Mozart and the Guises of Love

Hamish Swanston

If not from the beginning then from a very early time of his life, Mozart knew both that love in all its diverse manifestations is the rare wonder of our experience and that it is always under attack. At a London breakfast party in 1765, the nine-years old boy was asked by the distinguished lawyer, Daines Barrington, to extemporize a song for the castrato Manzuoli. The singer had befriended the little boy on this London visit and Mozart, with a grin, at once sat down at the harpsichord and began an air composed to the single word *Affetto*. 'If this extempore composition was not amazingly capital', Barrington reported to his fellows at the Royal Society, 'yet it was really above mediocrity, and shewed most extraordinary readiness of invention'. He had asked for another song, one that might be 'proper for the opera stage'. Immediately, the boy began a song of *Perfido*. 'And in the middle of it, he had worked himself up to such a pitch that he beat his harpsichord like a person possessed'. That Love will ever be dogged by Treachery is the continuing theme of Mozart's *dramma in musica*. The writing of operas became, as he told his father in February 1778, 'an obsession with me', and, taken together, these operas present as rare an assessment of the great matters of our experience as the philosophy of Aristotle, the sculpture of Michelangelo, or the novels of Henry James. 'I cannot write a poem, for I am no poet; I cannot get the light and the dark into verse. Neither am I a painter. Nor can I express my thoughts in mime or pantomime, for I am no dancer. But I can express them in sounds. I am a music-maker'. Mozart's music expresses his mind. Within the theatrical machinery of other men's libretto verses, back-drops, ballet steps, and comic patter, his operatic intelligence commands attention.

He took his first public chance to express his mind dramatically in a *geistliches Singspiel* designed as part of an after-supper entertainment for Archbishop von Schrattenbach of Salzburg in Lent 1767. *Die Schuldigkeit des ersten Gebotes* presents in allegory the generally luke-warm response of christians to the first commandment that we should love God with whole hearts. Such luke-warmness is, this little oratorio declares, the result of Christianity's persuasions being undercut by Worldliness. Christianity pleads with Mercy and Justice to help her guard Christian from being swept away by 'the froth and flood' of passion. But Mercy points to the Christian's free choice of sin. So Christianity asks Justice to frighten Christian with a nightmare of the

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1991.tb07166.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

last Judgement. Terrified, Christian wakes, and the piece continues with a mountingly dramatic sequence in which Christianity's patient recall of Christian to the life of Love is repeatedly frustrated by the devices of Worldliness.

Christianity appreciates that plain 'announcements' of the dogmatist and persistent 'denouncements' of the homelist will never bring Christian to the love of God. She must come in more attractive guise if Christian is to understand the sort of world in which he is moving. What Mozart begins in this *geistliches Singspiel,* he continues through his adolescent exploration of pastoral idyll, *commedia dell'arte,* greek myth, and roman history. In these several guises he tells his story of the common attack upon love and the peculiar beauty of love's constancy under such attack. In *Ascanio in Alba,* for example, written for the Milanese wedding of the Archduke Ferdinand in 1771, the charming nymph, confused by the conflicting demands of her father and her handsome wooer, remains constant in her love for both and thereby is brought into unexpected happiness. The Archduke was much impressed by the forwarding energy of the music Mozart had written for Manzuoli, who sang the lover's part. He thought of retaining 'the young Salzburger' at court, but his mother, the Empress Maria Theresa, would not countenance such a frivolous project, 'I cannot surmise why you should suppose that you need a composer or any other of these useless persons'. After this, Mozart made his meaning plainer in a diversion for the new Prince Archbishop's arrival in Salzburg in 1772. *Il sogno di Scipione* is a nice mixture of allegory, dream, and history, by which the roman general is brought to turn from the service of *Fortuna* to an honest life under the command of *Costanza.* Archbishop Colloredo shewed no sign of thinking this little opera's moral to be of any relevance for his own life. He might have learnt more from *La Finta Giardiniera,* but he preferred to sulk ungraciously and refused to attend the Munich performances in 1775. Perhaps he supposed the complications of unrequited love unsuited to his clerical state. But through the popular conventions of *opera buffa,* Mozart was still declaring his considered estimate of our lovings. The girl who pretends to be a gardener is a figure of a vulnerable and a rescuing love. After his brutal attack, in which Belfiore had stabbed her and run away thinking her dead, the marchese Violante has left her palace and gone in disguise to seek her little count. She finds him engaging himself to the equally fickle Armida. This lady, suspecting that the gardening girl will somehow interfere with her marriage plans, has Violante kidnapped and abandoned in the wild wood. In a delightful peripety, it is Violante who brings Belfiore safely from that wood of anger, jealousy, and madness. He comes at last into the graceful order of her garden. Mozart delighted in this bringing of the powers of psychological destruction to such dramatic reversal. He put a besieged love and its rescuing virtue at the centre of *Idomeneo* in 1780, the first great work of his maturity.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1991.tb07166.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Rather in the manner of the *Judges* myth of Jephtha, the greek story of Idomeneo, caught in a storm on his way back from sacking Troy, and vowing to sacrifice to Poseidon the first of his Cretan subjects who should greet him on his safe arrival home, puts its narrative and emotive emphases on the warrior's unhappiness at having to kill his own child. The unfortunate Idomeneo is met by prince Idamante. Mozart, however, directs his audience to attend rather to the effects that the destructive selfishness of the old man has on the youngsters in his house. He begins by establishing the patterns of their loves. The opera starts not with the storm-tossed king but with the captive trojan princess Ilia who loves Idamante. He, modestly, has not dared to hope that Ilia could love him. And she, an alien prisoner of war, thinks he must inevitably love and marry the daughter of his father's ally, the princess Elettra. Ilia prompts a love that is liberating. For her sake, Idamante frees every trojan captive. Elettra, recognizing the course of true love, summons the Furies to re-take the world. This is the moment when we hear the storm. The sea crashes down upon the cretan ships, the cries of drowning sailors reach the harbour, the king returns. The steadfast mind, the kindness, the self-sacrifice, of Ilia do, at the last, bring a blessing from the god. But in the plague, the sea-monster, the headsman's chopping-block, we hear the recurring sorties of the enemies of love. And most especially, we hear those enemies in the maddened jealousy of Elettra. There is no need for us to hiss this villainess off the stage. Snakes are already writhing in the hell of her own imagination. The tortured music of her final aria declares the ruin of an human being. We are made immediately aware of what waits in our own selves to subvert the gift of love. It will not be a simple matter to reach that integrity expressed in Ilia's loving self-knowledge: '*Io ti son costante e fida*'.

In 1782 Mozart married the happily-christened Constanze Weber. He could think more cheerfully in that year of happiness of the complexities of love and constancy and treachery. He took up the popular form of a *singspiel* and the popular story of a decent european girl being rescued by a gallant european boy from the clutches of a heathen Turk. Less than an hundred years before, the conquering Turks had reached the walls of Vienna. They remained in folk memory as a menacing, barbaric, enemy. The original audience of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* would have readily recognized Osmin, the keeper of the seraglio, as a typically wicked heathen. But Mozart is humanely aware of Turk differing from Turk. His *singspiel* offers several versions of constancy, and the most loving is a Turkish version. The music first presents a conventional image of the constant lover: Belmonte, the young man who has come to rescue his beloved. Belmonte knows that he is the hero of the evening. He deserves the heroine. And the heroine is waiting for him. Belmonte, however, has never heard that 'Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds'. He will not take the lovely Constanze away from it all until she has assured him that the Turk has

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1991.tb07166.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

not had his wicked way with her. We know at once that Belmonte is unworthy of Constanze. It is outrageous that he should doubt such a woman. And there is something not quite right in his telling lies to the Pasha. And something worse in his thinking him a ravisher. For the Pasha is a decent man. He shares our sense of Constanze. He longs for her to love him. He waits for her to love him. Belmonte is constant in his self-picturing as a lover. After his insults he thinks it proper to sing a serenade. Constanze is constant in her loving. She will not break faith with Belmonte however kind the Pasha. The Pasha is constant in his acceptance of the demands of love. He is most severely tempted to swap love for revenge. But, even after learning that Belmonte is the son of the man who robbed and humiliated him, he guarantees safe-passage from his demesne for Constanze and the man she chooses. The Pasha is a more thoroughly-understood presentation than either Violante or Ilia of a necessary connection between love and suffering. Until this moment in Mozart's theatre such constancy had always been rewarded in a final happiness. The Pasha at the end of this *singspiel* is a man of tragic splendour. And we, who have been put at an amateur's distance by Belmonte's melodious song, and have acknowledged the pedestalling appropriateness of Constanze's fine emotion being heard as a thrilling sequence of high notes, are to recognize in the Pasha a figure of our own possibility. Mozart insists on the likeness between us and this splendid Turk. In the midst of the singing, the Pasha has only a speaking part.

A careless hearer might have found nothing in *Die Entführung* to offend patriotic, bourgeois, *buffa,* convention. *Le Nozze di Figaro* was immediately suspect. Anything derived from Beaumarchais' disruptive comedy would look dangerously revolutionary. As ever with Mozart, the appearance is not the thing. *Figaro* is not a political, class-war, opera. Mozart's music declares the valet, Figaro, to be as great a fool as his master, the Count. That the aristocrat's design to exercise a *droit de seigneur* comes to nothing is the result of Susanna's being quicker witted than either her suitor or her employer. But, again, this opera is not about some battle of the sexes. At the hopeful centre of *Figaro* is an aristocrat who continues to love her philandering husband. *Figaro* is about love as an endangered species. Love is under attack from the ill-disciplined crushes of the adolescent Cherubino, the voyeurist giggles of the choir-master, Basilio, and the casual infidelities of the Count. The Countess is, like the Pasha, a figure of love enduring through suffering. But now that love has a singing voice. Mozart is no longer suggesting that some ordinary speaker could figure such a love. In the Countess' music we hear the distinction of her spirit. We hear, too, the possibility of a shared forgiveness. This is the new element in Mozart's maturing meditation upon the ways of love. It informs each incident of this opera. Even the farcical business of Cherubino in the cupboard ends in the Countess' prophetic affirmation that he who cannot forgive does not deserve forgiveness: '*Perdono non merita chi agli altri nol dà*'. In the climactic

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1991.tb07166.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

scene of the opera, the Count has to learn the meaning of that *perdono*. Thinking he has caught his wife in a gazebo assignation, he denounces '*la perfida*'. When his villagers plead for her, he refuses to respond to their repeated '*perdono, perdono*'. This refusal inevitably brings about the revelation of his own plot to seduce Susanna. It is his turn to plead '*perdono*'. And the Countess' turn to invoke the resources of '*la mia costanza*'. At her forgiving him there is a mysterious change of key. In this change of the music Mozart declares that the world may be changed by such forgiveness.

If we would understand what the world would be like if there were no such response to our need to be forgiven and forgiving, we have only to listen to what Mozart did with the next libretto that da Ponte prepared for him.

Don Giovanni begins with the most savage assault on love: a girl is raped in her own home by a masked man. The opera's action derives its energy from this horrific start. There is in this music the violent working-out of a will towards total destruction. Things happen in a frantic rush. At Anna's shriek for help, her father comes running to his death by the masked man's sword. The rapist hurries away. Ottavio's awkward offer of conventional comforts cannot halt the career of anger. Anna is already far from him and his love. The race to hell is on.

Mozart's technical command of *dramma in musica* is perfectly demonstrated in his 'through-composing' this headlong opera, each incident sustained by a connective music, whilst he is, at the very same time, making us appalledly aware of the isolation of each character from every other. The narrative of *Don Giovanni* is moved forward in a series of soliloquizing arias. No one sings to anyone else. The violence of the rape has opened up cracks between their ways of experiencing. They perdure uncommunicatingly in a breaking world. The world no longer proceeds according to cause and effect. At the end of Act I, for example, the rapist has been recognized and cornered. All doors are barred. All swords are pointed at him. There is no way in which he can elude them. And yet, through some unexplained gap in the situation, Don Giovanni clambers into Act II.

Those he leaves behind are all terribly damaged. The Commendatore's fatherly honour collapses into a lust for revenge. Zerlina's innocence corrupts into the tricks of a silly flirt. Leporello's loyalty descends into a servile wage-demand. Anna is unable to bear her lover's touch. It would have been an act of heroic virtue for her to have forgiven her violator. But Mozart makes it clear that only by such forgiving could she and all those who are caught up in the cursed action have been restored to creative life. There is a most frightening moment when, in answer to Ottavio's pressing Anna to give up her bitter recollection of her experience, she makes a demand for bloody vengeance. '*Vendicar*' and '*sangue*' drive out the persuasions of '*il core amante*'. The opera fulfils her demand. Don Giovanni is seen amidst the

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1991.tb07166.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

flames of hell. The six witnesses to his damnation formulate his obituary: 'Sinners get their just deserts, as usual'. But their morality is not Mozart's morality. Its wise saws and modern instances are musicked in an old-hat fugue. Mozart has already declared against the retributive notions of this final sextet: '*Perdono non merita chi agli altri nol dà*'.

Mozart's questioning of conventional wisdom continues in the ironic title of *Così fan tutte*. Both the phrase and its music have their source in a line of the despicable Basilio, '*così fan tutte le belle*'. The remembrance of that original should put us at Mozart's own distance from such an oafish sentiment. And at his nearness to the people of this opera. Decent, fun-loving, and too quickly caught in the tangles of unbiddable emotions, they seem to be just what we so often tell ourselves we are.

Everything is stacked against Dorabella and Fiordiligi, the women of this opera. They are in Naples, far from their Ferrarese family and friends. Their suitors, Ferrando and Guglielmo, are ready to deceive them grossly just in order to win a bet. Their trusted adviser is casually plotting to ruin their reputations. Their maid is taking bribes from a stranger to let stranger young men into their home. They have only each other. And they are not alike. When their young men come in impenetrable disguise, Dorabella falls quite quickly. Fiordiligi maintains her integrity through a series of Ferrando's assaults. And, at the very moment of her surrender to this new love, she is all too complexedly aware of herself as needing forgiveness: '*perdona all'error d'un'alma amante*'. As her aria becomes more and more technically demanding, her suffering grows more and more unbearable until at its last pitch we know that she must fall too. It is inevitable, in such a design as the men have managed, that she should be stopped in her singing by the untimely entrance of Ferrando. '*Ah*', she sighs, '*la mia costanza*'. Having lost their bet, what will the young men do now? We look for an happy ending. And Ferrando, after an immediate tirade against the girl he has tricked, in which '*mio tradito affetto*' figures with '*ah, perfida*', cannot long resist the promptings of his heart, '*o Dio, questo cor per lei mi parla*!'. That, says the cynical Don Alfonso, more truly than such a cynic could know, is true constancy, '*Questa è costanza!*'. The C minor of Ferrando's fury is perfectly transmuted into the C major of his forgiveness. When Dorabella and Fiordiligi begin a canonic ensemble, Ferrando is ready to take his part. But Guglielmo cannot recover confidence in Fiordiligi. The canon's music reaches too high for his bass. He remains his muttering his own anger below. His suffering does not issue in '*perdono*'.

It may be that in his sulky sense of injury Guglielmo seems altogether too like us. But such a refusal of forgiveness was so painful to Mozart that he could not bear to hear it sung. The canon, and with it Guglielmo's cursing, was cut from the January 1790 performances.

Mozart's conviction that *affetto* must be expressed as *perdono* in the

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1991.tb07166.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

face of *perfido,* which had shaped his early pieces and been most thoroughly developed in the great da Ponte operas, was, undoubtedly, given most immediate power in *Così fan tutte.* But, as the history of other attempts to press such a view of life on us suggests, it was not to be supposed that everyone in Mozart's audiences would thenceforward interpret their experience in the ways he was proposing. All women and men not being alike, some at least would be unlikely to respond to the delicate complexities of *Così fan tutte.* For them, Mozart would try other forms of opera.

In the summer of 1791, Mozart received a commission for an opera to be given in Prague as part of the official festivities for the coronation of Leopold II as King of Bohemia. He needed the money. *La Clemenza di Tito* was ready for the September celebrations. In what seems even now a startling inversion of musical history, the Pasha of modern *buffa* has here become an Emperor of *opera seria,* that hieratic, declamatory, art of the old regimes. What were either conservatives or revolutionaries in 1791 to make of an opera that centres on an autocrat who is self-denying, merciful, forgiving? It is not at all surprizing that 'there was at court', as Count Heinrich Rottenham noted after the loss-making performances, 'a certain prejudice against Mozart's compositions'. This time the Emperor had ears only for Marchetti-Fantozzi, the leading soprano, the Empress, italianate in all her opinions, dismissed the opera as a piece of german piggishness, '*una porcheria tedesca*', Count Zinzendorf made a diary entry about 'a most tedious spectacle'. Mozart, however, thought it '*vera opera*', as truly presenting truth as *singspiel* and *buffa.*

In the figure of Tito, the emperor who sacrifices his happiness, surrenders the girl he loves, forgives the friend who plots his assassination, and devotes himself to the good of his people, Mozart found the most perfect image so far of that love which comes through pain to re-make the world for others. He found in the old Metastasio text a resonant vocabulary of that '*vero pentimento*' which is more pleasing even than '*costante fedeltà*', of that *clemenza* which is communicated in '*tutti assolvo*'. This is the language of dominical sayings and penitential liturgy. Mozart is entirely happy to make it his own. We live, he says, in '*sacri giorni*'. *La Clemenza di Tito,* in which a benign and merciful ruler sustains his world against the disintegrating violence of women and men, might well be received as a masque of the mercy of God.

Mozart was equally ready to put his meaning in the language of pantomime, to use the sacred and the pantomimic languages at the same time. In the weeks that he was composing *La Clemenza di Tito,* he was completing the transformation scenes of *Die Zauberflöte.* Here again is the kindly monarch, it may seem, who works his gracious will out of the wickedness of an angry woman, enables a young man to marry his beloved princess, and keeps his subjects in good order. The dramatic tone, however, is very different. *Die Zauberflöte* is a sure-fire

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1991.tb07166.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

extravaganza, a magic fantasy complete with a dragon, wild woods, spirits dangling in their harnesses from the flies, forbidden doors, monkeys, dungeons, a dancing blackamoor, a wizard, and a wicked mother-in-law. Within this fantastic action, four very real youngsters are very really looking for love. Prince Tamino, whom we see first rather unheroically fainting at the hot breath of the dragon, is a romantic, snobbish, chap who believes whatever he is told and does whatever he is told. He falls in love at the drop of a portrait, sets off obediently to find the princess Pamina, fails to notice that the bird-catcher Papageno finds her first, declares his undying love, and then, obedient again, refuses to speak to her because a priest has told him to keep quiet. Neither librettist nor composer means us to identify with this aristocratic dolt. Both text and music insist that we would do better to identify with Papageno. Schikaneder, the librettist, played the part himself in the 1791 performances at his Theater auf der Wieden. Mozart liked to play Papageno's jingle bells in the stage wings. Papageno is unreliable, always getting into scrapes, always telling lies in the hope of getting out of scrapes, easily distracted by a viennese cream cake, irritating to those in authority. Both the Queen of the Night and the High Priest want him silenced. But he goes on singing. Mozart gives him, not Tamino, the great love duet of the opera. It is he who sings of the happiness of '*mann und wib*' with the princess. But, of course, Papageno, too, is not worthy of Pamina. Caught by Sarastro's guards when attempting to get her away, he asks what story they should tell. 'The truth', says Pamina. So he looks around for some less demanding lover. Papageno realizes that if there is to be any sense to his life, he must keep on looking for love. Not aspiring to Pamina, deprived by the authorities of a girl of his own sort, he accepts the love of an old crone. Everything must be forgiven such a chap. The old crone must turn out to be his girl-friend. It is Papagena who has come to him in this guise. We clap.

Whatever the demand of Sarastro, the High Priest, for '*ein mann*' to subject himself to the prescribed rites of passage, Papageno is our hero. We are all willing him to beat the system. To get a laugh out of Sarastro. For Sarastro is not Tito. It is not simply that Sarastro is a pompous ass. He is more unpleasant even than that. There is not much to choose between his menacing rhetoric of 'holy', 'manhood', and 'enlightenment', and the Queen's shrill repetition of 'revenge', 'death', and 'hell'. He is certainly slower to reward and quicker to punish than the Queen. The first sight we have of his government is the blackamoor being sentenced to seventy-seven lashes. If we find ourselves unhappy at the way in which he and his henchmen threaten the young lovers but willing in the case of the lusting blackamoor to forget that '*perdono non merita chi agli altri nol da*', that should be a disturbing self-discovery.

Realizing that we are not yet loving and forgiving enough, we must put our hope in being loved and forgiven. Tamino should be more aware of himself as '*falscher jungling*', but the ill-used Pamina proves his

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1991.tb07166.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

constant lover. She will, as she promises, bring him through every danger, '*ich selbsten fuhre dich*'. Love, she assures him, will find the way, '*die Liebe leite mich*'.

In November 1791, after the twenty-fourth performance, Zinzendorf noted sniffily that there had been 'a huge audience' at 'this incredible farce'. Perhaps the women and men and children at *Die Zauberflöte* were no more ready than their betters at *La Clemenza di Tito* to receive Mozart's meaning, though I do not care to think so. His farce, like his *opera seria,* refers to all that he found credible in our world. In both these last stage works he affirms that love will find the way, that suffering will be redemptive, that all faults may be pardoned. Now, on his deathbed, he was confronted by that Judgement which had provoked the crisis of *Die Schuldigkeit des ersten Gebotes.* He was reaching, in the *Requiem,* the violently imagined lines of the *Dies Irae*:

Lacrimosa dies illa
Qua resurget ex favilla
Judicandus homo reus.

He felt himself to be that justly accused man. He stopped composing here. He left the next line for others to set in their prayers:

Huic ergo parce Deus

and, hoping with us for forgiveness, he slipped down into our common grave.

A Study of the Poem: *Noche oscura del alma* of St John of the Cross

Edward Sarmiento

Noche Oscura

Stanzas

en que canta el alma la dichosa ventura quo tuvo pasar por ***La Oscura Noche de la Fe*** *en desnudez y purgación suya, a la unión del amado.*

1 En una noche oscura,
con ansias, en amores inflamada,
oh dichosa ventura!,
salí sin ser notada,
estando ya mi casa sosegada; 5

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1991.tb07166.x Published online by Cambridge University Press