The Florentine Opera

The Marriage of Figaro
Study Guide
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New to Opera?</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elements Of Opera</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operatic Voice Types</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opera Vocabulary</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the Composer</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Marriage of Figaro</em>: Synopsis</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We firmly believe that newcomers have a great advantage over many opera fanatics worldwide. The composers of the great operas knew what they were doing – they created potent musical dramas aimed straight for the heart. More than many other art forms, opera is meant to appeal directly to the senses.

All you need are eyes, ears, and a soul to fully appreciate opera. Let us help you activate your senses.

OPERA BASICS

An opera is simply a play in which people sing. In most operas, all the words are sung, and none are spoken. There are other types of operas; however, in which there is as much speaking as singing. The theater has been around for hundreds of years. People were being entertained by plays long before television and radio were even invented. Music was added to enhance the feelings portrayed on the stage.

Opera powerfully combines the drama of theater with music…

Singing is a very unique form of music because the instrument (like our feelings) comes from inside. Our voice is a part of us which expresses how we feel, whether we sing, talk, shout, laugh, cry, moan, growl, whisper, gasp, hiss, etc. It is the actor’s job to express such feelings, and singing is a perfect way of doing just that. Naturally, singing was used very early in the history of the theater; however, opera as we know it is only about 400 years old. Opera powerfully combines the drama of theater with music – vocal and instrumental – to create the lasting art form that audiences enjoy throughout the world today.
ELEMENTS OF OPERA

THE OVERTURE
An opera usually begins with an orchestral piece of music called the overture, which functions as an introduction to the opera. Lasting anywhere from five to twenty-five minutes, these opera overtures usually contain important themes from the rest of the production. Before 1800, house lights were not dimmed while the overture played, and audience members continued to talk, drink, and even play cards! This ceased in the 1900’s, as the overture became a more integral part of an operatic performance. At the end of the overture, the curtain rises and the story of the opera unfolds through a series of scenes. These scenes are organized into acts.

ARIA
An aria is a solo moment for an opera singer and is usually accompanied by the orchestra. Italian for “air” or song, an aria stops the plot momentarily, giving each character the opportunity to express their innermost thoughts and feelings. These pieces also provide an opportunity for the singer to demonstrate their vocal and artistic skill. Mozart, Verdi and Puccini were able to achieve a remarkable balance between memorable melodies that perfectly suit the human voice while still reflecting the drama of the text.

RECITATIVES
Recitatives, a type of singing unique to opera, help propel the action forward. They can be accompanied either by a full orchestra, or, as is often the case with opera written before 1800, by harpsichord or keyboard instrument. Often introducing an aria, the text is delivered quickly and encompasses a very limited melodic range. It has no recognizable melody and the rhythms follow those of the spoken word.

ENSEMBLE
Ensemble singing deals with two or more voices of different range performing together. These include duets, trios, quartets, quintets, and sometimes sextets. The composer blends the voices depending on the dramatic requirements of the plot. For instance, a love duet may begin with each performer singing different music at different times, then gradually unifying into harmony. Conversely, the music of a duet may depict conflict. Georges Bizet used this technique in Carmen: if you listen to the duets sung by Carmen and Don José, you might notice that their musical lines are never completely blended, and this foreshadows their tragic ends.

CHORUS
Most operas include music sung by a large group of singers (sometimes more than 40) called a chorus. The chorus often appears in a crowd scene and can provide a stunning contrast to solo or ensemble singing. In one opera by Benjamin Britten, the chorus is played by a single male and a single female, as in the tradition of ancient Greek theatre.

ORCHESTRAL MUSIC
The orchestra accompanies the singing and introduces the opera with the overture. Musical and emotional themes often appear in orchestral introductions and conclusions to arias, recitatives, and choruses. In many cases, the orchestra plays such an important role; the gravity of its existence is that of a leading character.
OPERATIC VOICE TYPES

SOPRANO
This is the highest female voice and has a range similar to a violin. In opera, the soprano most often plays the young girl or the heroine (sometimes called the prima donna), since a high bright voice traditionally suggests femininity, virtue, and innocence. The normal range of a soprano is from middle C through two octaves above middle C, sometimes with extra top notes.

MEZZO-SOPRANO
Also called a mezzo, this is the middle female voice with a range similar to an oboe. A mezzo's sound is often darker and warmer than a soprano's. In opera, composers generally use a mezzo to portray older women, villainesses, seductive heroines, and sometimes even young boys. Mezzo-sopranos also often serve as the friend or sidekick to the soprano. The mezzo-soprano’s normal range is from the A below middle C to the A two octaves above it.

CONTRALTO
This is the lowest female voice and has a voice similar in range to a clarinet. Contraltos usually sing the roles of older females or special character parts such as witches and old gypsies. The range is two octaves from F below middle C to the top line of the treble clef. A true contralto is very rare—some believe they don’t exist at all!

COUNTER-TENOR
This is the highest male voice, which was mainly used in very early opera and oratorio. The voice of a countertenor sounds very much like a mezzo-soprano’s voice and they often sing the same repertoire. Like the contralto, true countertenors are very rare.

TENOR
This is usually the highest male voice in an opera. It is similar to a trumpet in range, tone, color, and acoustical ring. The tenor typically plays the hero or the love interest. His voice ranges from the C below middle C to the above.

BARITONE
This is the middle male voice and is close to a French horn in range and tone color. The baritone usually plays villainous roles or father-figures. The range is from the G an octave and a half below middle C to the G above.

BASS
This is the lowest male voice and is similar to a trombone or bassoon in range and color. Low voices usually suggest age and wisdom in serious opera. The range spans from roughly the F above middle C to the F an octave and a fourth below.
OPERA VOCABULARY

A cappella – Without accompaniment

Aria – a solo sung in an opera

Audition – When a singer or actor tries out for a company; usually involves singing 2 or 3 contrasting arias

Ballet – dance set to music within an opera

Bel Canto – “Beautiful singing;” an Italian style of singing prominent in 19th century opera

Blocking – Action on stage

Bravo! – A word that audience members shout when they like a performance – it means “well done” or “great job.” Use “brava” for women, or “bravi” for plural

Cadenza – An ornamental passage usually at the end of a piece

Chorus – music composed for a group of singers or the name of a group of singers in an opera

Comprimario – A secondary role in an opera

Conductor – person who rehearses and leads the orchestra

Duet – a song performed by two singers

Libretto – the text of an opera or other long vocal work

Orchestra – a group of musicians who play together on various musical instruments

Ornamentation – any of several decorations, such as the trill, occurring chiefly as improvised embellishments in music

Overture – a piece of instrumental music played at the beginning of an opera

Recitative – words that are sung in the rhythm of natural speech.

Rehearsal – time when singers/actors practice with or without the orchestra; time when musicians practice together with the conductor

Scene – segments of action within the acts of an opera

Tutti – Italian word that means “everyone”

Vibrato – Vibrating quality that produces warmth of tone in the voice
ABOUT THE COMPOSER

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (January 27, 1756 – December 5, 1791) was one of the most influential and prolific composers of his time, and remains one of the most important composers in the history of Western music. Along with his friend and fellow composer Joseph Haydn, Mozart “conceived and perfected the grand forms of symphony, opera, string ensemble, and concerto that marked the classical period” (Wolfgang 6). His composition of operas was particularly skillful, displaying a mastery of the vocal mechanism and innovation for his time in story and interpretation.

W. A. Mozart’s father, Leopold, was a successful composer, violinist, and assistant concertmaster with the Salzburg court. He began teaching Wolfgang to play the keyboard at a very young age, and his son soon started composing by himself. Leopold became fully aware of his son’s genius through a composition Wolfgang wrote at age 5, noting that he may have surpassed his own father’s training at such a young age. At age 6, Leopold began taking Wolfgang and his sister Anna Maria, also an accomplished young musician, on tours of Europe to play for royalty. After many years of touring and performing his own compositions, W.A. Mozart became a court musician for the ruler of Salzburg, Prince-Archbishop Hieronymus Colloredo, at age 17. He quickly grew bored with this position, and began looking for more intellectually challenging work elsewhere at the age of 21.

From then on, Mozart supported the lavish lifestyle he and his wife, Constanze Weber (a trained soprano), preferred by composing commissioned pieces and giving widely attended and self-produced concerts of his own music. In 1784, Mozart became a Freemason, or a member of a “fraternal order focused on charitable work, moral uprightness, and the development of fraternal friendship” (Wolfgang 4). He was well regarded and very involved in the Freemason community. For the last 7 years of his life, Freemason ideology had a strong influence on Mozart’s compositions including The Magic Flute. Mozart is probably best known for his collaboration with librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte, together producing Mozart’s three most celebrated operas that remain Italian standards to this day: Le Nozze di Figaro (The Marriage of Figaro), Don Giovanni, and Così Fan Tutte.

Toward the end of his tragically short life, Mozart’s lavish lifestyle caught up with him, leaving him in a state of debt and depression. It was in this period that Mozart wrote The Magic Flute for his dear friend Emmanuel Schikaneder’s fairly amateur theatre troupe, premiering in Vienna on September 30, 1791. This was the last opera W.A. Mozart ever wrote, as only slightly over two months later, the great composer fell ill and passed away at the age of 35.

Although he died at such a young age, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart succeeded in perfecting and revolutionizing music of his time. In his 35 years, Mozart wrote over 60 symphonies, over 50 concertos, hundreds of pieces for piano and chamber orchestra, over 30 masses and pieces of sacred music, and 23 operas, along with countless pieces for other genres. Mozart’s music and influence lives on, as many of his compositions are still performed all over the world to this day.
THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO: SYNOPSIS

ACT 1: Figaro and Susanna are preparing for their wedding. He and his bride are slated to occupy a room between the private chambers of the Count and the Countess. Figaro thinks that will work out just fine. Susanna thinks otherwise. She tells Figaro that the Count has been making advances toward her. In their new room, all he’ll have to do is lure Figaro away on some errand, and the Count will be right next door to press his lecherous demands. Figaro hesitates to believe that his old friend the Count could have anything so nefarious in mind. But when Susanna convinces him, Figaro begins to display the same cunning and confidence that were his trademark in *The Barber of Seville*. We then meet Figaro's old nemesis Dr. Bartolo, and his housekeeper, the aging Marcellina. Figaro has borrowed money from Bartolo, but he had no collateral. To secure the loan he agreed to marry Marcellina if he couldn’t pay his debt. Well, the debt is due, and Bartolo demands that Figaro fulfill that obligation. With Susanna alone in her room, the young page Cherubino rushes in. He’s in the throes of adolescent ardor, and says he’s desperately in love with the Countess. But he has also been caught with one of the servant girls, and the Count is hot on his heels. Cherubino hides when the Count appears, then eavesdrops on the Count’s latest proposition for Susanna. When the Count finds him, he banishes Cherubino to the army. Figaro then turns up with a group of peasants, who want to thank the duplicitous Count. He has recently announced that he’s forgoing his “feudal right” to be with any woman in his realm on her wedding night. When the Count accepts their praise, Figaro suggests that he and Susanna should be married immediately. The Count puts him off. Considering his designs on Susanna, and his renunciation of the feudal right, he’s better off if Susanna is single. The act ends as Figaro teases the lovesick Cherubino about his impending military service.

ACT 2: Rosina, the Countess Almaviva, is upset about her marriage, which is on the rocks. Her husband is not only scheming to prevent the wedding of their servants Figaro and Susanna, but is also planning to have Susanna for himself. Yet, despite his behavior, the Countess still loves her husband, and her unhappiness colors the opening number of Act 2. She’s joined by Susanna and Cherubino. Together, the three hatch a plan. Cherubino will dress up as Susanna. The Count will be lured to a meeting with this phony Susanna by a trumped up letter, and the Count’s duplicity will be exposed. As the two women are dressing Cherubino for his role, Susanna leaves to find a ribbon. Then the Count knocks on the door. Rather than be found alone with the Countess — and in drag, no less — Cherubino ducks into a closet. When the Count enters, Cherubino knocks something over. The Count hears this, and demands to know who is hiding in that closet. The Countess tells him it’s Susanna, but refuses to let him see for himself. He angrily leaves to fetch a crowbar, to force open the locked closet door, and the Countess follows to try and calm him down. When they’re both gone, Susanna slips back into the room — and into the closet — while Cherubino has no choice but to leap out a window into the garden. When the Count and Countess return, they are both amazed to see that it actually is Susanna in the closet. The Countess is confused — but relieved. The Count is embarrassed and begs forgiveness for his unseemly suspicions. When the gardener appears in a tizzy, saying someone has just jumped out the window, Figaro comes to the rescue. He says he’s the one who took a flying leap into the nasturtiums. He also takes advantage of the Count’s confusion to renew his demand that the Count allow his marriage to Susanna. But Bartolo and Marcellina join in. When they produce evidence that Figaro has actually agreed to marry Marcellina, the Count gleefully cancels Figaro’s wedding.
ACT 3: Susanna hatches her latest scheme. She pretends that she's finally willing to go along with the Count's lascivious suggestions, and proposes a meeting later that night — which was to be her wedding night! — in the palace garden. The Count eagerly agrees. But as she leaves, he overhears her talking to Figaro and realizes the two have something up their sleeves.

Next there’s a hearing to determine exactly who it is that Figaro is legally bound to marry. When it looks like he's going to be stuck with Marcellina, he claims that he can't marry her because he's actually a nobleman, stolen from his parents at birth. He displays a distinctive birthmark on his arm. Marcellina recognizes the mark, and nearly faints. It turns out that she is Figaro's mother — and his father is his old nemesis, Dr. Bartolo. Figaro can hardly marry his mother, so Susanna and Figaro can be married at last — much to the Count's chagrin. Everyone leaves to prepare the ceremony.

ACT 4: That night, in the garden, the servant girl Barbarina is searching for something in the dark. Though she's barely a teenager, she has already been the object of the Count's attentions. Now she's acting as a courier between the Count and her older cousin Susanna, who has just been married. She's looking for the hairpin that sealed Susanna’s letter — the Count has sent her to return it. Her brief, opening number suggests a young woman who is disturbed at the adult world of amorous schemes that she's just now discovering.

As she searches, Figaro confronts her. When he discovers she’s a messenger between Susanna and the Count, he’s devastated. Figaro is convinced that Susanna is plotting to betray him, especially when he hears her nearby, singing about her “lover” — though she's really singing about Figaro.

Meanwhile, the Count is due any time for his assignation with Susanna. To fool him, the Countess and Susanna have agreed to exchange clothes for the evening. That way, when the Count goes into his seduction routine, he’ll be romancing his own wife without knowing it.

Before long, Figaro figures the whole thing out, and decides to play a joke of his own. He goes to Susanna, pretends he really does think she’s the Countess, and tries a few moves of his own. This enrages Susanna, but just momentarily. She soon sees through him, and they have a good laugh over it.

Things come to a head when the Count finally shows up, eager for his tryst. First he tries to seduce his wife, thinking she’s Susanna. Then, when he sees Figaro with a woman he thinks is the Countess, he self-righteously accuses her of infidelity. Susanna, still imitating the Countess, begs the Count for forgiveness. He refuses. At that, the Countess reveals herself, and the Count is finally humbled. This time, it’s his turn to ask for pardon. The Countess generously embraces him, and the opera ends with both couples reconciled.
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