Notes on the Program

Overture to Le nozze di Figaro (The Marriage of Figaro), K.492

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Mozart’s opera Le nozze di Figaro (known in English as The Marriage of Figaro) was moderately successful when it was unveiled at Vienna’s Burgtheater in May 1786, but when it was produced at Prague’s National Theatre later that year, it proved to be a major hit. Writing from Prague to his student Gottfried von Jacquin back in Vienna, Mozart reported:

I watched with greatest pleasure how everyone was hopping about with sheer delight to the music of my Figaro, which had been transformed into contredanses and German dances; for here they talk of nothing but — Figaro; nothing is played, blown, sung, and whistled but — Figaro; no opera is seen as much as — Figaro; again and again it is — Figaro; it’s all a great honor for me.

Le nozze di Figaro was a brave choice for the first collaboration between Mozart and the librettist, Lorenzo da Ponte: the play on which it was based, Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais’s Le Mariage de Figaro, had become the subject of intense controversy immediately on its publication in 1784. The play was banned from the stage throughout Germany and Austria (although it could be acquired in print) because of what was perceived as a disrespectful portrayal of the aristocracy and its overwhelmingly sympathetic portrait of class conflicts. Da Ponte assured the Emperor that he would tone down the offending passages and, on those terms, was given the green light to move ahead with his libretto.

The result was what many consider to be the finest opera ever written, a profound human tragicomedy at once hilarious and heartbreaking, in which the Countess Almaviva, abetted by the servants Susanna and Figaro, manages to shame her husband (the Count) for his egregious philandering — at least momentarily. (To be sure, that’s just the barest outline of a subtle and convoluted plot.)

Mozart customarily held off writing his overtures until he finished the rest of the opera he was preparing, and evidence involving the manuscript to Le nozze di Figaro hints that this was the case here. It has been suggested that the Overture to Figaro was written only hours before the curtain went up, but that seems improbable. The composer attached the date April 29, 1786 (two

In Short

Born: January 27, 1756, in Salzburg, Austria
Died: December 5, 1791, in Vienna
Work composed: The opera was written in Vienna between October 1785 and April 29, 1786; the Overture was among the last parts to be composed.
World premiere: May 1, 1786, with the composer conducting the opera’s premiere at the Burgtheater, Vienna
New York Philharmonic premiere: May 7, 1891, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which merged with the New York Philharmonic in 1928 to form today’s New York Philharmonic)
Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: July 21, 2021, Jaap van Zweden, conductor, at the Bravo! Vail Music Festival in Colorado
Estimated duration: ca. 4 minutes
Views and Reviews

The distinguished 20th-century theologian Karl Barth was a Mozart aficionado. In 1956, for the bicentennial of the composer’s birth, he penned a marvelous essay in which he pondered philosophical and spiritual aspects of Mozart’s music (often “speaking in threes,” as is frequently found in theological writings):

Mozart’s music always sounds unburdened, effortless, and light. This is why it unburdens, releases, and liberates us. This is so in his famous minor-key compositions; this is so when he composes opera seria — even in the sacred works culminating in the Requiem, even in the Freemason melodies, even when he becomes solemn, melancholy, and tragic. But he never becomes truly tragic. He plays and never stops playing, and the listener who does not himself sway and soar, who does not play along with him, is not truly hearing him. But neither is one truly hearing him if, as happened in the 19th century, he is heard as a musician of mere facile gaiety. Behind his play there is an iron zeal. … This ever-present lightness possesses something very demanding, disturbing, almost provocative, even in the most radiant, most childlike, most joyful movements.

— James M. Keller, former New York Philharmonic Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair; San Francisco Symphony program annotator; and author of Chamber Music: A Listener’s Guide (Oxford University Press)

days before the premiere) to the identifying incipit — the first seven measures of the Overture — that he inscribed in his catalogue of compositions. Still, it is likely that the music was very fresh indeed at that point.

The fact that Mozart wrote out seven measures is worth noting. One thinks of phrases in Classical music as typically striving for balance, and such balance (in terms of musical meter) almost always involves an even number of bars: phrases of two measures, or of four or eight measures. Yet, these seven measures are as balanced as anyone could ever desire; if one doesn’t stop to count them, one would probably assume that they add up to eight. This is definitely not irrelevant: the idea of subterfuge goes to the heart of Le nozze di Figaro, and Mozart was not unskilled when it came to imagining ways to underscore psychological states through music.

However, on its surface, all is effervescent gaiety in the Figaro Overture. The themes are high-spirited, and none of them undergo any degree of “learned” development. At one point Mozart did begin sketching out some slower music to stand as a contrasting section in the middle of the Overture, mirroring to a great extent the structure of his overture to Die Entführung aus dem Serail, which he had unveiled four years earlier. But he scrapped that idea: perhaps he didn’t want to impede the onslaught of his Allegro assai; perhaps he was already worried about the opera’s running time (which is long).

As it is, this jewel of an overture lasts only about four minutes, and, although it doesn’t cite a single tune from the acts that will follow, it perfectly prefigures the opera’s winsome exhilaration.

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings.