-century evidence on tempo would suggest that an *andante* should be so slow as to convey timelessness.

Eighteenth-century writers saw tempo as determined by written markings in combination with the metric value of the basic pulse and the prevailing affect or character. Concerning the marking, Neal Zaslaw concludes, “for Mozart’s time *Andante* was a flowing tempo only slightly slower than *Allegretto*.”<sup>25</sup> Most writers contemporary with the composer invoke the meaning of the term as “going” or “walking,”<sup>26</sup> which for Daniel Gottlieb Türk (1789) indicated “a moderate tempo, neither fast nor slow,”<sup>27</sup> and for others, including Mozart and his father, a pace tending toward the brisk end of the spectrum.<sup>28</sup> Mozart used “*molto andante*” to mean “faster than *andante*,” suggesting that he understood the unmodified term as closer to *allegro* (where

24. Cf. Andrews, “From Beaumarchais to Da Ponte,” 220.

25. Neal Zaslaw, *Mozart’s Symphonies: Context, Performance Practice, Reception*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 494.

26. Clive Brown, *Classical & Romantic Performing Practice 1750–1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 352.

27. Daniel Gottlieb Türk, *Klavierschule* (Leipzig and Halle, 1789), 105.

28. See especially Leopold Mozart, *A Treatise on the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing*, trans. Editha Knocker, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 51.

“molto” likewise means faster) than *adagio* (where “molto” means slower).<sup>29</sup> Metronome markings from the early nineteenth century concur, though they must be viewed with caution since they represent memories of performance practices from two or three decades earlier. Still, J. N. Hummel (1823) and Carl Czerny (1835) mark the *andantes* of Mozart’s last six symphonies at ♩ = MM 100–126,<sup>30</sup> and Gottfried Weber (1815) argues for ♩ = MM 138–52 in Pamina’s “Ach, ich fühl’ es” from *Die Zauberflöte*, finding support from a correspondent who claimed to remember Mozart performing it at that speed in Vienna.<sup>31</sup>

In these examples the metric value of the basic pulse is the eighth. Performances of the *Figaro* *andante* sometimes give a similar impression, particularly in the *tutti* where the individual notes of the violin arpeggios can be so heavily emphasized as to sound like beats (mm. 430 ff.). However, numerous rhythmic details point instead toward the quarter as the basic pulse. Every phrase begins with a quarter note upbeat, some conclude by emphasizing the first and second quarters (e.g., mm. 423, 427), and most measures feature quarter- or dotted-quarter/ eighth-note motion on beats three and four.<sup>32</sup> At the beginning the bass moves more slowly, in wholes and halves, but gradually it adopts the rhythms of the vocal lines, and by the end it prepares the cadence with two full measures of steady quarters.

A quarter-note beat would have suggested a slower pulse than the eighths of the symphony movements marked by Hummel and Czerny. How much slower, though, depends on one’s definition of a “walking pace.” Zaslav’s speculative interpretation of Ernst Wilhelm Wolf’s (1788) use of the term, “[ = ?MM 75–85],” seems not unreasonable; too much slower than that, and it becomes difficult to imagine either the real-life action of walking or its implications of purposeful movement.<sup>33</sup> Metronome markings for *Figaro* published by Schlesinger in 1822 put the passage at the upper end of that range, MM 84,<sup>34</sup> and Jean-Pierre Marty goes even higher, recommending MM 92 for this and Mozart’s other common-time, quarter-note *andantes*.<sup>35</sup> In sum, while Mozart’s notation encourages *rubato*, at least for the Count who has *fermati* over his

29. Zaslav, *Mozart’s Symphonies*, 494–95; on the factors determining tempo, see also 489.

30. *Ibid.*, 499.

31. Christopher Raeburn, “Das Zeitmass in Mozarts Opern,” *Österreichische Musikzeitschrift* 12, no. 9 (September 1957): 330–33.

32. Where the quarter-note upbeat is divided into two eighths (or dotted-eighth/sixteenth, as at m. 436), the second eighth is always an anticipation of the downbeat half note, and sounds less like an independent beat than a subdivision leading from one metric emphasis to the next. Likewise in the eighth-note arpeggios, the fact that the higher pitch in each two-note pair occurs on the quarter-note beat emphasizes the quarter at the expense of the eighth (mm. 430–35).

33. Zaslav, *Mozart’s Symphonies*, 492.

34. Max Rudolf, “Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Temponahme bei Mozart,” *Mozart-Jahrbuch* (1976/77): 208.

35. Jean-Pierre Marty, *The Tempo Indications of Mozart* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 8 and “Catalogue,” p. 24.

final notes and over the rests bracketing his entrance, it also seems to call for an underlying pulse that is moderate to relatively animate.

A tempo of ♩ = MM 75 or higher would result in a very different absolution from what is usually heard. Lasting just over a minute rather than two minutes and more, the music would behave more like the text, resolving the plot efficiently and leaving minimal time for reflection. It would also give fewer signs of suspending the action. Beyond slow tempos, it is a lack of connection between the andante and the surrounding music that contributes most to the familiar image of transcendence. As James Webster points out, the passage is in fact securely linked to both the foregoing imbroglia and the ensuing celebration; a half cadence at the end of the imbroglia resolves directly into the andante, which is in the same key of G major, and an orchestral transition leads seamlessly from the tonic cadence of the andante to the D major of the following allegro.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, when the andante is performed at very slow speeds the impression is not of three continuous sections but of two rhythmically similar allegros—both are allegro assai in alla breve meter—separated by a rhythmically foreign, seemingly self-sufficient interpolation. It is as if the finale pauses to accommodate an altogether different piece. The effect is enhanced by the frequent extension both of the rest separating the first allegro from the andante, and of the transition into the second allegro, which often seems to back away from the faster tempo rather than lead into it (mm. 445–47). A quicker andante would make it harder for the passage to become a tableau unto itself, and help integrate all three sections into a multi-part journey toward celebration.

Something like this can be heard in a few recordings, particularly those directed by Erich Kleiber (1955) and Erich Leinsdorf (1959). Their allegros belong to the slow end of the spectrum, around ♩ = MM 120, while their andantes surpass all others at ♩ = MM 60. The 2:1 proportion audibly links the tempos, two beats of the allegro becoming one of the andante, and other decisions reinforce the continuity. Lisa Della Casa, the Countess in both recordings, slows little if at all at her entrance in the allegro, establishing no expectation that she will be particularly slow or serious in the andante. Neither the final chord of the allegro nor the ensuing grand pause are unduly elongated, which eliminates any temporal chasm between the passages and makes the Count's entrance seem like a reaction more to the immediate turn of events than to his overall behavior or character—he is embarrassed, not transformed. The tempo then remains relatively constant through the andante, forging plea, forgiveness, and reaction into a coherent sequence, and although the singing is expressive, the voices do not affect such fervor as to lose all resemblance to their tone before and after. Lastly, the juncture between the andante and the following allegro is treated as a transition rather than a break. Leinsdorf accelerates through the

36. James Webster, "The Act IV Finale of *Le nozze di Figaro*: Dramatic and Musical Construction" (unpublished typescript), which also details voice-leading and other continuities across the three sections. I am grateful to Professor Webster for sharing this unpublished essay with me.

orchestral interlude to arrive at the allegro already in tempo, while Kleiber maintains the same speed so that the allegro doubles the governing pulse just as the andante had halved it. The result of all this is that the drama flows evenly: rather than the imbroglia functioning as preparation, the absolution as climax, and the celebration as denouement, the three stages bear more or less equal weight and together provide closure.

What does the absolution mean when it is absorbed into—as opposed to separated from—the rhythmic flow of the ending? One answer is suggested by Allanbrook, who assumes an even closer connection between the allegro and andante tempos than do Leinsdorf or Kleiber. In her reading, the half note of the faster section becomes the quarter note of the slower, and the andante maintains a four-beat hyper-meter already implied by the concluding measures of the allegro (i.e.,  $\frac{4}{2}$ , mm. 402–19, becomes  $\frac{4}{4}$ , mm. 420–47). The new meter, which sounds “imposed” onto the quicker motion of the allegro’s *alla breve*, lends to the andante

an air of exalted control—of borrowed and unnatural circumspection—which is appropriate to the quality of the reconciliation . . . its position in the finale as a sudden slow gesture in the midst of a lively drive to the final cadence generates a curious tension between the proper tempo and the present tempo. This tension . . . cannot help but impart to the scene some feeling of the impermanence resulting from behavior not from the heart.<sup>37</sup>

The andante interrupts the sequence of action but does not obliterate it; if anything, its rhythmic dissonance with the allegro raises listeners’ awareness of comic business remaining to be finished. And in the absence of a temporal rupture, the polarization of the leading couple returns to haunt them. They cannot transcend time and place, nor summon the long-breathed expressivity allowed by slower tempos, which does so much to suggest emotional transformation. They can only perform the roles expected of them, achieving resolution with a rhythmic formality that suggests necessity more than redemption.

Listening to Leinsdorf’s or Kleiber’s recordings, or imagining andantes that are animated without bearing 1:1 or 2:1 tempo relationships to the allegro, suggests other readings as well. The livelier the performance, the less opportunity to imbue the scene with seriousness and sublimity. On the other hand, even the fastest tempo cannot obscure the basic character of the passage, which remains diatonic, homophonic, and suggestive of social harmony as first the couple, and then all the characters come together on the same music. The andante differs sharply from the couple’s previous attempt at reconciliation, where Mozart goes some lengths to telegraph complicated feelings and unresolved tensions. Early in the act 2 finale, after the Count discovers Susanna in the Countess’s wardrobe, he reproaches the women with his usual stridency and threatens to punish their supposed co-conspirators Figaro and Basilio (mm. 188–91, 265–67). At the same time, in much quieter tones, he asks Susanna to intercede and the Countess to forgive (e.g., mm. 176–87, 203–7). The women respond with admonishments phrased like proverbs

37. Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture*, 192–93.

("Perdono non merta/Chi agli altri non dà") and sung in a purely comic vein, chattering parallel thirds that descend from tonic to dominant before cadencing with pedantic emphasis (mm. 191–95, 267–71; cf. Susanna's replies in mm. 207–11 and elsewhere). Meanwhile the Countess expresses sorrow and anger in a series of outbursts that redirect the rhythm and harmony as far afield as A $\flat$ , flatted seventh of the tonic B $\flat$  (mm. 234–42; cf. mm. 211–18, 280–86). Thus the husband is vengeful but also penitent; the wife, angry but also witty; the witness, light-hearted but also cynical (as in her statement on men, mm. 287–97). The emotional complexity perseveres through the cadence, for in the last exchange, just before the Countess yields her hand (still crying "ingrato!"), the apparently secure tonic gives way to the parallel minor (mm. 301–5). Major is soon restored, but the momentary darkening gives added meaning to the chromatic gestures in the concluding trio (mm. 308–26). Even as they patch up their differences, singing the same words together in harmony, the characters seemingly continue to harbor reservations.

The andante of act 4 gives little hint of similar ambiguities. Far from staging emotional or tonal diversions, the Countess extends the melody sung by the Count and resolves it to the tonic. The rest of the characters simply chime in, and the scoring of their cadences, where the cast follows the lead of the two sopranos, reinforces the spirit of cooperation (mm. 436–45). Only the brevity of the music suggests that resolution might be less than complete, particularly in light of the much lengthier reconciliation that Susanna and Figaro have just enjoyed (mm. 121–334). For them, Da Ponte preserves all the twists and turns of the play, including Figaro's recognition of Susanna's voice, his teasing of her and subsequent beating at her hands, and their eventual understanding. Mozart's music is correspondingly long and complex, comprising an allegro di molto that sets the comic business, followed by an andante that joins the characters no less than three times in parallel thirds and sixths, once to declare peace and twice more to anticipate the next reconciliation, which is forecast by the appearance of the Count. Count and Countess, by contrast, get no such chance to negotiate or take pleasure in their reunion. One statement each is all they get in both libretto and score, and when they sing together their voices are subsumed by the tutti. The simplicity of the exchange is surely another sign of Allanbrook's "behavior not from the heart"; however beautiful, a minute of peace cannot put to rest hours of animosity.

And yet, even though the andante passes quickly, and even though the polarization of its main characters makes their reconciliation improbable in any event—even so, the resolute harmoniousness (for lack of a better word) of Mozart's music is hard to ignore. It has neither chromatic shadows nor comic repartee, just diatonic chords moving in rhythmic unison from one tonic cadence to the next. If the characters do harbor residual anger or insincerity, they bury it so deeply as to leave no mark on the musical surface. Perhaps the composer, having added so much weight to the conflict between Count and Countess, wanted to recapture the light-heartedness of Beaumarchais's ending: the principals may not laugh as they reunite, but they call a truce for long enough to share a vision of happiness with the rest of the cast. Or perhaps the entire scene does step outside the story—just not in the direction of transcendence. The allegro which follows observes the convention by which *opere buffe*, to quote Mary Hunter, "assert from

within the *merely* pleasurable nature of the occasion, its function as escape or diversion from, rather than model for, daily life.”<sup>38</sup> Instead of a moral, or the satirical musings on marriage found in Beaumarchais, the end of *Le nozze di Figaro* offers a simple declaration—“Questo giorno di tormenti . . . In contenti e in allegria solo amor può terminar” (love can end the day of torment only in contentment and joy)—and a call to celebrate “al suon di lieta marcia” (to the sound of a happy march). The references to happiness and to music as its agent are typical of *buffa*, and neither the one nor the other belongs to the characters so much as to the performers and the audience. The story is over, and what remains is to confirm what a good time everyone has had making or watching it unfold.

That satisfaction may already be evident in the andante. The harmonic and rhythmic concord of the music may indeed suggest social harmony, particularly in the tutti where all sing together, but the society in question is not that of the plot, but rather of those who have just witnessed that plot unravel—and what an unravelling it has been! Whether the dramatic characters find peace is not clear, and less important than the reminder that while the pleasure they derive from the reconciliation is fictional, the joy of watching it is real. From this perspective the brevity of the passage looks less like a sign of unfinished business than an invitation to audience wonderment, turning the resolution into a *coup de théâtre* that astonishes by its speed as much as its mechanics. Put another way, where the absolution is conceived as a short, dynamic, well-integrated episode within the finale, its meaning may become the opposite of what is often assumed. Rather than lift the characters toward redemption, it brings the entire drama back to earth. Its swift and easy disposal of the noble couple’s incompatibility exposes the artifice of the spectacle and encourages the audience to marvel at its complexity.

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*Le nozze di Figaro* is a rich work, and the readings above do not exhaust the potential meanings of even a comparatively quick absolution. Nevertheless, they do suggest how faster and less reverent performances of the andante might alter the relationship between the final scenes and the rest of the opera. Most obviously, the social instabilities portrayed elsewhere in the work would not so suddenly evaporate. The characters of *Figaro* are remarkable for the number of different sources they appeal to in asserting or maintaining power: social privilege, birthright, wit, virtue, money, sexual allure, the law. Each source has limitations, and seemingly secure positions of advantage repeatedly crumble under the pressure of new forces. An absolution that was more conventional than redemptive would preserve the possibility of further reversals, whether by telegraphing latent insincerity or by shifting attention from plot to performance. Were the fictional drama to continue, no one could say whether forgiveness would restore the Count’s authority or set him up for another fall.

38. Mary Hunter, *The Culture of Opera buffa in Mozart’s Vienna: A Poetics of Entertainment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 28.

Along similar lines, a less conclusive ending might preserve the complexity of character exhibited by the Countess. Her purification at the hands of Mozart and Da Ponte notwithstanding, she proves capable not only of virtuous passivity and sorrow, but also of anger and wit (as in the act 2 finale, discussed above), and ultimately of action and trickery. To read her mercy as whole-hearted and selfless risks returning her to the one-dimensional goodness she exhibits initially. That simplification is especially jarring when her action is taken to affect not just the Count, but all of the characters and society generally. Social harmony depends not on mutual forgiveness or a dialogue between equals, but on one woman's willingness to assume a familiarly inequitable role, forgiving infidelities that would not be forgiven in her. Such a result seems at odds not only with her characterization but with the overall tenor of the opera, which, if it does not critique privilege so explicitly as Beaumarchais's play, nevertheless revels in depicting carnivalesque inversions of power: servants over masters and mistresses, teenagers (Cherubino, Barbarina) over adults (the Count, Antonio), and, above all, women over men. The work loses an important part of its comic and political energy when its prima donna sacrifices all of her hard-earned advantage to the greater good. A performance that resolved the Count's plea, without suggesting that it absolved all sin, might leave the impression that social convention is obeyed in the full knowledge of its costs—that compassion is tempered by ambivalence.

