

MSA at Mostly Mozart 2015

For the third year, the Mozart Society of America held a Saturday afternoon panel discussion for the general public in connection with Lincoln Center's Mostly Mozart festival, and for the third year the presentation was well attended and enthusiastically received. This year's event, held on 15 August, was chaired by Bruce Alan Brown and was entitled "Listening to Mozart." The abstracts of the papers presented:

Listening to Mozart through the Voices of His Singers

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Mozart's early biographer Franz Xaver Niemetschek pointed out that "...one must always know the singers for whom he wrote, in order to be able to form a correct judgment about his dramatic works." Of course it is not possible for us to hear the original singers for whom Mozart wrote his arias, but we can gain an impression of what their voices were like by comparing musical settings of the same texts. In this paper, I discuss two pairs of arias—"Non so d'onde viene" (K. 294 and 512) and "Non temer, amato bene" (K. 490 and 505)—to show how Mozart shaped arias for individual singers.

K. 294 was written for the soprano Aloysia Weber, while Mozart was visiting Mannheim in February 1778; it is modeled closely on an aria that Johann Christian Bach had written for the tenor Anton Raaff. Several years later, Mozart wrote K. 512 for Raaff's pupil, the bass Ludwig Fischer, in a completely different setting. The second pair of arias was written less than a year apart, the first (K. 490) as a replacement aria for Francesco Pollini, the tenor who sang the role of Idamante in the Viennese performance of *Idomeneo* in March 1786; in December 1786 Mozart rewrote it for the soprano Nancy Storace (K. 505). Both are described as "Scena con Rondò" in Mozart's thematic catalogue, though K. 490 features a violin solo (for August Clemens Count Hatzfeldt) and K. 505 a keyboard solo (played by Mozart himself). The similarities between these arias are as striking as the differences. Although we cannot hear singers such as Aloysia Weber or Nancy Storace today, we can listen for how Mozart composed for their voices, and how his singers in turn gave his dramatic works their unique character.

Mozart's Odes to Improbability

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A taste for the coherent plot in imaginative works has a long and reputable past. Aristotle devoted much of the *Poetics* to exploring the possibilities found along the horizontal axis of fiction, and today we often laud Mozart for his unparalleled talent in giving a musical dimension to dramatic probability.

But then there are those Mozartean episodes, those moments, whose eeriness or superabundance or generosity transfix the listener. The senses quicken and the mind becomes more alert; past and future fall away. Time itself seems to slow down, as some sight from above distracts it from its inexorable forward march. This talk, in looking at a few such incursions along the vertical axes of *The Marriage of Figaro* and *The Magic Flute*, suggests that there is something instructive in this stupefaction.

Whether it is the cusp of the Trial of Fire and Water, where Tamino and Pamina sing a hymn to the power of music, or the third-act sextet of *Figaro*, where the *dramatis personae*, beguiled that things have turned out so well, also break out in a hymn, or the closing solemnities of the same opera, where, in an instant, disarray turns to contentment—these and other moments look like odes to improbability that Mozart muscles into the plot. Beauty defeats logic, or at least the laws of human psychology and of respectable plot construction.

I will propose that there is a delicate logic governing these episodes, a conclusion also reached by some of Mozart's contemporaries. In discovering for themselves new treasures upon repeated listening, an early generation of Mozart enthusiasts bore witness to the idea that, when it comes to the best art, composers such as Mozart taught them, and continue to teach us, how to listen to them.

Listening in and to *Figaro*

Laurel E. Zeiss

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Le nozze di Figaro highlights the act of listening in a variety of ways. Characters constantly overhear or eavesdrop on one another. The opera also incorporates numerous pleas to listen (i.e., "Ascolta!" and "Sentite!"). Two numbers in particular involve characters listening and responding: the aria "Venite... inginocchiatevi..." and the famous letter duet, "Che soave zeffiretto." In addition, most of the arias in this opera are addressed to onstage listeners. In fact, only seven of the arias are true soliloquies and of these, three are addressed to offstage characters or to specific persons. Mozart's opera also contains extended passages of onstage music, moments when the characters understand what they are hearing as music or a song.

The libretto's and the score's emphasis on hearing—particularly the repeated exclamations of "Cosa sento!"—may have encouraged the audience to listen carefully, especially to the opera's music. Numerous commentators have argued that Mozart embedded political commentary in the music.

Mozart and Da Ponte had another motivation to urge audiences to listen carefully. *Figaro* was the composer's first commission for the Emperor's *opera buffa* troupe. As Hertz, Brown, and Hunter have shown, the score is peppered with musical allusions that suggest that the young composer was positioning himself as Paisiello's heir and Salieri's successor. Highlighting the act of listening, therefore, exhorts audience members to hear these musical cross-references and political subtexts, which were made more audible by the opera's original performance circumstances. Vienna's Nationaltheater employed a repertory system. Operatic works alternated with one another and with spoken plays; new works were interspersed among older favorites. Therefore audience members had multiple opportunities to rehear this and other works.