

# Oh Susanna: The Wise Women of Mozart

*In Mozart's operas, as in his life, says Anat Sharon of the Department of Literature, Language and the Arts at the Open University, women rather than men are the ones who come out on top and who win our hearts. Mozart loved and valued women in his personal life and this was reflected in his operas. Through brilliant musical interpretations, his sympathetic, vividly-drawn portraits make audiences love even the most evil of women.*

Mozart's fascinating, complex female operatic characters are more than simply great musical creations. They also reflect the value Mozart himself placed on the women in his personal life. The women who were influential in Mozart's personal life were his mother Anna Maria; his talented sister Nannerl; his cousin Maria Anna; the woman whom he loved in his youth, Aloysia Weber; and her sister, his beloved wife Constanze.

In a recent lecture, Anat Sharon discussed the way that Mozart depicted women on stage rising above every test that men subject them to. Clearly, Mozart related to the women differently from the way he related to men.

According to Anat Sharon, "Mozart's attitude to women can be considered both in terms of their standing in society as a whole and in terms of his personal life. Mozart himself was open-minded and aware of the lack of justice and equality in the feudal society in which he found himself. In the court of the Archbishop of Salzburg, where he lived and worked as a musician, he was considered no more than a kind of servant.

"It is clear that this social order outraged him not only with regard to what he considered his own servitude, but also with regard to women. Therefore, sometimes women in his operas work together to protect their interests against the joint 'enemy'—men.



**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart at piano with muses by Hausleitner (Lebrecht Music and Arts)**

There is no doubt that the depictions of women in Mozart's operas are deeper, broader and more interesting than the depictions of men."

The question is how much of this slant is due to the librettist and how much to Mozart himself.

According to Anat Sharon, "In the operas Mozart wrote with librettist Lorenzo da Ponte, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Così fan Tutte* and *Don Giovanni*, Mozart was a full partner

in the dramatic design of the plot. He didn't just receive completed texts; he also placed his personal stamp on the characters. One outstanding example of a musical image of a woman that is actually opposed to the text is the Queen of the Night in *The Magic Flute*. In the story, her character is absolutely a negative one. But Mozart gave her the most beautiful, much-loved arias that make the audience adore her. Thanks to Mozart's music, an image that could easily have been one-sided is in fact something much more complex."

Anat Sharon explains, "One of the most idealized feminine characters of all in Mozart's operas is in fact not a noblewoman but a servant. That is Susanna in *The Marriage of Figaro*. Although traditionally in the commedia dell'arte, servants are more full of life and wit than their employers, Susanna is much more than this. She is an intelligent woman who knows how to read, write and play music. In one scene, Susanna and the Countess sit and together write a letter in which they help catch the Count in his betrayal. The countess dictates and Susanna writes; an example of two women working in harmony against men. The music also reflects the relationship between the two. They sing a soprano duet in which the countess sings and Susanna replies. The melodies and words are so intermingled that it is virtually impossible to determine which woman is singing which melody. In effect, the two become one. Though this is not explicitly stated in the libretto, the

## Research



*Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's opera Le Nozze Di Figaro*  
(Tristram Kenton/Lebrecht Music and Arts)

music is depicting a state of equality between the two in Mozart's eyes, even though they belong to two different social levels.

"This is seen even more clearly in Mozart's decision to write an aria for Susanna to sing to seduce the Count, which is actually a serenade. A woman singing a love serenade is unheard of. Susanna is behaving like a man, trying to forge her own path in life. There had been nothing like this in the world of opera, until Mozart, since women were thought at the time to lack the intellect and capacity for rational thought that would enable them to manage their lives for themselves.

"Mozart knew this well, because he had a personal example at home. Constanze was very shrewd and had initiative and good business sense, as

can be seen by how well she established herself and their children after Mozart died penniless. She guarded his heritage, helped publish his works and was instrumental in the writing of his first biography."

In contrast to the women in Mozart's operas who are very aware, men in the operas tend to be rather confused. "It seems that Mozart didn't value men very highly, especially compared to women, who in his eyes were always more complex and interesting. The male characters in the operas are more one-sided. In *The Magic Flute*, the only character whom the audience supports wholeheartedly is Papageno, the bird-catcher, who touches our hearts with his simplicity and innocence."

In all the operas, men are convinced that women are fickle betrayers. Generally,

this is all in their imaginations, but in *All Women Do That (Così Fan Tutte)*, it turns out to be true: when the men are not near them, women are untrue.

According to Anat Sharon, "Even in *Così Fan Tutte*, Mozart's sympathies are on the side of the women. Here, the men set a test of loyalty and the women, who originally hadn't thought of betrayal, are swept away. This also happens to the men, so that in fact, not only do all women 'do that' but men too. This is apparently human nature.

"In spite of the 'good' ending, there is no doubt that the message is subversive and there is an expression of something like feminism. Although the opera seems to indicate that women are dependent on men for love, in fact Mozart does not suffice with what is written in the libretto. He makes his own contribution to the different characters through musical characterization in his operas.

"Another excellent example is the duet that opens *The Marriage of Figaro*. Figaro is measuring the size of the room where he and Susanna will live after their marriage while Susanna is trying on her wedding bonnet in front of the mirror. He is pleased with the room; she is less so. They sing a duet composed of two separate tunes – his, staccato in buffo style; hers, lyric and sensitive. The audience is made to wonder how on earth these two will ever live together compatibly if they sing in two completely different musical languages. It is also clear from the music, that she is the one who will set the tone in their marriage. And that is indeed what happens in the opera – Figaro dances to her tune."

In such a way, in both the operas and in much of Mozart's personal life, do men dance to women's tunes.