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MOZART

LE NOZZE DI FIGARO
THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO
DIE HOCHZEIT DES FIGARO

Overture to the Opera
K 492



Eulenburg

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

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PREFACE

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart did, of course, preface his opera *Le nozze di Figaro* (The Marriage of Figaro), K 492, with an overture – a theatre performance without such an introductory instrumental piece would be unthinkable! It would usually have been a ‘Sinfonia’, an introduction evolving from the Italian tradition, laid out in three sections, fast-slow-fast, opening with an eight-bar theme constructed in strict periods – an instrumental piece unrelated in content to the opera, basically interchangeable within the comic or serious opera genres. Yet, already the opening of the ‘Figaro’ overture causes a stir: Mozart after all surprises with a seven-bar theme constructed totally against the rules, pianissimo, furthermore, with the strings in unison with the bassoon. It is symptomatic of the overture as of the following opera to break so many conventions of the time.

On 27 April 1784 the comedy *La folle journée ou Le Mariage de Figaro* by Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais had been premiered in Paris with unprecedented success. The comedy, attacking the social model of nobility, bourgeoisie and clergy, was translated into German (and printed) in 1785; in Vienna, however, a performance of the controversial piece fell through because of censorship. Mozart suggested a musical setting of the material to the librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte who succeeded in so altering the ‘Figaro’, ‘disarming’ it as critics occasionally complained, that nothing any longer stood in the way of realising it: ‘What in our time is not permitted to be said is sung’, the *Wiener Realzeitung* announced on 11 July 1786 – after the premiere.

Mozart composed the opera between October 1785 and 29 April 1786 without a commission, which was very unusual. It first went onstage, much acclaimed, in the Burgtheater with the ensemble of the Vienna Court Opera under his direction on 1 May 1786 in the emperor’s presence – planned had actually been

29 April. In December of that year Mozart could look forward to successful performances in Prague – with a follow-up commission to compose *Don Giovanni*. There, the opera was also very popular with the audience: ‘... but I watched with great pleasure how all these people ... sported so deeply amused to the music of my Figaro; – for here nothing is spoken of but – Figaro; nothing played, sung and whistled but – Figaro ... certainly a great honour for me’, the composer reported in a letter of 15 January 1787 from Prague. Three years later *Le nozze di Figaro* – with addenda, corrigenda and cuts – was on the programme again in Vienna.

Mozart normally composed overtures shortly before or after concluding their operas. He made no exception in the case of *Le nozze di Figaro*. But unlike the prologue to the *Entführung aus dem Serail* he did so without reverting directly to or anticipating musical thematic material from the musico-dramatic numbers. Mozart also did not have it lead directly into the first scene as in *Don Giovanni*: the overture to this opera buffa is independent, an autonomous musical work, and hence also justifiably has a place on the programmes of symphony concerts. It does reflect, though, the turbulent happenings of the opera, with its surprises, its breaking away from conventions, its tempo, its intensifications and outbursts in confined spaces.

This overture’s form has repeatedly puzzled music scholars, either because they sought hidden thematic connections between the opera’s introduction and the stage events themselves – these are at best indirect, strikingly non-existent as thematic affinities – or because they measured the work by the classical first-movement sonata form and were perturbed by the differences! The murmuring string opening with the unusual colouring from two bassoons in unison was already mentioned, the asymmetrical period formation still continuing after the opening seven bars, likewise: the musical world is as it