

# Mozart on the Stage<sup>1</sup>

JOHN A. RICE

Independent Scholar

THE WORD “miraculous” comes easily to those who think about Mozart’s operas. In no genre did he more obviously surpass even the most talented of his compositional contemporaries; and since his training, his exposure to the operas of other composers, and musical life in Vienna cannot fully account for the perfection of his later operas, we may be tempted to call them miraculous and leave it at that. Yet something about Mozart’s relation with the theater—not only opera but theater in the broadest sense—may help to explain some of what he achieved as a composer of opera.

Let us start at the beginning, with Salzburg and Leopold. Neither Mozart’s hometown nor his father was particularly interested in opera. During the 1750s and 1760s, when he was a child, Salzburg saw the performance of a few Italian operas; but it was no operatic center. Leopold, a prolific composer, wrote not a single opera, and in letters written before his son began to write operas, he demonstrated no particular interest in or fondness for opera.

Yet one theatrical genre did flourish in Salzburg: school dramas put on at the Benedictine university. These Latin plays gave Mozart what seems to have been his first practical contact with the theater. In 1761 he had a minor role in *Sigismundus Hungariae Rex*; Mozart’s name appeared in print for the first time in the booklet published for this production.<sup>2</sup> Already as a five-year-old he experienced the thrill of being on stage, the pleasures of costumes, disguises, make-believe, and applause.

In considering the childhoods of other operatic composers of the eighteenth century I can think of no theatrical debut like Mozart’s. I suspect his performance at such an early age helped to establish in his mind a desire that stayed with him throughout his life—a desire, simply put, to be on the stage.

---

<sup>1</sup>Read 11 November 2006, as part of the Symposium on Mozart.

<sup>2</sup>*Mozart: Die Dokumente seines Lebens*, ed. Otto Erich Deutsch (Kassel, 1961), 14.

That desire surfaced during Carnival 1783. The twenty-seven-year-old musician, now well established in Vienna as an independent artist—and one of the most famous composers in Europe—wrote to his father, “On Carnival Monday our company of masqueraders went to the ballroom, where we performed a pantomime that exactly filled the half hour when there is a pause in the dancing. My sister-in-law was Columbine, I played Harlequin, my brother-in-law Pierrot. . . . Both the plot and the music of the pantomime were mine . . . and I must say we played it charmingly.”<sup>3</sup>

Even in the last months of his life Mozart could not resist the urge to appear on stage—in sound if not in person. At a performance of *The Magic Flute* he circulated among the audience—that is, until Papageno’s aria in act 2. Afterward he wrote to his wife, “. . . during Papageno’s aria with the glockenspiel I went backstage, feeling a sort of impulse to play it myself. Just for fun, where Schikaneder [who played Papageno] has a pause, I played an arpeggio. He was startled, looked behind the wings and saw me. When he had his next pause, I played no arpeggio. This time he stopped and refused to go on. I guessed what he was thinking and again played a chord. He then struck the glockenspiel and said ‘Shut up.’ Whereupon everyone laughed.”<sup>4</sup>

Mozart had few opportunities to act; he sublimated his desire to be on stage into a passion to write operas. That passion differentiated him from some of his contemporaries. Haydn, for example, a willing, competent, and prolific composer of operas, never expressed in his letters what Mozart expressed repeatedly—his desire to write operas and the excitement and pleasure he received from their success.

The theater represented for Mozart an opportunity not only to be on stage in front of an admiring audience, but also to mingle with a part of society that, throughout his life, represented the ideal audience for his talents and accomplishments—the court and the aristocracy. Mozart probably learned to associate the theater with contact with the upper reaches of society before he left Salzburg. But his early travels hammered this association home.

Of the reception of *Ascanio in Alba* (Milan, 1771) Leopold wrote home to his wife, “Their Royal Highnesses the Archduke and Archduchess not only caused two arias to be repeated by applauding them, but both during the serenata and afterward leaned over from their box toward Wolfgang and showed their gracious approval by calling out

---

<sup>3</sup> *Mozart: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen*, ed. Wilhelm A. Bauer, Otto Erich Deutsch, and Joseph Heinz Eibl, 7 vols. (Kassel, 1962–75), 3:259.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:160.

‘Bravissimo, maestro’ and clapping their hands. Their applause was taken up each time by the courtiers and the whole audience.”<sup>5</sup> How similar is Mozart’s report, written from Vienna twelve years later, of a concert he gave in the Burgtheater in 1783: “The theater could not have been more crowded and . . . every box was full. But what pleased me most of all was that His Majesty the Emperor was present and how delighted he was and how he applauded me!”<sup>6</sup>

Mozart’s travels constituted another aspect of his childhood in which he differed from most of the operatic composers of his age, providing him with a vast array of theatrical experiences before the age of twelve, and before most of his compositional contemporaries saw their first opera. The travels brought him to London, where he lived from April 1764 to July 1765, and where he celebrated his ninth birthday. His experiences in London, more than any other city, including Vienna, represented the single most crucial turning point in his relations with the theater.

Leopold wrote as follows of Italian opera in London: “This winter, nobody is making much money except Manzoli and a few others in the opera. Manzoli is getting 1500 pounds for this season. . . . In addition he is giving a benefit, that is, an evening recital for himself, so that this winter he will be earning more than 20,000 Gulden. He is the only person whom they have had to pay decently. . . . Five or six operas are being performed. The first was *Ezio*, the second *Berenice*, . . . the third *Adriano in Siria*, newly composed by Signor Bach [that is, Johann Christian Bach].”<sup>7</sup>

Leopold’s principal interest in the London opera was financial—the money the castrato Giovanni Manzoli made. As for the operas being performed, two things stand out: the repertory during the Mozarts’ visit consisted entirely of opera seria, and it was dominated by settings of librettos by Pietro Metastasio, the century’s greatest librettist of serious opera.

Compare Leopold’s letter with Wolfgang’s experience in London, which also involved Manzoli and opera seria. I quote from the account of Daines Barrington, published in 1771 in the *Philosophical Transactions* of the American Philosophical Society’s sister-institution, the Royal Society:

Happening to know that little Mozart was much taken notice of by Manzoli, the famous singer . . . I said to the boy, that I should be glad

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 1:445.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 3:261.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 1:178–79.

to hear an extemporary *Love Song*, such as his friend Manzoli might choose in an opera.

The boy on this (who continued to sit at his harpsichord) looked back with much archness, and immediately began five or six lines of a jargon recitative proper to introduce a love song.

He then played a symphony which might correspond with an air composed to the single word, *Affetto*. [By symphony Barrington meant what we would call an instrumental introduction. The aria that followed] had a first and second part, which, together with the symphonies, was of the length that opera songs generally last: if this extemporary composition was not amazingly capital, yet it was really above mediocrity, and shewed most extraordinary readiness of invention.

Finding that he was in humour and, as it were, inspired, I then desired him to compose a *Song of Rage*, such as might be proper for the opera stage.

The boy again looked back with much archness, and began five or six lines of a jargon recitative proper to precede a *Song of Anger*.

This lasted also about the same time with the *Song of Love*; and in the middle of it, he had worked himself up to such a pitch, that he beat his harpsichord like a person possessed, rising sometimes in his chair.

The word he pitched upon for this second extemporary composition was, *Perfido*.<sup>8</sup>

Mozart's voice, wrote Barrington, "in the tone of it was thin and infantine, but nothing could exceed the masterly manner in which he sung." The music historian Charles Burney also witnessed Mozart's operatic improvisation, which in his words amounted to "an extemporary opera to nonsense words"—"after which he played at marbles, in the true childish way of one who knows nothing."<sup>9</sup>

Several themes emerged from the London stay that were to constitute leitmotifs in Mozart's relations with the theater for the rest of his life.

In London, opera became for the first time a means for Mozart to perform—to earn admiration and praise. And by earning money for Leopold—since Londoners paid to see Mozart improvise—opera became a way for him to earn his father's approval. Earlier in his travels he had amazed and delighted audiences with his keyboard antics, and he never stopped doing so. But in London he found a new outlet for his talents that allowed him to experience the thrill of being on the stage. He wrote no real opera, but the "extemporary opera to nonsense words"

<sup>8</sup> *Mozart: Die Dokumente seines Lebens*, 98.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, Addenda, Neue Folge, ed. Cliff Eisen (Kassel, 1997), 20.

that Burney admired was the seed from which Mozart's career as an operatic composer grew.

London offered Mozart his first sustained contact with opera seria. For the first ten years of his career as an operatic composer, he acted (for the most part) as if opera buffa didn't exist. He wrote to his father in 1778, "Do not forget how much I desire to write operas. I envy anyone who is composing one. I could really weep with frustration when I hear or see an aria. But Italian, not German; serious, not comic."<sup>10</sup> The mature artist of twenty-two expressed here a longing to be part of the same operatic culture to which he had been introduced in London thirteen years earlier.

From London also dates Mozart's attachment to Metastasio's poetry, and his recognition of it as a potential inspiration for his own music. Many of his early arias are settings of words by the *poeta cesareo*; and when he received his first commission for an opera in Italy he recommended that the libretto be one of Metastasio's. Those responsible for choosing the libretto did not follow his advice (the opera was *Mitridate*); but at the end of his life he returned to Metastasio for his last Italian opera, *La clemenza di Tito*.

In London, too, Mozart learned to associate opera with personal relations with singers. Throughout his life he cultivated such relations, sometimes going well beyond professional collaboration. With one, Aloysia Weber, he fell in love; another, Emanuel Schikaneder, became a drinking buddy and a Masonic brother. Opera offered Mozart not only outlets for his musical and dramatic talents, but also opportunities for social interaction. In the theater he found not only admiration and applause, but friendship and love.

London was a turning point for Leopold as well as Wolfgang, whose experiences there apparently gave Leopold the idea of taking his son to Italy and making him a composer of opera seria. That idea approached fruition in December 1769, when they left Salzburg on their first trip to Italy.

In one of Mozart's first surviving letters, he wrote to his sister of the Carnival opera he had just attended in Verona. This fascinating document reveals much about Mozart's relations with the theater, bringing together almost every aspect of these relations mentioned here. It is reprinted as an appendix to this essay.

The letter begins in German but switches soon to Italian, changes back into German and then Italian; amid many quick changes of language Mozart even found opportunity to insert a little Venetian dialect.

---

<sup>10</sup> Mozart: *Briefe und Aufzeichnungen*, 2:254.

The letter finally ends in French. This linguistic playfulness is a product of Mozart's travels, but also a manifestation of his theatricality—a kind of play-acting, an assumption of different roles. The letter deals mostly with *Ruggiero*, an opera by Pietro Guglielmi on a libretto by Caterino Mazzolà—the same poet who, twenty-one years later, reworked Metastasio's *La clemenza di Tito* for Mozart. The young musician playfully confused the singers with the characters they played on stage, showing his interest in the singers as people—the same eagerness to establish relations with singers that he had shown in London with his friendship with Manzoli. I quote part of the letter in translation:

Now we are always hearing operas, one of which is entitled *Ruggiero*. Oronte, the father of Bradamante, is a prince (played by Signor Afferi), an excellent singer, a baritone, but forced when he sings falsetto, but not as much as Tibaldi in Vienna. Bradamante, daughter of Oronte, is in love with Ruggiero (she is to marry Leone, but she does not want him); she is played by a poor baroness who has had a great misfortune, but I don't know what it was. She is singing under an assumed name, but I don't know it; her voice is tolerably good and she doesn't look bad, but she sings devilishly out of tune. Ruggiero, a rich prince, in love with Bradamante, a castrato, sings a little in the manner of Manzoli and has a very beautiful, strong voice, and is already old; he is fifty-five years old and has a flexible throat. Leone, who is to marry Bradamante, is very rich, but whether he is rich off the stage, I do not know. He is portrayed by a woman, Afferi's wife. She has a most beautiful voice, but there is so much noise in the theater that one cannot hear a thing. Irene is sung by a sister of Lolli, the great violinist we heard in Vienna. She has a muffled voice and always sings a sixteenth-note too late or too early. Ganno is played by a gentleman whose name I do not know; he is singing for the first time.

We get a wonderful sense here of Mozart being fully involved in every aspect of the opera—the plot, the performers, the audience. Verona was not an important operatic center, most of the singers second-rate, and the opera itself of no great significance. Yet Mozart was in his element.

When not attending the opera, Mozart demonstrated, in a series of concerts, his prowess in operatic improvisation and singing. In Verona (according to a local newspaper) “four verses [were] submitted to him, on which he composed on the spot an aria in the best taste in the very act of singing it.” And in Mantua “he sang a whole aria extempore, on new words never before seen by him, adding the proper accompaniments.”<sup>11</sup>

He continued on to Milan, where he wrote several arias in the hope of winning a commission to compose an opera for the court theater.

---

<sup>11</sup> *Mozart: Die Dokumente seines Lebens*, 105, 107.

Having improvised an aria on four lines of text, as he had done in Verona, it was a small step to put an aria down on paper. One of his earliest surviving arias, “Per pietà, bell’idol mio,” K. 78, is a setting of a four-line aria text from Metastasio’s *Artaserse* (fig. 1). This is the kind of music that Mozart might have improvised as he approached his fourteenth birthday, his boyhood soprano voice still intact. To return to the adjective with which I began, this music is hardly miraculous, but it does display the high level of craftsmanship that Mozart had achieved as a fourteen-year-old. It is also a kind of self-portrait in sound. In it we can hear not only Mozart the composer, but Mozart the singer and the actor—the *performer* whose artistic and emotional life was already inextricably tied to the stage.

## APPENDIX

MOZART’S LETTER FROM VERONA, 7 JANUARY 1770<sup>12</sup>

Verona il sette  
1770 di Jenuario

Allerliebste schwester.

Einen spanlangen habe ich gehabt, weil ich so lang auf eine antwort vergebens gewartet habe, ich hatte auch ursache, weil ich deinen brief von 1 ten nicht empfangen habe. ietzt hört der Teutsche tölpel auf, und fängt daß welsche Tölperl an. Lei è piu franco nella lingua italiana, di quel che mi hò imaginato. lei mi Dica la cagione, perchè lei non fù nella Comedia che anno giocato i cavalieri? adeßo sentiamo sempre opere: che è Titulata: *il Ruggiero*. *Oronte* il padre di *bradamento* è un principe, (fà il sig: *afferi*) un bravo cantante, un paritono, ma (gezwungen wen er in falset hinauf gügez, aber doch nicht so sehr, wie der Tibaldi zu Wienn.) *Bradamenta*, figlia d’oronte, innamorata di Ruggiero, ma, (sie soll den leone heyrahten, sie will ihn aber nicht.) fà, una povera baroneßa, che hà avuto una gran disgratia, mà non sò chè? Recità (unter einem fremden nam, ich weis aber den namen nicht) hà una voce passabile, e la Statura non sarebbe male, ma distona come il Diabolo. *Ruggiero* un Ricco principe, innamorato della bradamenta, un Musico, canta un poco manzolisich, ed à una bellissimoà voce forte, ed è gia Vecchio, hà cinquanta cinque anni, ed à una leiffige gurgel. Leone, soll die bradamenta heyrahten, reichischime est, ob er aber ausser dem Theatro reichist, das weis ich nicht, fà una Donna, la moglie di *afferi*, à una bellissimoà voce, ma c’è tanto sußurro nell theatro, che non si sente niente. *Irene*, fà una sorella di Lolli, del gran violinisto, che abbiamo sentito à Vienna. à una schnoffelte voce, e canta

<sup>12</sup>From Mozart: *Briefe und Aufzeichnungen*, 1:301–02.

**Andante con moto**  
Artaserse

Soprano

Per pie - tà, bell' i - dol - mi - o, non mi dir ch'io so - no in -

4

S - gra - to: in - fe - li - ce, e sven - tu - ra - to ab - ba -

7

S - stan - za il - ciel mi fa, ab - ba - stan -

11

S

Oboes, Horns

Strings

Strings

Strings

Oboes, Horns

Oboes, Horns

FIGURE 1. Mozart, “Per pietà, bell'idol mio,” K. 78, mm. 1–32

15

S

za il ciel mi fa. Per pie - tà, bell' i - dol mio, non mi

Oboes, Horns, Strings

19

S

dir ch'io so-no in - gra - tor in - fe - li - ce, e sven-tu - ra - - - to ab - ba -

23

S

stan - - - - za il ciel mi fa, ab - ba - stan - - - -

Oboe

Strings

28

S

za il cor mi fa, ab - ba - stan - - - za il cor mi fa.

Strings

Oboes, Horns, Strings

sempre um ein viertel zu tardi, ò troppo à buon ora. *Ganno* fà, un signor, che non sò come egli si chiama, è la prima volta che lui Recita. zwischen einem jedem act is ein balet: es ist ein braver Tanzer da, der sich nenet: *Monsieur Ruesler* er ist ein teuscher, und tanzt recht brav, als wir daß lezte mahl (aber nicht gar daß lezte mahl,) in der opera waren, haben wir den M:<sup>r</sup> Ruesler in unserm balco herauf kommen lassen, (dan wir haben den balco des Marquis Carlotti frey, dan wir haben den schlüssel darzu) und mit ihm geredet: apropos: alles in der Mascara ietzt, und was daß comote ist, wen man seine larve auf den hut hat, und hat das privelegium, den hut night abzuziehen, wen einer mich grüst, und nimer beym namen nenen, sondern allzeit: *servitore umilißimo, giora Mascara*. Cospetto di Baco, daß sprizt: was aber das rariste ist, ist dieses: das wir um 7<sup>ben</sup> uhr gegen halbe 8 uhr schon zu bette gehen: se lei indovinaße questo, io dirò certamente, che lei sia la Madre, di tutti indovini. küsse anstat meiner der mama die hand, und dich küsse ich zu tausend mahl, und versichere dich, daß ich werde bleiben imer dein aufrichtiger, getreuer bruder  
porter vous bien, et aimez moi toujours. Wolfgang Mozart