

Key Notes



Mozart

THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO

A Supreme Human Comedy

by Bernard Jacobson

Le *nozze di Figaro*—best translated as “Figaro’s Wedding”—is two quite distinct kinds of miracle at once. Here, on a superficial view, is the epitome of the artificial eighteenth-century *opera buffa* plot, replete with intrigues suspected and real, complete with young-man role for female singer, and culminating in a night-time garden scene that outdoes all rivals with its mêlée of mistaken meanings and identities and of selectively overheard asides. Yet it was this same piece of theatrical clockwork that led Bernard Shaw to celebrate Mozart as “**the most subtle and profound of all musical dramatists.**”

The cauldron of forces that justifies such an evaluation seethes on two levels—political and personal. Mozart’s opera, first performed in Vienna on 1 May 1786, was composed to a libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte based in turn on Beaumarchais’s play *La Folle Journée ou Le Mariage de Figaro*, first publicly produced in Paris only two years earlier. A thoroughly topical piece, it was also, for the 1780s, a politically revolutionary one: the aristocrat is the villain, and he is bested by a pair of servants who surpass him as much in real nobility as in intelligence and self-control.

Because of the perfection of Mozart’s musical manners, it is easy to overlook the subversive trend of his work. Yet *Figaro* is as radically egalitarian a work as that more obviously revolutionary tract,

Beethoven’s *Fidelio*. Both operas, interestingly, begin on a deliberately prosaic note: Susanna is trying on a hat, Marzelline will be doing the ironing. It would be a mistake to think that Beethoven’s intensification, because of its clearly heroic and tragic tone, is of a higher order than Mozart’s. Tragedy is not a higher, nor for that matter a lower, form of art than comedy: it is merely different.

It is when we compare it with another no less different opera—Rossini’s *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (composed thirty years after *Figaro*, and two years after Beethoven put *Fidelio* in its final form)—that the stature of Mozart’s work emerges most strikingly. *Figaro* is based on the second play of Beaumarchais’s trilogy, *Il barbiere* on the first. Beaumarchais’s *Le Barbier de Séville*, a relatively innocent play, was the ideal springboard for Rossini’s uncomplicated effervescence. By the time the author came to write his *Mariage de Figaro*, the poison had entered the system in an obviously dangerous story that gave Da Ponte as many problems with the censor as it offered Mozart opportunities for a really ambitious composition.

The germ of *Figaro*’s operatic impact, then, is to be found in Beaumarchais. But just as Beethoven realized that the best way to convey the message of universal brotherhood was by concentrating on an individual drama, so Mozart, in his opera, elevates the socio-political puppets of the play to the status of human beings by underlining their personal attributes.

It is preeminently through the music that the characters take on their unparalleled vividness—that they pass, indeed, beyond the sphere of “characters” in any sense and become people.

Mozart, who never lived to be middle-aged, was thirty when he composed *Figaro*. It is a work in which youth is unmistakably opposed to age, and in which the composer’s allegiance to the side of youth is as unmistakable as his enthusiasm for the hoped-for new social order. It is through the music, much more than through the text, that the youth of almost all the central characters shines out: Figaro, who is thirty like his composer; Susanna, a decade younger; the Countess, often portrayed in rather matronly guise, but according to Beaumarchais only nineteen; and Count Almaviva, who has moved only three years—though an infinity of weary self-indulgence—on from the dashing blade he was in *Le Barbier*.

Even more crucially, it is music’s power of characterization that breathes life into the still younger figure of the page, Cherubino, who stands outside the central relationships but is yet a mainspring of the plot. He is a personage as perceptively drawn as any in the drama. He is the quintessential operatic adolescent. Some commentators have likened him to the young Don Juan, but he is more human. A more pertinent parallel would be with the young Almaviva himself: why should

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that specimen of woman-chasing manhood be reduced to paroxysms of jealous rage and neurotic self-doubt if not because he sees, in Cherubino, the next generation of specialist charmer treading on his heels?

Besides the characters' highly personalized vocal lines, Mozart the dramatist has ample further means of characterization at his command. Prominent among these is the carefully pointed use of orchestral color. The frequent association of the bassoon with the Count's amorous vein is an instance. The special treatment of Mozart's favorite woodwind instruments, the clarinets, is worth noting too. As he was later to do even more emphatically in *Così fan tutte*, he links them in *Figaro* with particular persons and moods. The immediate sense of greater warmth and new depth that they produce at the Countess's first entry is enhanced by the fact that they have been heard little since the overture.

Less subtle, but just as effective in its direct way, is Mozart's unblinking exploitation of the conventional symbolism of the horn, the brutal, age-old code-sign for cuckoldry. And the symbol can work as well by deliberate omission: at the end of the opera, when all the couples are united and bitterness and suspicion have been banished, the wind band makes its last appearance denuded at first of the horns with apparent musical perversity but perfect psychological aptness.

Yet it is outside the sphere of formal musical design, and independently of instrumental support, that the opera *Le nozze di Figaro* and its mercurial hero reveal their hearts most movingly. "O Susanna! Susanna," Figaro laments in his Act IV recitative "Tutto è disposto." It is a harrowing cry put forth all alone in the night, when the true lover thinks he has been played false. Such a moment is the surest proof that the apparent artificiality of this supreme human comedy is merely apparent. And only the profound musical dramatist of Shaw's encomium could in the space of a few minutes have moved without anticlimax from this to the brilliant festivities of the opera's conclusion.

Bernard Jacobson is a freelance music critic and the former program annotator for the Philadelphia Orchestra, where he worked as an adviser to Riccardo Muti for seven years. The original version of this essay was written to accompany Daniel Barenboim's recording of Le nozze di Figaro. The full version of this essay is at www.pov.bc.ca/figaro.html

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Hatching Plots

No doubt, it is the alchemy of Mozart's music that lifts *The Marriage of Figaro* into immortality. But the wordsmiths behind *Figaro* were an intriguing pair, and the story and characters they created have particular delights.

Pierre-Augustin Caron (he added the "de **Beaumarchais**" later to give himself an air of nobility) was a gifted watchmaker – which may explain his knack for juggling the clockwork intricacies of plot in his *Figaro* trilogy. Beaumarchais was also an inventor, harp teacher, composer, financial speculator, and publisher – as well as an international secret agent who shipped guns to American Revolutionaries (there is a detailed report of his exploits on the website of the CIA).

Lorenzo Da Ponte was an equally adventurous soul – a Jewish-born Catholic priest, poet, gambler, and womanizer, who wound up as a New Jersey grocer, a distiller, and a voice in the wilderness promoting Italian opera in America.

Da Ponte took the second play of Beaumarchais' *Figaro* trilogy, defanged it enough to get it by the censors, and gave us the libretto for one of the greatest comic operas of all time.

A bare plot outline of *The Marriage of Figaro* inevitably has a manic house-that-Jack-built flavour: At the Almoviva estate near Seville, the teenaged Cherubino foos around with Barbarina, but worships the Countess, who pines for the Count, who pursues Susanna, who is engaged to Figaro, who has promised to marry Marcellina, who is old enough to be his mother ... and that's only the beginning!

The byzantine story is easier to follow if we know the characters and what has happened before the curtain opens. When *Figaro* premiered in Vienna in 1786, Mozart and Da Ponte would have assumed their audiences knew Beaumarchais' *The Barber of Seville*, which had been a huge success and had inspired a hit opera by Paisiello that played in Vienna in 1783.

Below is a brief primer to introduce the main characters (along with a few of designer Cameron Porteous' sketches for the wigs in POV's production).



In *Barber*, **Count Almaviva** was the fervent young hero, who, with the help of the barber Figaro, married Rosina. Now, three years later, the marriage has gone sideways. Almaviva is a bored serial

philanderer (though furiously jealous of his wife). Always on the prowl for girls, he has turned his eyes to Susanna, Figaro's fiancée.



The **Countess** handles her husband's neglect with dignity and grace (and the occasional fainting spell, eased by a dose of smelling salts). But she's not above plotting with her maid Susanna to teach the Count a

lesson and perhaps win back his love.



Wily and good-humoured, **Figaro**, now the Count's valet, is marrying Susanna today. He's a dab hand at improvising his way out of awkward situations. But although he's

known Almaviva for years, he's clueless about the Count's intentions toward Susanna until she enlightens him.



Susanna is as close to perfect as a girl can be: charming, resourceful, and quick-witted. She sees through Almaviva's plans to give her and Figaro a bedroom that's a little too close for comfort to the quarters of the Count and Countess.



Cherubino is an adorable scamp who has just discovered girls. He has a huge crush on the Countess, but that doesn't stop him from fooling around with Barbarina. He's clearly an Almaviva in training.



Barbarina, the gardener's daughter, is young, pretty, and a bit ditz. She has previously had a fling with the Count – and is quickly discovering the power of her charms.



Dr. Bartolo had, in *Barber*, been Rosina's guardian. He still carries a grudge against Figaro for foiling his attempt to marry Rosina, and so he is in cahoots with Marcellina to force Figaro to marry her.



Marcellina is Dr. Bartolo's spinster housekeeper. Figaro owes her money and has promised to marry her if he defaults. Marcellina would definitely prefer a husband to the money. But then Figaro mentions his birthmark and we learn (gasp!) that Figaro is Marcellina's love child by Dr. Bartolo. Now we're in for a double wedding!

Maureen Woodall

Find a detailed synopsis at
www.pov.bc.ca/figaro.html

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There is nothing quite like that moment of revelation in the theatre when the curtain rises, and you discover a new world ... That world, with its surprising depth and magic, exists specifically to frame a story in space and time, to illuminate characters as they move through those dimensions, to paint words and music with light and colour. It is a world created by designers.

Because POV builds all its productions, we enjoy the luxury of inviting some of Canada's most accomplished design teams to make every opera a revelation. Our production of *The Marriage of Figaro* emerges from the vision of the *crème de la crème* of Canadian designers – Production Designer Cameron Porteous and Lighting Designer Robert Thomson.



Cameron Porteous

Over his more than 40-year career, **Cameron Porteous** has had a major influence on the development of the art of theatre design in Canada.

Born in Saskatchewan, he trained in Vancouver and then at the Wimbledon College of Art in London, England, before returning to Canada.

He was Head of Design at the Vancouver Playhouse from 1972 to 1981 and at the Shaw Festival from 1980 to 1997.

He has designed for opera, theatre, and film and taught design at the University of British Columbia, the Banff School of Fine Arts and Ryerson University Theatre School. His designs have been exhibited at the Prague Quadrennial, in St. Petersburg, Russia, and in a touring 40-year retrospective called *Risking the Void – the Work of Cameron Porteous*.

Noted director Christopher Newton, who is former artistic director of the Shaw Festival and the Vancouver Playhouse, worked closely with Cameron for over three decades and said of his frequent collaborator, *Cameron can make theatrical moments that connect viscerally with an audience, unexplainable images that are both true and relevant, and windows into other worlds that parallel our own.*

Cameron was one of the first designers in Canada to refer to his work as scenography, denoting a holistic approach to theatre in which design takes its place as an equal partner with all other theatrical elements – text, music, and performance.

In the words of British scenographer Pamela Howard, *The scenographer visually liberates the text and the story behind it by creating a world in which the eyes see what the ears do not hear.*

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She adds, *Scenography is always incomplete until the performer steps into the playing space and engages the audience.*

Canadian designer Patricia Flood says, *A scenographer is, in fact, a visual director. Their work ... not only complements a director's interpretation, but also clarifies the playwright's text through the languages of colour, light, proportion and dimension...*

Rather than existing only as a backdrop to the action or a technical solution to problems of movement or visual interpretation, scenography is a direct visual response to the many real and metaphoric levels of the play text.

Joining Cameron Porteous in the creation of a visual world for *The Marriage of Figaro* is Robert Thomson, one of Canada's most acclaimed lighting designers for theatre, opera, and dance.

Robert was the lighting designer for POV's productions of *Nabucco* (2001), *Wozzeck* (2003), *Manon Lescaut* (2006), and *Idomeneo* (2007).

Cameron and Robert have worked together many times, for Robert has designed more than 55 productions for the Shaw Festival over 24 seasons and was Head of Lighting Design for 10 years. He also spent 12 seasons as Resident Lighting Designer of the National Ballet of Canada and 12 more designing for the Stratford Festival.

Robert Thomson has painted with light for theatres across Canada and internationally, including Lincoln Center Theater, the Metropolitan Opera, Goodman Theatre, Hartford Stage, Seattle Opera, and Stuttgart Ballet. He won a Sterling Award for Robert Lepage's *Bluebeard's Castle/Erwartung*, and four Dora Mavor Moore Awards.

Robert is also the 2012 recipient of the prestigious Siminovitch Prize in Theatre,

which honours professional directors, playwrights and designers and the marriage between the arts and the sciences.

On accepting the Siminovitch Award, he spoke about the challenge and beauty of designing with light:

The challenge of talking about lighting design— to paraphrase Martin Mull — is that "talking about lighting is like dancing about architecture". My medium – light – is ... elusive, difficult to document, and virtually impossible to articulate... It expresses time, exaggerates time, and, like the characters who people the stage, is intrinsically performative. Alive.

And the beauty of lighting design is its capacity – like sound design – to have an emotional impact ...

My approach, as much as possible, is to have no approach at all ... seeking all my inspiration from the text or score, the rehearsal hall, and the collective journey of my fellow artists...

Talking about lighting is like dancing about architecture ... And the beauty of lighting design is its capacity ... to have an emotional impact.

Understanding an opera – grasping the intention of the composer, the possibilities of the text – means returning to the source – the conductor to the score, the director to the music and the words. The designers and performers too, in Robert's words, are *discovering, with the director, the world of the play, and what we're trying to say with it. This is the allure and great joy of the work that we do: with each new project, the opportunity to immerse ourselves in a new ocean of experience.*

In an interview with the *Toronto Star* he added: *One of the most important things we can do is create a vista that contains the emotional suggestion of something and then let the actors do their job. You do have to get out of the way a little bit ... And don't be afraid of the dark.*



Robert Thomson

Maureen Woodall

Events Calendar

COMMUNITY EVENTS

INSIDE OPERA at the Union Club

Friday, April 11, 11:45 am

805 Gordon Street

\$24 per person includes a sandwich lunch.

Enjoy lunch in elegant surroundings while Robert Holliston presents a special INSIDE Opera on Mozart's enchanting, melodic masterpiece, *The Marriage of Figaro*.

Please call 250-382-1641 to reserve with payment.

Dress code: Business Dress.

INSIDE OPERA with Robert Holliston

Sunday, April 13

Two sessions: 10 am and noon

Phillip T. Young Recital Hall

University of Victoria

Robert Holliston and guests present a guided tour of *The Marriage of Figaro*. Bring your friends. It's all free, including the parking. Please reserve before noon April 11, specifying which session you plan to attend. Space is limited.

250-382-1641 or rsvp@pov.bc.ca.

Sense of Occasion

Thursday, April 24, 6:30 pm

East Lobby, Royal Theatre

Pre-performance reception to celebrate the opening night of *The Marriage of Figaro*. Gourmet finger foods and wine. Space is limited. Dress is festive. \$25 per person. Reserve with payment: 250-382-1641.

Raising Voices Master Classes

Wingate Studio, 925 Balmoral Road

Raising Voices, our program for youth engagement and artist training, offers an array of activities for young artists.

We are thrilled to invite the community to selected Raising Voices events to observe young artists learning their art. All are welcome to observe the following master classes, as distinguished guest artists work with POV Choristers and Victoria voice students.

Robert Holliston is host and accompanist.

Free. RSVP to 250-382-1641 or rsvp@pov.bc.ca.

Thursday, April 10, 7 pm

Soprano Leslie Ann Bradley (the Countess Almaviva in *The Marriage of Figaro*)

Monday, April 28, 7 pm

Bass Baritone Thomas Goerz (Dr. Bartolo in *The Marriage of Figaro*)

DONOR RECOGNITION EVENT

Design Insights

with Cameron Porteous & Robert Thomson

Sunday, April 20, 2 pm

Wingate Studio, 925 Balmoral Road

Two acclaimed Canadian designers talk about *The Marriage of Figaro* and share their insights on designing for theatre, opera, and dance. This is a **Raising Voices Workshop** for students of voice and practising artists.

We are pleased to invite our **President's Circle and Impresario Circle** donors to this special presentation.

Invitations have been sent by mail.

RSVP by April 16 to 250-382-1641 or rsvp@pov.bc.ca



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www.pov.bc.ca/fundraiser-affle.html

THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO

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Matinée: May 4, at 2:30 pm

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EDITOR MAUREEN WOODALL

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