

MOZART'S *LE NOZZE DI FIGARO*: A HIDDEN DRAMATIC DETAIL

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In two earlier articles I have written of finding identical or very similar themes in two different compositions, either in two works of the same composer or in the work of two different composers.¹ The conclusion presented was that such events are rarely meaningful, that citing a particular melodic affinity to assert some kind of relationship between the two compositions is almost always misguided.² The amount of melodic duplication that may be found when comparing any two pieces (by any two composers from any two eras) is so considerable that one might conclude it is largely meaningless and accidental.

On the other hand, how does one know when meaningful melodic quotation is encountered? Some instances are so obvious that they require no proof: for example, Jacques Offenbach's brief quotation from *Don Giovanni* in his opera *Les contes d'Hoffman*,³ Richard Strauss's several self-quotations in *Ein Heldenleben*, or even the obvious case of the central theme of Ernst von Dohnányi's *Variations on A Nursery Tune*. Such quotations may attempt to honour another work or serve humorous or dramatic purposes. However, some few cases may be so subtle that not only are they hard to find, but speculating on intentionality proves difficult.

Such a case is found in Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*. The event, unspectacular when it occurs, requires a microscopic examination of the tune to establish it as a possible self-quotation. However, it may open up a new perspective on the plot at that moment. *Figaro* is a beloved opera about which volumes have been written, yet, as far as I have been able to determine, there has never been a statement about the dramatic implications of this disguised melodic self-quotation. I suggest that it is a brilliant but hidden private joke that redirects the dramatic intent of a brief operatic moment.

Act 1 contains a scene that appears to be dramatically uncomplicated, yet there is an element of uncertainty about a simple detail, one that cannot be cleared up by examining the opera's dialogue. The eventual understanding of exactly what is taking place is accomplished by Mozart, not with words, but with a melodic quotation, a device that is not generally thought of as a way in which Mozart tells his stories. I refer to Scene 6 from the moment when Don Basilio makes his first entrance up to and including the vocal trio of Susanna, the Count and Basilio, 'Cosa sento! tosto andate'.

The matter centres around the following specific question: when Basilio enters, exactly what does he know about what took place in the previous scene, namely the supposedly private conversation between Cherubino and Susanna, which included Cherubino's aria 'Non so più cosa son, cosa faccio'?

In that scene Cherubino, alone with Susanna, tells her that his behaviour with Barbarina has placed him in a perilous situation with the Count. He wants the Countess to intercede on his behalf and, to this end, seeks Susanna's help. Then he offers Susanna his *canzonetta* and gives song to his feelings in the aria 'Non so più'.

At the end of his song Cherubino begins to leave, but sees the Count and hides behind a chair. The Count, thinking himself alone with Susanna, makes overtures to her. Dialogue follows during which Basilio's voice, offstage, is heard for the first time. To avoid discovery, the Count hides behind the same chair while

1 Daniel N. Leeson, 'The Enigma Enigma', *International Journal of Musicology* 7 (1998), 241–257, and 'Franz Xaver Süßmayr and the Mozart Requiem: A Computer Analysis of Authorship Based on Melodic Affinity', *Mozart-Jahrbuch* 1995, 111–153.

2 For an example of such a scholarly assertion see Bradley P. Ethington, 'Mozart's Serenade, K.361/370A [sic]: Thematic Borrowing and Musical Influences', *College Band Directors National Association Journal* 13 (1998), 3–12.

3 Sung by Nicklausse in Act 1 and quoting Leporello's 'Notte e giorno faticar'.



Cherubino slips into it unnoticed by the Count and is covered by Susanna. Basilio enters and a conversation takes place between him and Susanna. Eventually the Count emerges from his hiding place and the trio 'Cosa sento! tosto andate' begins. Almost nothing that transpires in the dialogue between Susanna and Basilio sheds light on the question of what he knows of the private conversation between Susanna and Cherubino. Only one remark is made that suggests Basilio might have overheard the earlier conversation. This is his reference to the *canzonetta*, something spoken of only in the scene between Susanna and Cherubino. Thus his reference to the *canzonetta* might demonstrate that he has overheard the conversation.

But the argument is weak. Basilio's knowledge of the *canzonetta* can be explained by a variety of devices, none of which have him overhearing the conversation of that previous scene. For example, he is the music master of the house, so the knowledge that Cherubino wrote a song about love might have been gained in a way other than by the conversation between the page and Susanna; for instance, he could have heard Cherubino practising the song.

Besides, where is the manuscript of the *canzonetta* at this moment of the opera? Since Cherubino gave it to Susanna in her apartment (which is the location of the scene now unfolding), it is to be found there. Basilio, being a meddler, could well have discovered it in the first few moments following his arrival in Susanna's apartment. In some productions of the opera, Basilio is shown snooping around the apartment and discovering the *canzonetta* in the *recitativo* preceding 'Cosa sento! tosto andate'. This could explain his knowledge of its existence. To sum up, it appears impossible to prove that Basilio overheard the private talk of Cherubino and Susanna. Yet I suggest that it is certain that he did, and it can be established through a musical quotation in a way that is miraculous, a way that changes the interpretation of the opera's action at that instant.

In the trio 'Cosa sento!' Basilio's first sung material is an innocuous throwaway line of apology to the Count for having come at an inopportune moment.



The dramatic significance of this apparently unimportant melodic line is not appreciated, nor is its impact on the drama understood, without reference to an earlier heard tune, namely that of the first bars of 'Non so più cosa son, cosa faccio'.





so più' and, by doing so, he accomplishes two ends: he makes it clear that he overheard the conversation between her and Cherubino, and he threatens Susanna with this knowledge.⁵ I suggest that Susanna immediately understands the significance of what Basilio has done, because she reacts in horror, saying 'Che ruina, me meschina! son oppressa dal dolor'.⁶ She realizes that Basilio must have been listening at the door of her apartment.

But what evidence is there to support the assertion that this musical utterance by Basilio is deliberate, is an intended reference to Cherubino and is designed to convey the message that I suggest? The answer is not only content, but quantity. The melodic quotation occurs a total of five times in the trio, three of which refer explicitly to Cherubino (by name or by mentioning a page). The first appearance is given in Example 1, while the second version is also sung by Basilio, from bar 29 (with Susanna again reacting with her words of horror). In the third presentation, from bar 85, Basilio directs his remarks to the Count. Here he makes specific and ironic reference to Cherubino when he says 'Ah del paggio quel che ho detto era solo un mio sospetto!'.⁷ The fourth is found from bar 129, this time sung by the Count, at the exact moment when Cherubino is discovered hiding in the chair: 'Ed alzando, pian pianino, Il tappeto al tavolino[, Vedo il paggio!].'⁸ With the Count's presentation of the melody it becomes a virtual but still secret signature-tune referring to Cherubino. The fifth and final presentation occurs from bar 175, when Basilio repeats his ironic comment that what he said about the page was only a suspicion.

Given these five presentations, one must come to grips with the following question: what is the probability that Mozart would have accidentally presented a disguised version of Cherubino's tune five times in this trio, in three of which the text explicitly refers to him? I suggest it is zero. This is a deliberate act, and the drama that unfolds at this instant is engineered by Mozart's musical action.

I have always wondered what has upset Susanna at the point where she speaks of her 'ruin'. On inquiring about her behaviour from those who were more familiar with the opera, I was invariably informed that she was embarrassed because Basilio had discovered her alone with the Count. This is a viable argument, of course, but not the only possible explanation, particularly in light of the hidden tune's multiple presentations. While the situation is potentially embarrassing, Susanna's and the Count's being together could hardly be characterized as *in flagrante delicto*. For one thing, the apartment where the scene takes place lies between that of the Count and the Countess and would be an unwise choice as a seduction site. Furthermore, although it is clear what his intentions are, the Count's specific invitation is that Susanna meet him in the garden that night. In effect, except for the fact that Susanna and the Count are alone together, the situation into which Basilio has stumbled can be characterized only as embarrassing to her. One can even argue that there is no need for her to be embarrassed. Counting the hidden Cherubino, there are only four people involved in the scene, all of whom know of the Count's amorous intent, particularly Basilio, who has carried notes from the Count to Susanna in the past.

It was Susanna's seeming overreaction to Basilio's words that caused me to seek another interpretation of the dramatic moment. But not until I had heard and recognized the implications of the melodic quotation did I realize that what was taking place was a far more subtle situation than appears at first blush. I propose that the entire scene has a quite different dimension.

By singing a disguised version of Cherubino's tune to Susanna, Basilio suggests a nasty perspective on what might have transpired in the previous scene. Any possible accusation against the Count has, by Basilio's

5 Another perspective, suggested to me by Cliff Eisen, came when he asked 'Why does Basilio make this quotation to Susanna at this moment?'. He suggests that he is not only surprising her with his knowledge of the tune but also with his knowledge of *her* knowledge of it. So for Basilio really to make his point, he shows her that he knows she knows. And so he must have been a witness.

6 'What a ruination, unhappy me! I'm overcome with misery.'

7 'What I said about the page was only my suspicion.'

8 'And very, very softly, lifting the tablecloth [I saw the page there!]. The Count demonstrates his earlier action by lifting the dress covering Cherubino as if it were a tablecloth, only to discover the boy in the chair.'



hidden musical threat, been redirected: the insinuation targets Cherubino as the recipient of Susanna's favours. And should the Count be brought to hold that opinion, Susanna's position would be fatally compromised. It was one thing for Susanna to refuse the advances of the Count, but it would be quite another if he thought that she accepted those of Cherubino. I have seen no such interpretation of this interaction in the literature.

How isolated is this event in Mozart's *oeuvre*? I don't think the question is answerable, precisely because it is impossible to count the total number of events – some of which may be so hidden that they have yet to be discovered, others of which may be perceived as a coincidence. On the one hand, Mozart uses obvious quotations, such as the melodies by Martín y Soler, Sarti and himself in the supper scene of *Don Giovanni*. On the other hand, this entire discussion has been about concealed quotations, of which approximately half a dozen have been found or proposed in the literature – and some of these, perhaps including the one in question, may be submerged, personal jokes. This gives rise to the obvious question: what is the purpose of a joke that hardly anyone can hear?⁹

Astonishingly, we need move only a few bars on in this same trio to find Mozart making another musical statement that he will quote, four years later: there are four presentations of a motive, sung each time by Basilio, that Mozart would later incorporate in the overture to *Così fan tutte*. What makes this motivic duplication almost certain to be a case of deliberate action rather than an accident are the words 'Così fan tutte le belle', which occur in two of the four presentations of the motive as it is sung in *Le nozze di Figaro*.¹⁰

Are there other such examples to be found? I don't know, but it wouldn't surprise me in the least to learn that Mozart had created many such melodious jokes with refined punch lines, hidden here and there in his music like Easter eggs filled with Viennese buttercream and chocolate.

9 That twenty-first-century ears find this joke inaudible does not permit us to judge how eighteenth-century ears would have reacted to it.

10 Found from bars 161, 165, 184 and 188 of 'Cosa sento!'.