

The Marriage of Figaro

(Le nozze di Figaro)

An Opera in four acts. Sung in Italian, with supertitles

Music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Based on the French comedy of the same name by Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais

Premiere: Vienna, May 1, 1786

Act 1

While preparing for their wedding, the valet Figaro learns from the maid Susanna that their philandering employer, Count Almaviva, has designs on her. At this the servant vows to outwit his master. Before long the scheming Bartolo enters the servants' quarters with his housekeeper, Marcellina, who wants Figaro to marry her to cancel a debt he cannot pay. After Marcellina and Susanna trade insults, the amorous page, Cherubino arrives, reveling in his infatuation with all woman. He hides when the Count shows up, furious because he caught Cherubino flirting with Barbarina, the gardener's daughter. The count pursues Susanna but conceals himself when the gossiping music master Don Basilio approaches. The Count steps forward, however, when Basilio suggests that Cherubino has a crush on the Countess. Almaviva is enraged further when he discovers Cherubino in the room. Figaro returns with fellow servants, who praise the Count's progressive reform in abolishing the droit du seigneur – the right of a noble to take a manservant's place on his wedding night. Almaviva assigns Cherubino to his regiment in Seville and leaves Figaro to cheer up the unhappy adolescent.

Act 2

In her boudoir, the Countess laments her husband's waning lover but plots to chasten him, encouraged by Figaro and Susanna. They will send Cherubino disguised as Susanna, to a romantic assignation with the Count. Cherubino, smitten with the Countess, appears, and the two women begin to dress the page for his farcical rendezvous. While Susanna goes out to find a ribbon, the Count knocks at the door, furious to find it locked. Cherubino quickly hides in a closet, and the Countess admits her husband, who, when he hears a noise, is skeptical of her story that Susanna is inside the wardrobe. He takes his wife to fetch some tools with which to force the closet door. Meanwhile, Susanna, having observed everything from behind a screen, helps Cherubino out a window, and then takes his place in the closet. Both Count and Countess are amazed to find her there. All seems well until the gardener, Antonio, storms in with crushed geraniums from a flowerbed below the window. Figaro who has run in to announce that the wedding is ready, pretends it was he who jumped from the window, faking a sprained ankle. Marcellina, Bartolo and Basilio burst into the room waving a court summons for Figaro, which delights the Count, as this gives him an excuse to delay the wedding.

Act 3

In an audience room where the wedding is to take place, Susanna leads the Count on with promises of a rendezvous in the garden. The nobleman, however, grows doubtful when he spies her conspiring with Figaro; he vows revenge. Marcellina is astonished but thrilled to discover that Figaro is in fact her long-lost natural son by Bartolo. Mother and son embrace, provoking Susanna's anger until she too learns the truth. Finding a quiet moment the Countess recalls her past happiness, and then joins Susanna in composing a letter that invites the Count to the garden that night. Later, during the marriage ceremony of Figaro and Susanna, the bride manages to slip the note, sealed with a pin, to the Count, who he pricks his finger, dropping the pin, which Figaro retrieves.

Act 4

In the moonlit garden, Barbarina, after unsuccessfully trying to find the lost hatpin, tells Figaro and Marcellina about the coming assignation between the Count and Susanna. Figaro inveighs against women and leaves, missing Susanna and the Countess, ready for their masquerade. Alone, Susanna rhapsodizes on her love for Figaro, but he, overhearing, thinks she means the Count. Susanna hides in time to see Cherubino woo the Countess – now disguised in Susanna's dress – until Almaviva chases him away and sends his wife, who he thinks is Susanna, to an arbor. By now Figaro understands the joke and, joining the fun, makes exaggerated love to Susanna in her Countess disguise. The Count returns, seeing, or so he thinks, Figaro with his wife. Outraged, he calls everyone to witness his judgment, but now the real Countess appears and reveals the ruse. Grasping the truth at last, the Count begs her pardon. All are reunited, and so ends this “mad day” at the court of the Almavivas.

Historical Context

When *The Marriage of Figaro* premiered (1786):

- George III is the King of England; George Washington will not be elected as the first president of the United States for another three years.
- Two French mountaineers, Jacques Balmat and Michel-Gabriel Paccard, are the first to scale Mont Blanc.
- In three years, civil unrest in France will lead to the French Revolution.
- Davy Crockett is born.
- Frederick II (The Great), King of Prussia dies.
- Stagecoaches have been carrying the mail between towns in the United States for one year.
- United States Congress establishes the United States mint.
- Eli Whitney's cotton gin will not be invented for another seven years.

Program Notes: The Marriage of Figaro
Mozart's comic Operatic Masterpiece-
The Height of Comedy with Serious Depth
By Charles H. Parsons
Opera Historian

Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* (1786) is one of the most beloved comic operas of all. Audiences have been laughing and enjoying its humor for over two centuries. Yet no one probably enjoyed the humor as much as Mozart himself. Noted for a ready, if sometimes childish, wit, Mozart certainly enjoyed tweaking the prevailing social class system of his day. And no one was more aware than Mozart of the dangers of such tweaking and the serious underside of Figaro's story. Mozart had audaciously chosen to base his opera on Pierre de Beaumarchais' play *Le Marriage de Figaro* (1784), which with vicious political satire mocked the French nobility and absolutism in general. The play was soon to become a rallying cry for the French Revolution (1787-1799).

Mozart was dependent on commissions from the Austrian court and could little afford to offer offense, even when disguised as comedy. Still, the composer, the court and audiences laughed at the frustrated, amorous misadventures of Count Almaviva and Figaro's clever manipulation of his social superiors. We laugh at the ruses used to hide the truth and reality as Cherubino hides behind and in the chair while overhearing the Count's revelation of amorous intrigue at the Count's none-too-sophisticated attempts to seduce Susanna; at Cherubino's youthful infatuation with Countess Almaviva; at Cherubino's ineffectual disguise as a girl (doubly so, as we see a woman playing a man playing a woman!); at Cherubino hurling himself out of a window to escape discovery; at Figaro's "injured" leg as he attempts to cover Cherubino's escape; at the multiple disguises of the last act; and a myriad of other comic situations.

Yet behind all this—as is so true of great comedy—lies a seriousness, a sense of the near-tragedy of life, of great depth of emotion, and an appreciation of life in all its variety, foibles, quirks and greatness. Looking at the comedy from the other side, we see a darker, more serious picture of life.

- If the Count fails to seduce Susanna he can always force himself on her by demanding his right to the 'droit du seigneur' then prevalent among the nobility—the ruling lord had the right to "favors" with any of his female servants on her wedding night even before the legitimate groom.
- Cherubino is young, the Countess much older. Would such a May-September affair thrive?
- What of the Countess... how does she feel in seeing the open promiscuity of her husband? Or the possibility of her own unfaithfulness?
- Cherubino must be disguised and then escape the Count's anger for disobeying his orders, which would subject him to serve a punishment.
- And what of Figaro's complicity in plattiong against the Count?

- As for the multiple disguises, they are manifestations of intrigue and insubordination—subject to dire punishment. Besieged nobility has no sense of humor!

Yet, from all the complexities of the plot and the dichotomy of good and evil emerges true human nobility. It is nobility not based on social class, heritage, power or rule of law, but rather a human nobility built on the depths of humanity, from the love of that humanity and God-given capacity to forgive. Nowhere is this more movingly expressed than in the brief scene near the end of the opera wherein the Count sincerely asks forgiveness of the Countess (“Contessa, perdono”), who willingly and movingly forgives him. The comedy comes full circle to this completion.