

11 Mozart and opera seria

JULIAN RUSHTON

Mozart is treasured today for his opera buffa and Singspiel, the foundation of the modern repertory. His serious Italian operas belong to the most abundant operatic genre of the eighteenth century, and share its modern neglect. Yet there is no reason to suppose that Mozart despised the rhetorical grandeur of opera seria, with its cast of tyrants, suffering princesses, courtiers and soldiers, and its plots of treachery overcome and magnanimity in suffering. It played a larger role in his pre-Vienna works than any other type of opera, and was by no means neglected thereafter. Mozart was brought up on opera seria, and an opera seria was his last stage work.¹

The majority of Mozart's serious operas were composed for specific occasions connected to the Austrian ruling house of Habsburg, yet none was written for its capital, Vienna. What today we loosely call 'opera seria' comprised a number of sub-genres, selected according to the circumstances of a commission. For Milan, Mozart composed two traditional opere serie, *Mitridate, re di Ponto*, and *Lucio Silla*.² Such operas acted as a mirror to the upper echelon of society, and an enlightened monarchy is directly reflected, or indirectly admonished, when the tyrant sees the light and forgives his enemies. Although concerned almost entirely with aristocratic characters, this kind of opera seria, whose form was established by the librettist and Imperial poet Pietro Metastasio, was designed for public theatres; yet in a city such as Milan, governed by the Austrian Archduke Ferdinand, the court certainly attended the premiere. Mozart wrote only one further opera along these lines, *La clemenza di Tito*, for the 1791 coronation of Leopold II in Prague. Two operas fall into an exclusively courtly genre, the *fiesta teatrale*, which relieves the succession of recitative and aria with an occasional chorus and dance. *Ascanio in Alba* was written for Ferdinand's marriage, again for Milan, and *Il sogno di Scipione* for the Salzburg Prince-Archbishop's Golden Jubilee in January 1772.³ Also for Salzburg, in 1775, he composed a cut-down version of Metastasio's *Il re pastore* for the visit of the Archduke Maximilian. In form, this is a traditional opera seria, but as in the *fiesta* the intrigue is comparatively slender. These three works can be associated with the category of serenata, which implies less than full staging. Mozart's very first opera, *Apollo et Hyacinthus*, was a Latin-text serenata, written for Salzburg University when he was eleven (1767).⁴ It conforms to the expected pattern of recitative, sometimes harmonically daring, and arias which, with

[147]

performers scarcely older than the composer, were naturally more pleasing, or brilliant, than individually expressive. At the other extreme, *Idomeneo*, commissioned for the court theatre in Munich for the Carnival of 1781, is the masterpiece of an operatic type cultivated mainly in German court theatres, based on Greek myth rather than Roman or medieval history, with heavy involvement of chorus, and partly modelled on French lyric tragedy. Gluck's 'reform operas' composed for Vienna were the principal but by no means only forerunners.⁵ In *La clemenza di Tito*, Mozart tried to retain the advances made in *Idomeneo* and, indeed, in opera buffa; his collaborator Caterino Mazzolà simplified the intrigue and compressed some dramatic situations into ensembles rather than letting them unfold in a sequence of arias: in short, he boiled down Metastasio 'into a proper opera.'⁶

The aria

Opera seria is represented in our theatres today mainly by Handel. Its basis was great solo singing, and therefore the aria; it thus requires a special kind of attention, focussed on the discharge of single, intense emotions into long pieces of music of almost abstract symmetry that, in their role as vocal concertos, balance direct emotional expression with virtuosity. The conventions of opera seria required most of the dramatic motivation to be channelled into arias, assisted by only a handful of elaborately orchestrated recitatives. This concentration on aria is the feature of opera seria that most disconcerts audiences accustomed to Mozart's comedies, charged with dramatic electricity in their ensembles and finales. Yet even the comedies depend on arias for full presentation of the characters' internal dilemmas. Parts of *Così fan tutte*, in particular, resemble opera seria viewed through a looking glass; when he wrote it, Mozart was probably already on the look-out for the chance to write a tragedy.

Mozart's musical education included singing lessons, and he is recorded as singing in public, with a thin voice but much expression, up to his thirteenth year.⁷ In a report written for the Royal Society of London, Daines Barrington testified that the nine-year-old boy, who was having lessons with the castrato Giovanni Manzuoli, could extemporize music proper to arias of love and rage, complete with preceding recitatives.⁸ Mozart's understanding at such a young age of the conventional passions of opera seria may testify to his genius, but also, to the sceptical, may seem to mark the musical language as over-conventional. At the height of his powers, Mozart overcomes any such reservations, and his dramatic objectives were fully compatible with his sensible policy of getting to know the singers before composing. This policy brought practical problems in preparing his first opera seria, *Mitridate, re*

di Ponto: as his father wrote, ‘he has only written one aria for the *primo uomo* because he hasn’t arrived, and he doesn’t want double the work; he prefers to await his arrival so he can measure the suit to fit the body.’⁹ In the event Mozart had to rewrite several numbers, but the *prima donna*, Antonia Bernasconi, refused an insidious suggestion that she might substitute arias from an earlier setting of the same libretto by Quirino Gasparini.¹⁰ One of Gasparini’s arias (‘Vado incontro’) seems to have been included by the recalcitrant tenor Guglielmo d’Ettore, who had sung the same role (Mitridate) in Gasparini’s opera.

The typical aria text had two stanzas, complementary or contrasting, returning to the first stanza after the second. This design, established as the Baroque da capo aria, is found in *Apollo et Hyacinthus*. But by 1770 most composers preferred a modified form of this design, in which the first stanza ends in a related key, so that when it returns after the second stanza the music is recomposed like a sonata recapitulation, ending in the main key, often with a cadenza. It is tempting to look with a favourable eye on departures from these conventional patterns, but this would do scant justice to Mozart’s ability to make conventional designs work dramatically. A number of arias make their effect by using varied tempi, and a favourite design of the 1780s formalised this into the *rondò*, a slower then a faster movement, in each of which a main theme receives two statements; a dramatic advantage of this form is that the character and hence the drama appear to have moved on during the aria.

It needs to be remembered that aria-based opera was designed for a more formal society than ours, and is used to characterize people whose relationships were governed by class and rank, so that even relatives and lovers (married couples seldom appear) must observe decorum when addressing each other. The coupling of orchestrated recitative and aria, usually marking a dramatic climax within an opera, could be detached as a freestanding scena, precisely the form Mozart used in many of his so-called ‘concert arias’, written for particular singers he wished to oblige, or for whom he acted as teacher.¹¹ In Mannheim (1777–8), he fell in love with Aloysia Weber (later Lange), and determined to establish her career; over nearly ten years, during which time he married her sister Constanze, he composed for her some of his most intense and brilliant arias. The intensity results as much from exploration of her extraordinary high tessitura as from other forms of compositional inventiveness; one aria extends higher than those of the Queen of Night in *Die Zauberflöte*, a role created by her sister Josefa.¹² Mozart set Metastasio’s text ‘Alcandro, lo confesso . . . Non sò d’onde viene’ for Aloysia (K. 294) in 1778, and then again in 1787 (K. 512) for the magnificent bass, Ludwig Fischer, who had created Osmin in *Die Entführung*. The settings have little in common beyond the broadest aspect of form, a modified da

capo with the middle section in a faster tempo. Both exploit the singers' enormous range and flexibility in singing large intervals. The Fischer version is musically more sophisticated; but, like several of the Aloysia arias, it suffers from its own cleverness. The same could be said of one of Mozart's most celebrated scenas, 'Bella mia fiamma . . . Resta, o cara', K. 528 (1787). This was written for Josepha Duschek, who allegedly locked Mozart in her summerhouse until he had completed it; in revenge he filled it with awkward intervals. Insertion arias for comedies are usually shorter and warmer; and excess intellectualism is entirely absent from the beautiful 'Ch'io mi scordi di te? . . . Non temer, amato bene', another text Mozart composed twice, first as an additional aria with obbligato violin in the 1786 *Idomeneo* revival, and a few months later for the farewell performance of the first Susanna, Nancy Storace, with obbligato piano for himself. For this popular mistress of opera buffa overwhelming difficulties were not required, and her raptly beautiful dialogue with the piano led to unsubstantiated rumours that Mozart was in love with her; for him, however, the chance to combine two of his favourite forms, the rondò and the piano concerto, was sufficient motivation.

Dramatic themes

A new opera seria was a major cultural event requiring co-ordination of poetic, musical, histrionic and scenic arts. The visual dimension is irretrievably lost, although surviving illustrations suggest considerable lavishness. Acting skill was expected, or at least desired; Leopold Mozart recounts an incident at the premiere of *Lucio Silla*, when the inexperienced tenor's tyrannical fury was so exaggerated that the audience laughed, seriously discomposing the *prima donna*. In reviving its emotional poetry and elaborate music, we should remember that its favourite topics – arbitrary imprisonment, exile and tyranny – were rife during the Enlightenment, of which opera seria is a characteristic product. Mozart's German operas are famed for the magnanimity of Pasha Selim and Sarastro, but in this they imitate the older Italian form. Mitridate yields to his better instincts on his deathbed, renouncing his intended queen Aspasia in favour of his faithful son, Sifare. Less convincingly, Lucio Silla arbitrarily forgives his enemies and retires into private life. Curiously, his action has some historical basis, yet in the opera nothing is done to make it plausible; Silla is the least interesting and least musically rewarding role. The clemency of Tito, however, follows from a clear, if bland, analysis of his personality by means of arias. In this last opera seria commission, Mozart accepted this method of characterization, which sets into higher relief the rages of his antagonist, Vitellia. Her final recitative and aria ('Non più di fiori') are the musical embodiment of resignation, as

ambition is abandoned and she resolves to confess her role in the attempted assassination of Tito. Significantly, Mozart used the modern *rondò* form, in which a thought represented by theme or tonality continually returns to haunt the mind. Only aria can achieve such introspection; in a committed performance the very floridity of the instrumental obbligato (basset-horn) contributes positively, through musical beauty, to the sentiment, and to the conviction of the musical rhetoric.

The complexities of plot preclude detailed dramatic discussion here, and in what follows a few features are isolated which show Mozart's remarkable grip on the potentialities of the genre. In the early serenatas, the slenderness of plot, divinely controlled and allegorical, is barely sufficient scaffolding for the musical elaboration, although *Ascanio*, according to Leopold Mozart, eclipsed the opera seria of the season, Hasse's *Ruggiero*. But *Mitridate* and *Lucio Silla* have shown themselves well worthy of revival, and although it takes a leap of faith from producers, singers and audience to mount or attend a production, the effort is rewarded by the satisfactory symmetry of *Mitridate*, in which the old King breathes his last while his sons are reconciled to their brides, as it is by the finest scenes of *Lucio Silla*.

Despite its success, *Lucio Silla* was Mozart's last commission for Italy, a fact that profoundly affected his future. Mozart respected the Milanese taste for long arias, without relinquishing characterization. Where a secondary character, Cinna, has a loquacious and open-hearted first aria, the *primo uomo* Cecilio immediately reveals a more introspective personality: Cinna picks up the tune of the orchestral introduction, while Cecilio's entry floats above the instrumental bustle, asserting the expressive independence of the voice. As Giunia defies the tyrant, her aria tempo twice changes to allegro. Behind such multi-tempo arias we may sense the influence of Gluck's *Alceste* (1767), stronger still in the magnificent scene in which Cecilio awaits Giunia by the tomb of her ancestor Marius; the atmosphere conveyed by instrumental texture and harmony would have done credit to any composer, never mind one of sixteen, and the solo and choral music for the processional entry of Giunia, and her mistaking Cecilio for a ghost, form the strongest passage of Mozartian opera seria before *Idomeneo*. There follows a rapturous duet; the rest of the opera never quite matches this superb and complex scene.

In *Il re pastore*, with Metastasio's libretto cut to fourteen numbers, the dénouement is convincing because each character is fully developed in the arias (there is one duet, and a finale for all the voices). At the heart of this pastoral opera seria lies an aria for the eponymous hero, Aminta: 'L'amerò, sarò costante' (the resources of Salzburg were enriched by the castrato Tommaso Consoli in this role). Muted violins, pairs of flutes and cors anglais, support a solo violin melody that curls back on itself, then develops an impassioned

continuation. The voice completes one of Mozart's most gorgeous paragraphs, the violin gliding above the orchestra like a benediction. This aria is a literal show-stopper: for over seven minutes nothing happens – or should happen – on stage. The young shepherd has discovered that he is the rightful king, and believing himself alone pours out his love for Elisa. Instrumentation and the rondo form assist in conveying romance, tenderness, constancy. That, at least, is what *we* hear. Those who witness Aminta's declaration assume that it is not meant for Elisa, but for Tamiri, daughter of the deposed usurper; Alessandro (Alexander the Great), with the best of intentions, has arranged this dynastic marriage. Agenore, who loves Tamiri, believes that ambition has led Aminta to throw over Elisa. Such misunderstandings are the stuff of serious and comic opera alike, but we may well ask why music of such transparent sincerity fails to register with Agenore. There are no unsympathetic characters in *Il re pastore*, but all are victims of Alessandro's well-meaning statesmanship. The beauty of this aria contributes to the irony of its misinterpretation within the dramatic context, and allows Agenore to be no mere confidant but a dramatically interesting person, whose own passions motivate the only minor-mode aria of the opera, a fine piece of *Sturm und Drang*. With unintended cruelty, Alessandro sings an aria of self-satisfied triumph; but when the women boldly confront him with their preferences in love, and Aminta determines to renounce glory for Elisa, the King duly displays enlightened magnanimity, and love and duty are reconciled.

This thoroughly moral opera is uncharacteristic of Metastasio only in the absence of any opposition other than well-intentioned ignorance. The orchestral sound is richer and more varied than in the earlier serious operas. Near the end of the overture, a horn melody precedes the first flute entry; flutes take the lead in the short aria that follows without a break.¹³ Elisa interrupts it before its cadence (but such continuity between numbers does not recur). Trumpets in Alexander's first and final arias contrast with the flute solo in the second, inspired by Johann Baptist Becke who accompanied Consoli from Munich. Form and style are sufficiently varied to be considered symbolic. Elisa, suffering noble anguish in her aria 'Barbaro! oh Dio', twice explodes into a fast tempo because she cannot contain her anger; then, with 'L'amerò', rondo form embodies the loving nature and nobility of Aminta, and the essence of this surprising early masterpiece.

Idomeneo is the only serious opera generally recognized to be among Mozart's finest achievements. The adaptation of a French original by the Salzburg cleric Gianbattista Varesco is no mere translation, but a reinterpretation of the myth previously treated in a French opera.¹⁴ Perhaps *Idomeneo* never reached formal perfection; after three performances in Munich, in which much music was cut and some restored, it was performed only once

more, by aristocratic amateurs in Vienna (1786). Although Mozart was writing with all the singers present in Munich, he struggled to express the drama through the medium of (so he claimed) an inexperienced castrato, Dal Prato (Idamante), and the all-too-experienced and elderly Anton Raaff as Idomeneo. Neither could act; 'Raaff is like a statue', Mozart wailed, in one of the letters home that provide unique insight into the compositional thinking behind this opera. In the event, that the King sings in a dignified, if old-fashioned, style is dramatically to the purpose. That his heroic son is overshadowed by the women in the cast is less so, given that Idamante slays the monster ravaging Crete, and then voluntarily offers himself for sacrifice to placate the god Neptune. Two members of the Wendling family sang Ilia, the captive Trojan princess, and Elettra, daughter of Agamemnon, both of them in love with the young Prince; and for them Mozart wrote superbly dramatic arias, contrasting the saint-like forbearance of Ilia with the alternate fury and exacerbated tenderness of Elettra. In the last act, Ilia's aria evokes a tender garden of love, while Elettra's, following the god's oracular pronouncement that her rival Ilia must marry Idamante, is neurotic venom personified.¹⁵ Between these personal epiphanies, the dramatic climax is the quartet, a piece of harrowing beauty which Mozart was never to surpass and which he could not hear again without weeping.

Not the least remarkable aspect of *Idomeneo* is the richness of its orchestral invention. The fury and charm of natural phenomena are unforgettably limned: the storm in Act 1, fantastically merged with the rage of Elettra, and the calm sea in Act 2. The orchestra conveys heroism, tenderness and resignation, through instrumentation as much as tempo and style, and supports splendid choral writing and fine dances. (Mozart was delighted to compose his own ballet music, instead of, as was usual, leaving it to a local hack.) No doubt Mozart never surpassed this work only because he never had the opportunity to do so; aspects of *Idomeneo*, matched by such works as the C minor Mass, K. 427, and the Requiem, K. 626, bridge the world of Gluck and that of Beethoven and Berlioz, even Wagner, for *Idomeneo* is a treasure-trove of motivic allusion, anticipating leitmotiv technique in its continual thematic cross-references.¹⁶

Idomeneo immediately preceded Mozart's move to Vienna, and his first efforts to revive it there, probably with a redistribution of voice-types (a tenor Idamante, a bass Idomeneo), were abortive. The version given a single performance by aristocratic *dilettanti* in 1786 makes Idamante a tenor, while Idomeneo's role was essentially unaltered (except for simplification of passagework in his central aria, 'Fuor del mar'). At least in adapting *La clemenza di Tito*, Mozart could include one low male voice, the Imperial confidant Publio, in addition to the experienced tenor Antonio Baglioni, who sang Tito. He may have wanted to cast his young hero, Sesto, as a tenor, but

the impresario supplied the castrato Domenico Bedini; his music, however, confirms that he was experienced and reliable, and his two arias are high points of the score. The first, 'Parto, parto', allows the young man, cowed by the beautiful and imperious Vitellia, to articulate his subservience to her will so that it almost becomes a strength of character; this feat is achieved with the support of a glittering clarinet solo.¹⁷ The second is a substantial rondò ('Deh, per questo istante solo'), which Sesto addresses to Tito. This expresses his tangled thoughts while saying nothing to implicate Vitellia in the (fortunately unsuccessful) plot to assassinate his friend and protector, the Emperor. Sesto fully expects to be put to death; his eloquence is the musical equivalent of silence in the face of an accusation that can neither be refuted nor explained. Vitellia was sung by Maria Marchetti Fantozzi, a competent actress as well as a singer of power and wide range. The rondò form of 'Non più di fiori' (see above), with the obbligato on the hollow-sounding bassethorn, forms an unacknowledged bond between these characters. Vitellia recognizes that her fate is intertwined with Sesto's, and although she does not love him as he loves her she cannot be responsible for his death. The clemency of the Emperor is thus richly justified, not only by his own character, but by the empathy the audience must feel, thanks to the musical powers of aria, with its beneficiaries. The happy ending foreshadowed in the opera's title is no less persuasive than that of the opera's contemporary, *Die Zauberflöte*.¹⁸

This concentration does not detract from the force and beauty of the opera's ensembles. The duet for Annio and Servilia is an enchanting evocation of young love resigned to frustration; the trio when Vitellia hears too late that the Emperor is willing to marry her, and tries to stop the conspiracy without revealing its existence, is blood-curdling in a good performance, and not only because she is required to sail up to d''' (this in a role which descends, in the last aria, to g). Shorter than Mozart's opera buffa finales, the first-act finale is a conception of concentrated grandeur. It opens with Sesto evidently about to sing an aria; confronted by the other characters, he rushes off to try to save Tito, his confusion represented by a disturbing modulation. When he returns he seems about to confess everything; a solo oboe again makes silence eloquent.¹⁹ The characters and chorus unite in lamenting the death of a beloved monarch.

Denounced as 'very bad' by the Empress at the premiere, *La clemenza di Tito* has had the most disputed reception of all Mozart's mature operas. It is too readily assumed, however, that its immediate popularity in the fifteen years or so following Mozart's death was a response to a perceived simplification of style.²⁰ It remains essentially unfinished; the recitatives were not composed by Mozart, and he would surely have revised it before any second production. But we cannot assume that the speed with which

it was composed equates to perfunctory invention or execution, or that he was already dying and his powers failing. There is reason to suppose that he was eager once more to try his hand at this genre, as he was with church music, and to measure his mature style against its rigorous demands on the musician.

Conclusion

In the modern fashion for musical revival, serious opera remains relatively neglected. Mozart's remain among the finest products of the genre. In Milan, Mozart acted under instruction from his father, from the singers and from the requirements of the court; these operas succeeded, and the absence of any revivals merely reflects a culture in which few operas outlived their first season. We might wonder whether, young as he was, Mozart could have grasped the political and human implications of the stories. Undoubtedly he worked from a stylistic template that enabled him to select a manner appropriate to each dramatic situation, as the remarks of Daines Barrington testify (see above). But in working with the signifying conventions, and thus of audience expectations, Mozart was no different from his peers, and in actual inventiveness within these constraints he can match any master of the previous generation. In *Lucio Silla* he added a powerful dose of post-Gluckian drama in the tomb scene, anticipating the glories of *Idomeneo*. In *Il re pastore* he captured the pastel shades of the libretto to perfection, and working on vulnerable characters on an intimate stage prepared him not only for the richer humanity of *Idomeneo* but also for his comedies. Although not without flaws, and uncertainty as to his final intentions, *Idomeneo* is quite simply one of his greatest works; modern performances of *La clemenza di Tito* have restored it to a significant place in the repertory; and if we add the opera seria arias which belong to no opera – the ‘concert arias’ – we have a Mozartian repertory so richly various that it must be considered unequivocally to be among the glories of his magnificent oeuvre.