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Paving the Way to Equality: Voice Part and Gender in the Operas of Mozart

Devon Borowski

Over the years since its inception in 1600, the genre of opera has seen the rise and fall of empires, changing social morés, and the evolution of musical styles. It seems that while the patrons of opera were finding their seats, everyone else was outside, either admiring or scoffing at them. Indeed, the world continues to change while the curious art form of opera has grown socially irrelevant and disconnected. Yet, search the major playhouses of the world and you will be hard-pressed to find something on stage from the eighteenth century, especially something filling seats. Major opera houses, on the other hand, would face uproar if even one perennial favorite from the eighteenth century were taken off the roster. The real genius of opera composers is their use of every aspect at their disposal, both musical and dramatic, to communicate ideas and emotions to their audience. The artful deployment of voice parts is one means of achieving these ends. The various voice parts lend themselves to harmonic and sonorous variety, but more importantly, dramaturgically speaking, they serve as means of characterization. In the first century of opera's existence, the voice parts came to be associated with specific dramatic roles, and these changed over time, reflecting changes in society.

Acknowledged differences among voice types, where training is concerned, stretch back to at least the seventeenth century and for the most part have stayed the same. The 19th century Italian pedagogue Francesco Lamperti recognized the specific needs of the soprano voice (Baker, Slonimsky 338). In opera, the assignment of voice part to character may be used as a societal barometer of the day. While the dramatic purpose of each voice part has changed over time, the most intense developments have taken place in the mezzo-soprano and baritone roles.

The attitude toward the high voices, soprano and tenor, has traditionally been that the higher the voice, the closer to God. These two are models of virtue sent on a quest from heaven, destined to end tragically and be rewarded in the afterlife. They are the

perfect embodiment of courtly love, led by an intense sexual desire manifested musically in climactic cadenzas, a desire seldom consummated. This can be seen, for example, in the relationship between the title characters in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. While the argument could be made that society today has outgrown such archaic and stereotypical views on sexuality, effectively outdating these characters, it would be rather naïve to think that a royal bastard or a corporate affair would not cause controversy and considerable media coverage, even today. The Judeo-Christian worldview may be dismissed in post-modern thought, but still has quite the hold on Western society and therefore what is portrayed on the opera stage remains relevant. These voices often embody qualities of innocence, even naiveté, in the face of danger, often trusting those that they should perhaps not. In Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*, for example, the tenor, Nemorino, trusts a traveling salesman to sell him a love potion.

If high voices are celestial, it follows that low voices must be terrestrial. Least often featured in opera, the contralto and bass voices are as rare as the wisdom that they so often symbolize. And yet, their arias are often the most coveted. At times, they may reveal the crux of the plot, as in Verdi's *Il Trovatore*, when Azucena describes her son's fraternal connection to the Count he wishes to fight in a duel in her aria "Stride la vampa." At other times, they signify the defeat of evil, as in Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*, when Sarastro sings "O Isis und Osiris," a prayer to help the warriors win their impending battle. They are usually the oldest characters in the story, their ages ranging from old to antique and, occasionally, to primordial. In Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, for example, Erda is the goddess of wisdom and the earth. She is so old and in tune with the earth, that she exists only as a torso jutting out of the ground. These characters are as ancient as the world itself and possess the wisdom of the ages, wisdom they have earned through having survived tragedies and trials. Sometimes they seek out a tyrant and sometimes they themselves are sought out for counsel by brave heroes, as seen with the character Gurnemanz in Wagner's *Parsifal*. In this sense, they act as equals and opposites to the high voiced characters, both after the same ends but with very different jobs to achieve them.

It may seem odd that these wise characters may be found in the lowest register of the human voice. Depths are, after all, associated with the underworld, playground to the

demons so feared in the Western world-view. To fully understand, the Judeo-Christian view must be seen through a purely historical lens. The proliferation of Catholicism, of monotheism itself, depended upon gaining followers from polytheistic cultures, which ultimately meant allowing pagan imagery and thought into the sphere of Catholicism (Halliday 318). For those people, were they Greco-Roman, Arabic, or pre-Colombian, a considerable focus was placed on the earth, as a wise maternal figure, and the underworld was viewed not as a torturous place but as destination of mortal souls after death. Certainly it is no accident that their deep voices are connected with the literal depth of the earth. Whether composers were aware or not, there seem to be strong pagan influences hidden within their deeply Catholic art form.

The medium voices, the mezzo-soprano and baritone, remain. Unlike the extremes of heaven and the earth, the roles assigned to these voice parts have changed over time. A look at the characters from various operas will show different directions, new patterns of thought emerging. These characters often serve as the volatile force that fuels the actions of the plot. The baritone voice may represent a character who is the conniving helper, as in Donizetti's *Don Pasquale*, the anti-hero, like in Menotti's *The Old Maid and the Thief*, the lover, or even the fighter, responsible for goosing the story forward. The mezzo-soprano voice may characterize a complex heroine, such as the title role in Bizet's *Carmen*, a temptress, like the lead in Saint-Saëns' *Sampson and Delilah*, or a jilted lover. These medium voice parts provide the human element in the opera. It then seems natural, that they have become the most common voice type. The boundaries of heaven and earth have already been established and the domain between them needs to be populated, after all, and ordinary people, caught up in ordinary human dilemmas, make the most relatable population. In many respects the mid-range is the perfect location for these characters.

Not too high or too low, not in touch with the divine in either way, nor on a mission from God, they are not out to help anyone but themselves. This is not to say they are evil, but they put their own interests before those of other people. Even characters that are traditionally seen as wicked, such as Iago in Verdi's *Otello*, upon closer dramatic examination, are interested in harming others only as a way to fulfill their own desires. It is a perceived slight that causes Iago to fly into a rage and plot revenge, and though he

chooses to be vengeful, the cause is far more important to him than the effect. These characters tread the fine line between good and evil that ordinary people walk each day. Their allegiance is not to a malevolent organization, nor even a benevolent one. They fight for themselves or those that they love, be it their family, as is the case of Germont in Verdi's *La Traviata*, or the people of a nation, like Le Comte de Saint-Bris, fighting for the Catholics in *Les Huguenots*. While the characters change from story to story, they all fundamentally have the same interests in mind, driven by their own desire for fame, liberty, sex, or wealth. Their self-interest often makes them the most interesting characters, who act as the dramatic catalyst for a story.

The roles for the medium voice, then, are typically the most malleable and have no set archetype, instead affording the composer a range of possibilities. Consequently these characters often reflect the spirit of the opera most intensely. What is commonly known as the *tinta*, or atmosphere of the opera is not only set by musical style, thematic material, orchestration and the like, but by the personality of the medium-voiced characters. As the most fundamentally human characters, they closely reflect the society of the day, its *morés* and politics.

Though the various voice parts have long existed in human history, their first dramatic codification appears in the *Commedia dell'arte* tradition, beginning in mid–sixteenth-century Italy. The six main character types, improvising on a few fundamental story lines, form the basis of the theatrical tradition to come. The six main characters, each wearing a specific mask, serve three basic roles: the servant, the master, and the lover, one of each gender. Over time, these stories were written down for reuse, and the characters expanded upon. The master developed into the miserly bass merchant, as in Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona*, and the wise contralto, into the matriarch. The lovers became the amorous tenor and soprano couple, as in Donizetti's *Don Pasquale*. The servants grew into the mischievous baritone butler and the coquettish mezzo-soprano maid. Societal changes affected the details of their personalities and predicaments, but their basic dispositions have remained unchanged over the years.

Much has been written about “the musical shot-heard-around-the-world,” the premiere of Jacopo Peri's *Dafne*, in 1597, which gave birth to opera as an art form. More enduring though, is the work that cemented opera as a legitimate genre, Claudio

Monteverdi's seminal work of 1607, *L'Orfeo* (Kelly 4). Given the relatively limited resources at the composer's disposal, there is no question he achieved a great deal in a single piece. For our purposes, however, the most important aspect of the work is what is *not* there: the medium voice is completely absent, also in his subsequent works. As the genre of opera evolved, high voices, especially *castrati*, were favored. Vocal spectacle was more important than realism in the portrayal of character, and the complex lines of instrumental compositions were transferred to the voice. The suspension of disbelief required of opera audiences during the Baroque era may seem ridiculous today, but as the general public grew interested in the genre, tastes began to change, and the music evolved to meet the new audience's expectations.

Baroque *Opera Seria* depended on certain strict conventions. George Frederick Handel composed over forty operas with rather rigid rules governing style, aria type, and of course, voice part (Burrows 121). The tenor and soprano voices were considered the height of operatic majesty, and the focus of the works as a whole. The strict gender conventions of the time were, perhaps counter intuitively, reinforced by these voice parts. Characters representing the height of Baroque masculine and feminine ideals, such as Cleopatra and Caesar in *Giulio Cesare*, sing in the same octave. This gender confusion was further muddled by classical plots extolling traditional masculine and feminine traits—for example, aggression and subservience, respectively—as virtues (Bokina 47). Themes of duty and honor trumping individual desire served to ensure the continuation of the aristocracy, as their very existence was intrinsically tied to these and other traditional values.

By the mid-eighteenth century, the extreme passions of the Baroque era were no longer in vogue. Instead, cool wit combined with understated elegance prevailed over the art and society of the time. Enlightenment ideals were sweeping through Europe, and reason governed science, literature, and even music. The catchwords of the day were liberty, fraternity, and, with the rise of the new middle-class, equality. No more perfect embodiment of these ideals in music can be found than in the operas of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. One of the pioneers of the medium voice, Mozart cast some of his most beloved characters as baritones. And yet, while Mozart pushed musical equality for men, he withheld this same right for women. In his operas, there are few mezzo-soprano

characters in the same context as the baritones, a lack of vocal equity afforded to the female characters. While Mozart's male characters are free to sing in a high, low, or medium voice, the women are by and large only given the high option. This reflects the newly burgeoning middle class society of the day, which afforded more opportunities for men, but still few for women.

Mozart wrote four great baritone roles at the zenith of his career, in the three Da Ponte operas and his last *Singspiel* with Emmanuel Schikaneder. The first of these, *Le nozze di Figaro*, contains a wide cast of characters encompassing the various *commedia dell'arte* types. This opera is more concerned with domestic affairs than those of the state. Here, Mozart takes the roles of servant, master, and lover, and blends and flips the traditional hierarchy of characters inherited from the Baroque period, but with disposition acting as a constant. The servant now becomes a gallant lover as well, and the blundering master is infused with a good deal more cunning. This means that not only may the lover outwit an authority figure, but a servant may directly defy and undermine his own master. Given the domestic focus of the work, there is considerably more room for a variety of characters and situations with these innovations in mind.

The most significant exception to Mozart's neglect of the mezzo-soprano voice is the bristles role of Cherubino, in *Le Nozze di Figaro*. This character, though starkly different than Count Almaviva, his fellow medium-voiced character, still has much in common with his master. Cherubino is a young servant, a dandy, and most importantly, he's naïve about the world. It must be noted that Mozart is highlighting Cherubino's effeminacy by using a female voice (Brett, Wood, and Thomas 41). This is in no way a ploy for female vocal equality, but just an old trick of *Opera buffa*, employed for the sake of characterization. What is clear through his text is that Cherubino is as interested in the opposite sex as his master. Once again, their commonality on the surface seems trivial, but the human desire for sex, a self-centered pursuit, gives them a realistic quality. While the Count is viewed as the villain for this reason, Cherubino is excused as a hormonal teenager, something with which audiences have long been familiar. This also accounts for his being a mezzo-soprano, and not a high voice. He is far more strongly identified with the overactive hormones of his age than with its innocence.

The other mezzo-soprano role in *Le Nozze di Figaro* is that of Marcellina, the old maid looking for a husband in Figaro. Like her fellow medium-voice counterparts, she too is looking out for her own carnal needs through any means possible, even if it involves taking legal action. While the quest of an old woman seeking companionship may look purer on paper, her attempt at coercion through invoking the contract, as well as her heated argument with Susanna, shows her fierce determination to gain Figaro at all costs, with no evidence of real feeling for him. It is reasonable to assume that Marcellina is, like Cherubino and the Count, looking to fill an immediate physical need rather than seeking a lifelong partner. She too, as both older and female, is reviled for not knowing better, and for flaunting her sexual appetite in ways unbecoming of a lady. It seems, once again, that Mozart's democratic ideals stopped at women; sexual freedom is reserved for the male character.

By contrast, the other characters involved in the opera's romantic shenanigans are focused on marriage, on the union more than the physical act. Like Cherubino, Figaro also takes on a new role for his voice type, as a bass playing the lover, a role traditionally seen as the tenor's purview. Immediately, it is clear that this is not a typical love story. With the couple already betrothed and nothing to vanquish, it takes less divine inspiration and more cunning to unravel the plot. A clever man, Figaro is able to outwit the Count with knowledge of human nature that he presumably gained from generations before him. In his cavatina, "Se Vuol ballare," he demonstrates his deep understanding of the various classes by appropriating their dance structures, employing formal elements of both upper and lower classes dances, as well as a dotted rhythm (Hunter 257). With all of this knowledge, he sounds a lot like a deific personage, much like Sarastro, but thrust into a different situation. He, too, wishes to make everyone happy; while looking to marry his betrothed, Figaro watches out for Cherubino and the Countess, and eventually, ensures the betterment of the whole estate.

Among those under Figaro's protective watch is Susanna, his betrothed, who is firmly set in the realm of the lyric soprano. For the female love interest, this range is not surprising, but her situation is more complex than just a girl in love. Though the Count attempts to take advantage of her, she is not the weak-willed and loose-moraled servant, but a powerful woman able to take care of herself. She not only fends off the Count's

attacks, but also keeps Figaro calm, while simultaneously acting as confidante to the broken-hearted countess. Despite having to balance these various actions, she remains calm, her musical lines steady and *legato*, not frantic and excited like many others' throughout the opera. Yet, as a high soprano her power to effect change is limited; she is unable to completely take charge and get things done herself, like a mezzo-soprano would.

As befits her noble station, the Countess Almaviva is a high voice part, though, like Susanna, she too, is far wiser than her type might suggest. Her wisdom comes from harsh experience with her husband, but her soaring lines characterize her ability to transcend her hard lot in life. Of all the characters, she is the most closely linked with the divine, through the cool acceptance of her fate and her generous bestowal of forgiveness in the finale. She is not unlike a biblical hero being tested, and while enduring a cruel life with her husband, she never ceases to take care of those around her. Cherubino not only identifies her as his godmother, but also worships her and the divine trials she puts him through in song. At the end, her simple, floating melody doles out heavenly mercy, while reminding her husband, of course, that she is far nobler than he.

While Mozart did not create these archetypes, he did develop them, especially the male roles. By giving the bass the role of the lover, and allowing the servant to outwit his master, he demonstrated that the old order was on its way out. Unfortunately, the women's roles were not developed to the same degree. The mezzo-sopranos are either the wrong sex, in the case of Cherubino, or virtually sexless, as in the case of the aging Marcellina. Susanna, a strong, proto-feminist character, is consigned to the high soprano range, her stereotype as a beautiful lover trumping her potential for change.

The Opera seria/buffa hybrid, *Don Giovanni*, extends the dramatic range of the male voice parts, even as it, once again, denies such developments to women. At the heart of the story is the titular Don Juan character, a powerful noble with an insatiable lust for women. With this opera, Mozart demonstrated that a medium voice—for Don Giovanni is a baritone—could successfully lead the story of an opera, without audiences feeling they had missed out on a tenor. As in his other works, this vocal freedom is not extended to the female characters, a state that is intrinsically linked to the prevailing

social inequality of the day. Of course, it also comes as no surprise in a story about one of history's most famous rapist (Waldoff 165).

This opera is about how ultimate power corrupts absolutely. The audience is offered no insight into why the Don does what he does; only that he always has and always will be a sociopath. There is no credible defense offered for him in the story, and even his own servant condemns him mercilessly. He does not even attempt to defend himself and, given his social station, feels no need to. At first, this seems surprising, given the meticulous characterization that Mozart usually provides. The simple answer to this is that Mozart did not want the Don to be a sympathetic character in the opera. This however would be a departure from his other characters, as one of Mozart's strengths as an opera composer is his understanding of human nature. It seems that even the anti-hero deserves some pity, especially from a composer personally familiar with sexual promiscuity (Stafford 126).

The scene in the graveyard is the key to understanding the character of Don Giovanni. There we see his uncontrollable downward spiral to his disastrous fate. In the end, he is an addict that everyone is constantly enabling. The Don cannot possibly see where his choices are taking him, and is incapable of censoring himself. In this, he shows his complete disrespect for the newly arising social order. His adversary, the *Commendatore* has a militaristic position that must have been earned through hard work and education. Giovanni is willing to take on the *Commendatore* who, though perhaps a lesser noble, is certainly more deserving of respect than he. Don Giovanni's lack of respect demonstrates that he takes the old order of birthright for granted, and doesn't understand the newly changing social order. Mozart characterizes the *Commendatore* as the wiser and more respected of the two by giving him a bass role. The Don disregards the traditional connotations of this voice part in favor of his birthright, the source of the power that ultimately corrupts him (Bokina 42).

Don Giovanni's inability to see and unwillingness to accept the social changes afoot leads him to his horrible fate. He is punished not only for this, but for his crimes against gentile society. Not only is he a rapist, but the very embodiment of sexual chaos. His target is women, with no more specific delineation beyond that aim, and his voice part reflects his lack of preference regarding social class. As a baritone, he is able to sing

in the upper or lower echelons of the voice, taking on whatever timbre and character is needed to seduce the woman of the moment. With his vocal flexibility, he is an “equal opportunity” seducer, attracting women in a way that no bass or tenor could. He does not stratify women based upon their appearance like other men, because he is open to any kind of female. What he lacks in an understanding of political equality, he makes up for in his total lack of discrimination regarding his female prey.

The women of the opera, already dehumanized by the Don, are likewise stripped of their gender equality through their voice parts. Each of the three principal women is, once again, restricted to the soprano range, though there are sharp differences among the three characters. In this way, the voice distribution takes its cue from *Opera seria*, rather than *Opera buffa*, where women are given more range, albeit within the domestic sphere. Through the three characters, the audience is introduced to three classes (a peasant girl, and two noblewomen of seemingly different rank) and three different types of victims (one who must be forced, one who is mildly coerced, and one who gladly succumbs). As high sopranos, their vocal homogeneity reminds us that, to the Don and the society in which they live, these women are all the same, despite their individual differences.

Dramatically, each woman is stereotyped differently, based on her own experience. The Don views Zerlina, the poor peasant girl, as an easy target, and assumes her to be sexually free because of her confidence and lower class. On the bottom rung of the social ladder, she must take charge of her own life and, even once wed, will have to manage a household. Her self-assurance is viewed as tantamount to sexual promiscuity, especially in a world where women are taught to be silent onlookers. In her aria, “Batti, batti, o bel Masetto,” the audience gets to see her ability to take charge of a situation. In this aria, she begs her new husband to beat her for her crimes against him. Not actually wanting or expecting to be beaten, she is simply using an alternative tactic to gain his forgiveness (Smart 62). She does not intend to supplicate herself before him as punishment, but is in fact using her body, the mere idea of touching her, as a way to arouse him until he can no longer remain upset with her. By the standards of the eighteenth century, such a capable woman is still not deserving of praise. Though Don Giovanni is the anti-hero of the story, he is not a villain on account of his sexuality, but

only because of sexuality expressed to excess. Zerlina is not afforded the same leniency or vocal equality, even though she is merely using sexuality as a means to an end.

Donna Anna, the victim the audience meets first, is immediately perceived as weak. For the entire opera, in fact, men surround her, offering to help, which only seems to take away from her own abilities in equal measure. She is viewed as a “victim” incapable of helping herself, someone who has been permanently damaged. As a soprano, she looks to her tenor fiancé, Don Ottavio, for support, and cannot function independently, like a mezzo-soprano would. Donna Elvira comes off as even more pathetic, following Don Giovanni around like a puppy dog. A clear victim of the Stockholm Syndrome, she cannot help loving him despite his crimes against her, and is repeatedly willing to take him back. She is easily fooled by the Don’s empty promises, but once again, as a soprano, does not possess the strength of will to go her own way. As a high soprano, more concerned with romantic love than anything else, she is the ultimate victim.

While Don Giovanni is ruled by his animalistic passions, we see his foil in Don Ottavio, Donna Anna’s fiancé and protector. Anna is flanked on the one side by him and on the other by her father the *Commendatore*, both men, at either end of the vocal spectrum, willing to give their lives for her. At the low end, her father, the bass, represents the wisdom acquired over the long and illustrious career that earned him his title. At the high end, the tenor Don Ottavio, is primarily concerned with his fiancée’s welfare and their romantic love. Though of noble birth, his high tessitura is less indicative of his station than of his polished attitude, even in revenge. And though the text of his “Il mio Tesoro” speaks of protecting his beloved, his delicate *fiortura* suggests less an action-oriented soldier than a high-minded dandy. While Don Giovanni easily gives in to his lustful nature, Don Ottavio carefully composes himself in preparation for his complicated and clearly doomed stratagem.

Meanwhile, Don Giovanni has perfected his manipulation of the outside world through his servant, the bass, Leporello. The most useful tool for Don Giovanni, in fact, is that his home key of D-minor is the relative minor of, and therefore related to, Leporello’s home key of F major. This related-key device, that allows the pair to change places smoothly and escape detection, reveals more than just cowardice. The fact that

Leporello is a bass role serves two purposes. First, as a smart servant, he has grown wise through protecting his master. In the same way that a personal assistant will know tricks of the trade better than their employer, Leporello knows Don Giovanni better than he knows himself, and is weary of his selfish schemes. This is relayed to the audience at the beginning of the opera in his “Notte e giorno faticar.” In fact, when he starts to sing, he is almost too tired to move out of a two-note motif, and is only motivated to begin a more legato phrase by his increasing frustration with his master. The other purpose is when Don Giovanni wishes to switch roles with him for his own safety. Not only does the crowd get a different target to chase, but one who is earthier and more grounded, wiser, in his deep, bass voice. Whether this distracts, intimidates or placates them, it serves Leporello well, so that he manages to escape each time he is hotly pursued.

In *Don Giovanni*, the victimization of the three women is mirrored in their vocal range, the soprano register a musical parallel to their dramatic oppression. Though they react differently to their seductions, none of them are given the vocal freedom afforded the men of the opera. The title character is perhaps the ultimate representation of the baritone as a self-serving figure, going so far as to derive pleasure from controlling others through rape. At the same time, he demonstrates a political system in decline, challenging the *Commendatore*, the representation of the new political order within the story. Here, dark themes serve as a backdrop to a struggle for equal rights, a struggle that once again excludes women.

The least known, and last, of the Da Ponte operas, the perennially charming *Così fan tutte*, involves one of Mozart’s most fascinating vocal schemes. Of course the themes of fiancé swapping and the inevitable disloyalty of women are problematic in a modern context, but audiences of the twenty-first century are naturally more inclined to see these as problems than the original spectators (Waldoff 189). Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the opera’s partner-swapping motif was considered too salacious for the stage, and was not performed often, but today, it is an issue that we must confront. What was originally intended as a harmless farce actually reveals much useful information about the opinions on women in society at that time.

The opera’s characters naturally divide into three pairs; the soldiers, the fiancés, and the troublemakers: Guglielmo and Ferrando, the baritone and tenor duo, Dorabella

and Fiordiligi, their soprano and mezzo-soprano lovers, and Don Alfonso and Despina, the bass and soprano facilitators of mischief. The façade created by these troublemakers also serves to divide the six into two groups: the three men versus the three women, creating a war between the sexes, a common *Opera buffa* theme. Given this division, it might seem as though the distinction between tenor and baritone, as well as soprano and mezzo-soprano is superficial and inconsequential, but closer examination reveals important differences.

Though initially the two soldiers may appear to be a package deal, it should come as no surprise that Mozart created a unique personality for each of them, best exhibited in their arias. After the initial introduction of the Albanian gentlemen, it is Guglielmo who cannot help but push the envelope to gain the women's affections. Though he is on the end of the bet that stands to lose should the women succumb, as the baritone he has other motivations.

The gender-centric themes of the opera were common for the time, and still are, as they broach, but do not explicitly mention, the topic of sex. In the cosmopolitan cities of the day, sex was just as much of a universal preoccupation as it is today, especially in a society where an entire class of people had no profession nor need of a day job. Guglielmo, as high society's representative, is much more interested in broaching the subject of sex for his own amusement than concerned with winning a bet. In his aria following their introductions, "Non siate ritrosi," he points out to the women very specifically what they have to physically offer. He is more than happy to see them blush at his descriptions. With his words, he is planting the first seeds of infidelity in the women's heads.

When the women finally acquiesce, it is first Dorabella that falls for Guglielmo. Naturally, he is overjoyed, even though it means that they are losing the bet. Not only is his sexual prowess rewarded, the prize is his best friend's fiancée. He has the admiration of his target, but has also outdone his friend. Furthermore, his betrothed, to this point, has remained faithful to him, and after initial sympathy, he cannot help but revel. While the audience may feel sorry for Ferrando, it is the mixture of *Schadenfreude* and intrigue that Guglielmo displays that the audience most identifies with.

In a society with as large a noble class as Vienna's at the time of the opera's premiere, the somewhat dubious preoccupation with courtly intrigue was to be expected. It is natural then, to have the baritone provoking such mischief. When Fiordiligi eventually succumbs to Ferrando's repeated attempts, instead of expressing anger, Guglielmo is genuinely agitated, as if he cannot understand the infidelity committed against him. The vain blindness he exhibits demonstrates his human fallibility once more—a state in which, again, the audience can see themselves.

The tenor comrade, Ferrando, has a much different outlook on the situation. His fiery reaction to his fiancée's infidelity is indicative of a much purer nature. Though he entered into the bargain with Guglielmo, when he sees firsthand how losing the bet looks, his constitution is revealed to be much different than that of the other men. Not only does he lack the stomach to watch his betrothed be unfaithful, he is enraged that his own picture has been given to Guglielmo (enclosed within the heart locket). It is the lack of honor in the situation that triggers his anger, and Guglielmo's gloating that causes him to then press on and succeed in seducing Fiordiligi, something he would surely have preferred not to do. Not only can we see Ferrando's unease with the scandalous situation, but also Guglielmo again acting as a catalyst, causing Ferrando to try his seduction once more after being teased so much.

Though Guglielmo continues to push his luck, ultimately Don Alfonso, the wise philosopher, is to blame for the whole situation. As the bass, he is presented as the wisest character of all, as well as years older than the rest of the characters. In fact, it is he who understands the ways of women down to their movements, and can impart that knowledge to the two young soldiers. Not only does he know that the women will falter, but he can play on the actions of each character, anticipating that the men will act as they do.

The women in this opera, though perhaps less physically harmed than in the others, suffer by far the most direct plight. The famous line and title, *Così fan tutte*, translates literally as "so do they all," directly referring to the infidelity and heartlessness of women. Don Alfonso, already shown as the wise man, knows for a fact that this is the way of all women, and he is proven correct. The soldiers feel no guilt about entrapping their fiancées, and then consider themselves magnanimous to forgive such dishonest and

undeserving women. It is not surprising then, that all three women have the tessitura of sopranos, restricted to the high range, when women of the day were viewed as more alike than different (Brown-Montesano 218).

When it comes to Despina, however, there are a number of significant distinctions. What is important to remember is that she is not in fact, paired with the other two women over the course of the opera, but with Don Alfonso, the bass. The first difference is that she is a maid and as a low-class woman, by definition is assumed to have loose morals. More significantly though, she goes along with the joke being played not only on two fellow females, but her own employers, no less. She is not just participating in this culture of female shame, but is helping to lead it. As a result she is “one of the boys” and has a certain level of status that goes with that. Not surprisingly then, Despina has the lowest tessitura of all three women. Given her soprano voice part, this means she’s torn between two loyalties. She wishes to be loyal to her mistresses, but the other option earns her more favor and attention from the men than she would normally get. Despina, though just a maid, has her own set of advice for her ladies with which, ultimately, she genuinely wants to help them. Her association with Don Alfonso, and their role in the mischief, brings her tessitura down, though she fundamentally remains a soprano (Ford 170). Her relatively low tessitura also serves to reinforce her role as a notary when she must trick the couples into signing a mock marriage contract.

All of these musical personalities work together, in conjunction and opposition, in the Act I Sextet, “Alla bella Despinetta.” Here we hear the three groups of two divided into polyphonic duets in the case of the soldiers and fiancés, and in the case of Don Alfonso and Despina, their own roguish line. For the duration of the number, Guglielmo and Ferrando sing homophonically together, usually in thirds. They are working in complete conjunction, and have gone so far as to plan out their entire speech. The homophonic texture is primarily true for Fiordiligi and Dorabella as well, though at times they break off from one another and toss the line between them. At that point, the two women go from being on the same page to speaking for one another entirely, completely trusting in the other’s judgment.

Don Alfonso has little to do on his own but introduce the two gentlemen. After that, he leaves them to their own devices, but what lines he does have afterwards are all

directed towards Despina, either instructing her or laughing with her. Despina's first homophonic line is with the soldiers in the three-part hymn-like section, in which they beg the women for forgiveness. The beauty of this section is Mozart's ability to work out how the thoughts of each character intersect at any given moment. Though Despina has been reprimanded for allowing strange men into the house, she has the same musical sentiment as the men who are trying to get into the women's good graces.

Eventually, everyone sings simultaneously, and after a long polyphonic section, they all end in agreement, singing only two different sets of words between them. While the ladies say that "*Innocente è questo cor,*" that their hearts are pure, the rest speak of "*Quella rabbia e quel furor,*" the impending anger and furor to come. Though they say different words, everyone agrees musically, singing in unison until the very last authentic cadence. While they have different takes on the situation, they all understand the situation through the same sharply chromatic phrase.

In *Così fan tutte*, women fare even less well than in the other two Da Ponte operas, if that is possible. Not only are Fiordligi and Dorabella seen as a single entity to be manipulated, but their mutual disloyalty is assured from the very beginning. This lack of fidelity is then encouraged by the rest of the characters, most of whom are in the position to care for their well-being, but don't. Despina, the character given the greatest vocal equality of the three women, through her relatively low tessitura, is already seen in a more masculine light because of her lowly station in life. As a mere maid, she cannot afford the feminine languor the other two women enjoy. What appears to be equality, then, is actually a punishment for her lack of femininity. Despina is, ultimately, a recipient of the same inverted equality that Don Giovanni offers his victims.

As far as equality for the sexes, Mozart's penultimate opera, *Die Zauberflöte*, goes one step further in each direction. While the baritone is afforded vocal equality, and the least outwardly selfish character, the highest soprano is actually condemned for having any power of her own. The work is not unlike a fairy tale with its archetypal characters and underlying moral structure. Papageno the happy bird-catcher, cares not for affairs of state, nor would he be much good at them if he were to. Nonetheless, he is given musical equality, that is, music to sing within the baritone range, sitting in his own tessitura. He is not expected to sing the highs of the tenor or the lows of the bass, but is

recognized as deserving his own legitimate voice part. His simple, *buffa* style arias supply the audience with tunes that they can hum long after the performance has finished.

Right away he is relatable, not being held to the extremes of the other characters, but out for simple happiness through his own song. More than just the comic relief that he provides so well, Papageno represents everyone that Sarastro is fighting for, the citizen that has long been oppressed by the powers that be. This oppressive power manifests itself in the character of the Queen of the Night, whose vocally taxing, stratospheric coloratura demonstrates her unquestionable power over the citizens of her territory. Just as she struggles and completes complicated musical lines, so must they struggle and complete her tasks for her. The complicated structure of her aria “Die Hölle Rache” demonstrates her immense intellectual capacity, which, for a woman at the time, immediately made her dangerous. The high religious and behavioral standard that she expects her subjects to meet is equivalent to the high tessitura that she must maintain.

Though Mozart gave Papageno his own tessitura, only Tamino can truly free him from the Queen’s rule. It is the medium voice that truly wins alongside Tamino and Sarastro. Papageno is no longer subjugated as a direct employee of the ruling class; he is not held to the same standards of honor that the high voices are. No more will he be punished for telling lies—as he was by the Three Ladies of the Queen—but is free to do as he pleases, governing himself without the threat of moral retribution.

This new order, brought about by Sarastro, was heavily influenced by Mozart’s ties with Freemasonry and its democratic ideals (Donington 71). More important than his position as leader of the council of Priests of Isis and Osiris, is Sarastro’s humanity and wisdom. He is not a god but, as a bass, he is of the earth, and therefore is able to free the citizens from the Queen’s heavenly oppression. In this ancient setting, it is clear that heaven does not imply benevolence and the earth is far from impotent. Sarastro’s famously low notes reinforce his strong connection with the wise earth. Not concerned with complicated rules that the Queen decrees from heaven he, as the wisest character, is far more interested in reason and equality. Like a good democratic leader, Sarastro can see beyond his own needs and to what people need for themselves, such as Papageno and his family.

At the other end of the spectrum, Tamino and Pamina, the tenor and soprano, are given the almost unattainable goals of goodness and divine love. That Tamino falls hopelessly in love with Pamina does not imply a lack of understanding of these goals on his part, but sets him up as a kind of super-human being, made for the kind of platonic love that people look for in great leader-couples. By contrast, Papageno and Papagena's final duet gives the impression that they leave the stage to consummate their love. Given that Papageno is a baritone, and therefore more concerned with himself and his own corner of the world, this makes sense. This sort of corporeal focus is what society needs in its citizens, but not its leaders. For political couples, it has always been true that they are partners in both their private and public lives. Justinian and Theodora, William and Mary, Barack and Michelle Obama all embody this idea, that society needs more than one to lead a country, and a married couple is ideal for their balanced relationship. As the two high voices, Tamino and Pamina's love represents the ultimate romantic relationship and cannot be consummated before a proper conclusion in the form of a wedding.

In reality, though a gender-balanced duo is good for Western society, it is unlikely that the female would actually have much public power. It is fitting then, that this new sort of musical equality does not extend to women in Mozart's opera. The principal mezzo-soprano role is rather noticeably missing from this opera. Pamina, for example, while expected to rule equally with Tamino, has not been subjected to tests of her own, but instead follows him. She acts as the "great woman" behind the "great man," but is not great in her own right. Furthermore, the source of evil in the story, the one making selfish decisions for her citizens, is the Queen of the Night. More than just a lyric soprano subjected to a high tessitura like Pamina, her infamous *fioratura* sends her literally into the heavens, giving her celestial power. At the same time, these notes relegate her to the most feminine reaches of the voice, making her inescapably inferior in the eyes of Western Society. Her femininity, displayed through her soprano coloratura, is most closely linked with her malevolence for the same reason.

A good example of these voice parts working in conjunction is the Act I Quintet "Hm hm hm hm," in which the main plot of the opera is unveiled. It begins with Papageno unable to speak, as he is being punished for lying, with a lock over his mouth. His lie was not malicious, but opportunistic, attempting to take credit for saving

Tamino's life from the serpent he fought at the start of the action. Of course, the Three Ladies who punished him for taking their credit eventually set him free, but not before Tamino attempts to first, showing his continuing kindness. The women spend the rest of the ensemble more or less in subservience to the men, supplying them with tools for their journey.

The ensemble begins with Papageno's introduction of the infectious melodic line. Tamino then enters with a contrapuntal answer to the melody, clearly placing Papageno in the center of the action. When the Three Ladies eventually free him, there is no tangible difference between what one says and what all three say at once. When they sing together it is as one voice; the harmonies are so tight that it is difficult to tell them apart. Thus, the first women we see in the opera are a completely homogeneous trio. Tamino and Papageno usually have their own line apart from one another, though they occasionally sing together when they are on the same page. The point at which there is more of a dialogue between the Three Ladies and Papageno, he is always speaking, while the three of them sing as a single unit in tight harmony.

Tamino attempts to free Papageno from the lock, which here represents the oppression of the extreme vocal ranges. When he fails, the Three Ladies must do it for him. He has not yet been tested, and must first prove himself. The scene is important thematically, as it introduces the magic flute and chimes, the instruments that will protect and guide them throughout the story.

The chorale sections in which all five characters sing as one are perfect examples of the various voice parts and character roles working harmoniously together, an ensemble technique for which Mozart is especially famous. While the various solo lines are important and provide information, when they come together in a homophonic unity, the texture demonstrates the new Enlightenment ideals of political equality.

From this discussion, we may conclude that the baritone roles in Mozart's operas are the most malleable, and hence progressive, of the voice parts. Among the various baritone examples presented, there are several correlations. Each character is somehow focused on the fairer sex. For example, while they differ in station, both Count Almaviva and Papageno are on the prowl, in constant search of physical love. At first glance, Papageno seems to be the more admirable lover, in the noble pursuit of a wife, while

Almaviva is the false husband, seeking pleasure outside the sacred bonds of matrimony. Further examination reveals, however, that neither is after a woman in order to improve society, nor, conversely, to break anyone's heart. They are merely out for themselves, sometimes causing pain, but not maliciously scheming to do so. These two medium-voiced characters are self-centered, an intrinsic aspect of the humanity that they represent. Likewise, Don Giovanni, though undoubtedly a villain, is still primarily concerned with his own needs. In order for him to satiate his lust as a rapist, he must cause pain and exert power over others. Guglielmo is mainly causing mischief with his plans, though he could not accomplish these goals without the façade of an amorous Turk. Therefore, within the context of the soldiers' prank, he is no different than the other baritones in his search for physical love, with no concern for the well-being of others.

More important, though, is what we don't find in Mozart's operas. While the male voice is allowed to expand and develop its dramatic roles, reveling in newfound vocal equality, the female characters are all confined to the soprano range, crowded into a narrow band of sound. The innovations in the baritone voice parts reflect the strides that democratic ideals were making during the time that Mozart was writing. The continued subjugation of women, with their lack of variety in range or dramatic role, stands out in stark relief against such progress. In the Mozart's operas discussed above, if women are not downright interchangeable, their musical and dramatic potential is restricted to their archetype, or in the broader society of his day, to their appearance and function. Even when women might fend for themselves, they are restrained from acting; high voices awaiting the support of the men beneath them. When the mezzo-soprano voice is used, it is primarily as a device to indicate age, whether that of a young man, or an old woman—in either case, not a sexual threat to the social status quo.

Nevertheless, Mozart led the way for subsequent composers to expand their own image of the society beyond soprano and bass. Through his inventive use of the medium voice, as well as new uses for the high and low voices, he was able to accurately reflect a changing time. The lack of female equality, while not a positive thing, is an accurate representation of his world. The period during which he was composing saw the American and French Revolutions, and with them, a burgeoning middle class, in which he played an active part. Beyond his freelance work, Mozart's Freemason connections

show that he was a strong proponent of democratic equality. The freeing of the male medium voice in his operas was a subtle way of flashing enlightened ideals in the faces of the upper class. With all of that in mind, the lack of freedom that he provides for the female voice gives fascinating insight into the limits of even the most forward thinking of Mozart's day. Fortunately, the brilliance of his music knows no such bounds.

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