

DLA Doctoral Dissertation Theses

Dr Ildikó Emese Jakab Illés

Female Characters in Mozart's Opera *Le Nozze di Figaro* in Light of  
Contemporary Opera Practice

Supervisor: András Almási-Tóth DLA

Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music

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## I. Research Background

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's opera *Le nozze di Figaro* holds special significance in the entire history of the genre. The work has spawned a wealth of literature in Hungarian and other languages, a body of material that offers a rich variety of perspectives for analysing the opera's musical and dramaturgical features. What I present in this analysis is the eternal relevance of the female characters in *Figaro* through the lens of a stage production conceived in accordance with dramatic principles shared across today's opera world. This production, the staging of *Figaro* that Claus Guth created for the 2006 Salzburg Festival, explores various possibilities for portraying the characters in the work along the lines of a musical concept developed by Nikolaus Harnoncourt. Guth's production, in my opinion, stands out not only for the way in which it identifies the theatrical and dramatic possibilities inherent in the score with the required sensitivity, but also in how it opens up for the audience an endless array of available interpretations in a piece whose dramaturgy is already quite rich. Since my dissertation attempts to analyse the female characters in *Figaro* through their depiction in a noteworthy contemporary production of the opera, it addresses issues related to theatre theory along with the semantic ones.

In his 1851 treatise *Oper und Drama*<sup>1</sup>, Richard Wagner discussed the relationships between music and drama and between the work itself and how it is staged. This book includes Wagner's analysis of the intuitive yet perfect musical structure of Mozart's operas. For my analysis of the relationship between music and staging, I relied on Adolphe Appia's 1899 book *Musique et mise en scène*<sup>2</sup>, in which the author clearly states that dramatic stagings constitute a beneficial means of expression that ensures a longer life for works that would otherwise lose their significance over time if they were merely written down. Appia's work lays the foundation for the concepts underlying contemporary opera directing, and I consider his ideas fundamental to my dissertation.

In his book *Opera - A Closed World: Core Problems of Operatic Drama*<sup>3</sup>, András Almási-Tóth, my doctoral dissertation supervisor, discusses the features of contemporary theatre in terms of the contradictions inherent in directing opera. In straightforward, unpretentious language, it provides clear and practical guidance for singer/actors seeking to understand how to approach their roles, primarily by examining the difficulties of role interpretation faced by singer/performers from the perspective of a stage director accustomed to working in spoken theatre. My dissertation takes Almási-Tóth's statements regarding the relationship between music and text, which posit that "text is the surface, while music is the depths underneath"<sup>4</sup>, as given. Comprising important sources in terms of theatre history – literature that

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Wagner: *Oper und Drama*. English translation: W. Ashton Ellis, (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1995)

<sup>2</sup>Adolphe Appia: *Musique et mise en scène*. Published in Hungarian as *Zene és rendezés* (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2012)

<sup>3</sup>András Almási-Tóth: *Az opera – egy zárt világ*. (Budapest: Typotex, 2008)

<sup>4</sup>Almási-Tóth: p.33.

also inspired my choice of topic for this dissertation – are Walter Felsenstein's *Musiktheater*<sup>5</sup> and Tamás Koltai's biography of Peter Brook, *Brook - Face to Face*<sup>6</sup>, both of which I used in my introduction to theatre history.

When referring to directorial approaches in my dissertation, I tried to avoid using the terms 'traditional' and 'modern', and most often defined the opera productions under focus as contemporary theatrical works. In his study *Postdramatisches Theater*<sup>7</sup>, Hans-Thies Lehmann - in addition to attempting to survey the path leading to the theatrical renewal of the second half of the 20th century and to offer interpretations of the theatrical phenomena evident of our own time - coins the term 'postdramatic' theatre, which has become established in theatre studies since his German-language essay was published in 1999.

Additional publications in the field of theatre studies related to contemporary opera performance likewise support the diverse interpretations of the term Musiktheater, including monographs on Peter Sellars, Harry Kupfer, Claus Guth and other contemporary opera directors<sup>89</sup>.

*Six Studies*<sup>10</sup>, the cornerstone of Hungarian-language musicological literature about Mozart's operas, includes an analysis of *Figaro* by conductor János Kovács, whose most important claim – in terms of the area covered by my thesis – is that in devising the musical structure for the work, Mozart dispenses with any distinction of rank between prima donna and soubrette. I found myself in alignment with Kovács's stance in analysing the Guth/Harnoncourt production of *Figaro* as well.

Géza Fodor's study *The Worldview of Mozart's Operas*<sup>11</sup> provides a fresh perspective on the composer's dramatic works, examining the unity of the score through the eyes of a director, playwright and critic; as a veteran of the theatre, he discusses issues of musical semantics, while also staking out a position on the differences between the opera and the Beaumarchais play it is based on. Over the years since he wrote them, it has become quite clear that Fodor's ideas – including with respect to *Figaro* – go far beyond music dramaturgy and semantic analysis and, furthermore, anticipating the perspective of a renewed musical theatre count as part of the detailed Hungarian-language literature on the richness of Mozart's ability to portray characters. Fodor's position on the doubling of the page character – which originates with Kierkegaard – also appears in Guth's treatment and is, moreover, explicitly emphasised in

it. In spite of all this, my own analysis diverges with Fodor's on several points, especially with regard to duet No. 17<sup>12</sup>.

Musicological research conducted abroad – thanks in part to the renewal of opera practice already underway – is further advanced, with Mozart's operas being examined from a diverse, complex and multidisciplinary approach. These studies approach the work from a fresher and richer set of perspectives, while still always respecting the ultimate authority of the score itself. It gave me great pleasure to employ this method of analysis in my own study as well. In her book *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart: Le Nozze di Figaro and Don Giovanni*<sup>13</sup>, musicologist Wye Jamison Allanbrook presents Mozart's music as an imprint of the social conventions of the time, with a particular focus on the musical references to dance music that are so abundant in *Figaro*. Allanbrook's Mozart study provides a detailed, multidimensional analysis of the musical fabric of *Figaro* using an approach that also reveals indications of feminist musicology. Another important text illustrating the diversity of contemporary musicological positions is John Platoff's analysis of the expressive passages<sup>14</sup>. The expressive passages of *Figaro* and how they are performed on stage played a particularly important role in my dissertation.

In the collected volume *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera*<sup>15</sup> (edited by Mary Anne Smart), Mary Hunter, W. J. Allanbrook and Gretchen A. Wheelock analyse the heroines of Mozart's operas in terms of feminist values. I found myself agreeing with a number of their conclusions. Another source of important and novel thinking was the collection *Opera buffa in Mozart's Vienna*<sup>16</sup> (edited by James Webster and Mary Hunter), a volume of innovative essays on social, genre-related and analytical issues, in addition to historical ones

In her book *Recognition in Mozart's Operas*<sup>17</sup>, Jessica Waldoff examines the characters emerging from Mozart's music – still without ever losing sight of the score itself – from a new and fruitful perspective incorporating social, sociological and psychological viewpoints. Waldoff and James Webster's writings on Mozart can be found in all the major collections of Mozart-related essays, such as *Wolfgang Amadé Mozart: Essays on His Life and Music*<sup>18</sup>. The essays contained in the collections *Mozart Studies*<sup>19</sup> and *Mozart Studies 2*<sup>20</sup> introduce new directions to research into Mozart, including

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5Walter Felsenstein: *Musiktheater*. Hungarian translation (as *Zenés színház*): Imre Ormay. (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1979)

6Tamás Koltai: *Brook. Szemtől szemben*. (Budapest: Gondolat Könyvkiadó, 1976)

7Hans-Thies Lehmann: *Postdramatisches Theater*. Hungarian translation (as *Poszt-dramatikus színház*): Zsuzsa Berecz, Gábor Schein, Beatrix Kricsfalusi. (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2009)

8Susan McClary: *The Passions of Peter Sellars. Staging the Music*. (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2019)

9Harry Kupfer: *Musiktheater*. (Berlin: Parthas Verlag GmbH., 1997)

10Bence Szabolcsi (editor.): *Mozart operái. Hat tanulmány*. (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1956)

11Géza Fodor: *A Mozart-opera vilásképe*. (Budapest, Typotex, 2012)

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12Instead, I concur with János Kovács's remark that the Count and Susanna are burning with equal levels of passion in duet No. 17.

13W. J. Allanbrook: *Rhythmic Gesture In Mozart: Le Nozze di Figaro and Don Giovanni*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983)

14John Platoff: *Musical and Dramatic Structure in the Opera Buffa Finale*. In: *The Journal of Musicology*. Vol.7.No.2. (1989 Spring)

15Mary Anne Smart (ed.): *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000)

16Mary Hunter, James Webster: *Opera buffa in Mozart's Vienna*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999)

17Jessica Waldoff: *Recognition in Mozart's Operas*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)

18Stanley Sadie(ed.): *Wolfgang Amadé Mozart. Essays on His Life and Music*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996)

19Simon P. Keefe (ed.): *Mozart Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)

20Simon P. Keefe (ed.): *Mozart Studies 2*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015)

psychological, sociological and gender theory-based readings of the text, dramaturgy, and musical fabric. In relation to the topic of my own research, the contributors to *Mozart Studies 2* raise a number of questions, particularly as a result of their innovative approaches: Ian Woodfield's essay on the role of Cherubino proves thought-provoking, while Mary Hunter's focus on the subordination of women versus female autonomy is brilliantly refreshing. Although her analysis unflinchingly respects the central authority of the score, this fact nevertheless casts no doubt on the groundbreaking results of her scholarly approach. She brings the personalities of Susanna and the Countess, as well as their relationship with each other, into a new – sometimes feminist – light, without ever giving the impression of imposing arbitrary interpretations on Mozart's operas. Contemporary musicological research into Mozart makes a definitive break with the unreserved deference toward traditional interpretation of the works that was once prevalent, and accepts that opera, as a dramatic genre, can only truly reach fulfilment within the audience members themselves.

Nikolaus Harnoncourt's books *The Musical Dialogue: Thoughts on Monteverdi, Bach and Mozart*<sup>21</sup> and *Baroque Music Today: Music As Speech*<sup>22</sup> provide a closer look into the conductor's concept of Mozart, which places special emphasis on tempo dramaturgy.

The works mentioned above represent only a fraction of the rich literature that exists on the portrayal of the female characters in *Figaro*. I, however, intending for my dissertation to examine Mozart's characters – primarily Susanna and the Countess – from a new perspective, that of the performer, the singer/actor of contemporary opera performance, placed most of the emphasis on my own analytical results. In my writing, I would sometimes indicate with a reference where my views corresponded to the approach of a given musicologist.

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21Nikolaus Harnoncourt: *The Musical Dialogue: Thoughts on Monteverdi, Bach, and Mozart*. Hungarian translation (as *Zene, mint párbeszéd*): Miklós Dolinszky. (Budapest, Európa Könyvkiadó, 2002)

22Nikolaus Harnoncourt: *Baroque Music Today: Music As Speech*. Hungarian translation (as *A beszédszerű zene*): Judit Péteri. (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1988)

## II. Primary Sources

For my work, I used the critical edition of *Le nozze di Figaro* published by Bärenreiter Urtext as part of the Neue Mozart-Ausgabe series and the piano extract based on it<sup>23</sup>. I determined the tempos with a KORG MA-2 metronome. My analysis of Mozart's written correspondence is based on the English translations published by Robert Spaethling<sup>24</sup> in 2000. The main focus of my analysis of *Figaro* is the 2006 Claus Guth production<sup>25</sup> of the work, and for purposes of comparison I have also included three other contemporary productions in my analysis.<sup>262728</sup> I translated the text of *Le nozze di Figaro* from Italian to Hungarian myself, thus avoiding any possible loss of meaning resulting from literary translations.

## III. Methodology

In examining the possibilities involved in portraying the female characters in *Le nozze di Figaro* – although I approached the characters by way of contemporary opera productions – I always considered the score itself to hold ultimate authority. After a brief introduction to theatre history and an overview of the historical background, I named the contemporary opera productions that, in my own personal opinion, best serve to put the intricate human relationships in *Figaro* on a new basis. My choices were the 2015 Berlin production staged at the Schiller Theater by the duo of Jürgen Flimm and Gudrun Hartmann (footnote 26), Barrie Kosky's 2014 Komische Oper production ( footnote 25), Jossi Wieler and Sergio Morabito's 2009 Amsterdam production ( footnote 27) and Claus Guth's 2006 Salzburg Festival production( footnote 23).

While I analysed the piece primarily through the Guth production, my aim throughout was to illustrate previously unexplored dimensions of how Mozart constructed his music and depicted his characters. I endeavoured to point out the multitude of social, psychological, and gender theory-related messages that are conveyed through the communication of meaning on multiple levels. Nikolaus Harnoncourt integrated his musical ideas into the Guth production in such a way that every note served the contemporary director's concept, meaning that each note served the work in the context of contemporary opera practice. Anticipating that I might find contradictions between the contents of Nikolaus Harnoncourt's two books listed above and what he said during the orchestral rehearsals of the Guth production, I conducted a comparative examination.

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23NMA II/5/16

24Robert Spaethling (ed. and transl.): *Mozart's Letters, Mozart's Life*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006)

25W. A. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro*. Director. Claus Guth. Deutsche Grammophon/Universal: 1 July 2007. Publisher code: 0440 073 4245 9.

26W. A. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro*. Director: Barrie Kosky. Berlin, Komische Oper (performed on 13 June 2014).

27W. A. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro*. Berlin, Schiller Theater (performed on 12 November 2015). Released: Accentus Music: 16 November 2018. Publisher code: ACC-10366.

28W. A. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro*. Nederlandse Opera Amsterdam. Released: OpusArte, 28 April 2009

#### IV. Conclusions

Due to my vocal range, I had been preparing for the role of Susanna since the beginning of my career, so the possibilities inherent in portraying this character were particularly appealing to me. The more contemporary productions of *Figaro* I encountered, the more I found myself confronted with the fact that neither Susanna nor the other characters in the piece can be stereotyped, not even in terms of voice type; we must discard the idea of the naive maid imposed on the work and instead search for the characters' true personality traits in the musical fabric of the opera. My primary aim in my choice of topic was to examine and substantiate the potential richness and topicality of the musical meanings of *Le nozze di Figaro*. As a musician, I found the most appropriate method for this to be musical semantic analysis. In my opinion, the Guth/Harmoncourt production of *Figaro* richly unravels the musical, dramaturgical, social and human levels of meaning of *Figaro*, while at the same time – remaining a contemporary opera production, or perhaps in spite of being one – never demanding compromises in either a musical or dramaturgical sense. For this reason, I came to the conclusion in my research that Guth's *Figaro* not only embodies a perfect juncture of contemporary theatre and Mozart, but also the purest kind of social mirror of our own era, while at the same time proving an impeccable interpretation in an operatic sense. To prove this hypothesis, I subjected the production to the ultimate authority of the score. Here I must stress that Guth too applies in his directing theories that were already key elements of Géza Fodor's analysis of *Figaro*<sup>29</sup>. Although it was not my intention to do so when choosing my topic, perhaps through my analysis I have also managed to shed light on the authenticity of this masterpiece of contemporary opera practice for a less receptive audience, as well as to take a stand in favour of the productive interpretative potentials of contemporary opera practice.<sup>30</sup>

My doctoral research and dissertation confirmed that Mozart's opera *Le nozze di Figaro* is timeless. In it, Mozart depicts people of different social backgrounds and with different lifestyles by approaching them from a human perspective and illustrating them intuitively through music.<sup>31</sup>

As a result, *Figaro* conveys very different meanings to the viewer today than it did in 1786, or even fifty years ago. As our society continues to change, so will the problems we have to face. Their roots, however, will always be traceable back to the human psyche. We can therefore expect that, at the turn of the next century, *Figaro* will convey a completely different set of messages.

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<sup>29</sup>For example, the distinction between the page as an individual and the mythical page, as well as Cherubino's central role in the piece.

<sup>30</sup>The reason why I placed special emphasis on Nikolaus Harmoncourt's tempo and music dramaturgy in my analysis is because the conductor's musical ideas are respected as canon in 'traditional' opera practice as well.

<sup>31</sup>At the conclusion of my research, I have to agree with what Bence Szabolcsi wrote in his study of *Figaro*: 'The battles of life are not fought by unequal forces; every person is equally armed, every person's life is crucially important – and every person's entire life is crucially important.' Bence Szabolcsi: "*Le nozze di Figaro*". In: András Wilhelm (ed.). *Szabolcsi Bence válogatott írásai* (Selected Writings of Bence Szabolcsi). Typotex (Budapest, 2003) p.62.

The director's concept brings the piece to life from the notes in the score with the help of the orchestra, singers, conductor, set, costumes, singers, dancers and dramatic and silent actors, thus affording the audience an active role. That role is to discover what *Figaro* means for them right there and then. The result? The gap between them and the stage vanishes, and the viewers feel a closer connection to what they are watching. The characters are familiar, their life situations are real. *Figaro*, both current and thought-provoking, could be our own story. As a result of my doctoral research, I no longer question the conviction that every one of these possibilities that feel so close to us is right there in the score. This is what makes *Figaro* valid both now and in every era.

#### V. Documentation of Activities Related to the Subject Matter of the Dissertation

I earned my degree in opera voice from the Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music in 2012. During my years of opera training, I had some of the most outstanding mentors imaginable to guide my professional path, and in addition, we were able to conduct our exercises on the stage in the context of the absolutely amazing complexity of contemporary opera practice. This was my first time as a performer experiencing how a work created centuries earlier can still convey a fresh and relevant personal message, as long as the viewer is willing to give up their attachment to stereotypes and allow their imagination to be drawn into the drama. It was inspiring for me to get to play the female leads in operas by Gluck, Purcell, Mozart, Janáček, Britten, Humperdinck and Máté Bella without any feeling that the era when the work originated was causing a sense of distance between the work and the artists performing it. During those same years, I witnessed many excellent contemporary opera productions in Hungary, Vienna, Milan and Berlin. In these performances, the opera singers took on the expanded role of singer/actors, becoming, in a theatrical sense, equal partners with the dancers, the extras and the speaking and silent characters, with whom the concept was constructed in a continuously evolving interrelationship.

At the Hungarian State Opera, for three seasons starting in 2012, I sang the role of Barbarina. This 1998 production was renewed in 2014 by the director, Judit Galgóczy, herself, so in the process, I got the opportunity to be exposed to the director's concept for *Figaro* from the inside. On three occasions during the 2012/13 season, I sang the role of Pamina in a production of *The Magic Flute* staged by András Almásitóth in the Liszt Academy's Solti Hall.

The programme for my DLA recital – scheduled for 11 March 2026, at 4 pm in the Liszt Academy's Solti Hall – will include Susanna's arias from acts 2 and 4, as well as the duet '*Sull'aria... Che soave zeffiretto*'.

I also employ the results of my research in my role as a music educator: at the Kokas Method classes (based the pedagogical concepts of Klára Kokas) I hold in Hungary and abroad, I attempt to sensitively guide participants to the infinite meanings of musical motifs and to the listener's active role and responsibility in receiving them.