



O Z A R T S

ozart has been my musical idol since early childhood. My father taught me to regard him as the "Christ of music."

Mozart is the reason I am in music today; and, to a very great extent, his music defined my world for me.

SUSAN MCLARY

Over the past few years, I have become increasingly concerned with the need for a feminist criticism of music. And rather than introducing my program of feminist criticism by analyzing omnipresent musical images of phallic aggression, I wanted to make my first foray as positive as possible. Thus, I turned to my first love, Mozart operas.

It seemed to me when I first began working on this project that Mozart's images of women are rather more palatable than those of most other composers. Mozart at least does not kill off any of his female characters. By contrast, the death of the female becomes a requisite ingredient in nineteenth-century opera; closure and the reestablishment of social order demand it. As Mérimée says at the top of his version of *Carmen* (which is downright liberal compared to Bizet's version), "A woman has two good moments: in bed and death." All of Mozart's women continue to live. And sometimes they are even portrayed as smarter, more ethical than the men that surround them.

In my eagerness to hold onto Mozart in the midst of whatever critical revision I undertook, I even thought I could make the case that Mozart occasionally appears to identify with his female characters and with the so-called feminine themes in his instrumental music. Alas, my subsequent research disabused me of that illusion, and I realized finally that my choices were either to abandon the project altogether or else to speak the truth as I understand it.

Once I chose speech over silence, I found that the *tone* of that speech became a major problem. For if I have learned one lesson from Mozart's operas, it is that passionate women tend to be written off as hysterics. Unfortunately, his nonpassionate women offer no acceptable models either, since they agree to remain quiet like Pamina or else acquiesce charmingly to the role of coquette. That left little choice except the uncomfortable one of appropriating, to some degree, the patriarchal voice. Or, alternatively, of inventing a new one . . . to adopt the father's voice is not a new strategy for women scholars in music.

To the contrary, it is only if a woman agrees to speak in male drag - that is, if she relinquishes her right to observe and write from a female point of view - that she is permitted into the profession at all. But, as Audre Lorde has so aptly put it, the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. Standard musicological discourse may allow me as a woman to enhance and decorate the established canon, but it will not permit me to address Mozart's construction of gender.

Here, I wish to deal primarily with Mozart's music itself and only incidentally with the libretti. Many of the points I want to make have been conceded in criticism, but they have been laid at the doorstep of Mozart's collaborators, Da Ponte and Schikaneder, who produced the words. The idea is that music (and most especially Mozart's) is pure, devoid of ideological content, and exempt from criticism; that while it may be deplorable that he happened to work with these poets, he himself can be faulted with nothing more than poor judgment in his choice of company. The texts do, of course, render far more explicit the contexts within which Mozart's characters operate, and therefore they cannot be ignored. But in order truly to be engaged in a feminist criticism of Music, I will be arguing principally from Mozart's compositional choices - from his manipulation of the semiotic codes and procedures of his musical language.

I should admit at the outset that I do not believe in perfect unity and internally defined coherence in human artifacts. To take works that have been granted the label of Great Art at face value and to limit the search for meaning to their own boundaries is at best to mystify and obscure the social dimension of artistic production and reception. At worst it is to transmit uncritically and irresponsibly - for the sake of aesthetics - certain ideological constructs that are potentially pernicious.

I am not advocating that we cease to take the canon of Great Art seriously. Indeed, I propose that the canon is dead serious. Hidden among those matchless melodies, I will be looking for answers to questions that continue to plague women in this society: where and how, for instance, do women learn to be masochistic, to remain with men who abuse us, to silence ourselves in submission to patriarchal law. In other words, rather than continuing to marginalize Mozart's compositions as a collection of beautiful but trivial objects, I am suggesting that they (like all the other cultural models and images put before us) influence the ways in which we shape ourselves - our notion of proper behaviour and values.

Thus I will not be providing readings of these operas that aspire themselves to internal consistency, for to do so is to submit to their claim to autonomy. Instead, I will be introducing rupture into the musical texts, frustrating our usual desire to believe unreflexively in the illusion of perfect order attributed to Mozart's music. Indeed, I would say that the more glorious the music, the more urgent the need for critical examination. In *The Magic Flute*, Tamino is initially sucked in by the Queen of the Night's aesthetic virtuosity, and he must be trained to prefer the less sensual Enlightenment of the Father. In a subversive appropriation of Sarastro, I want to recommend that we scrutinize the seductive power of Mozart's music in the light of feminist theory.

In *The Marriage of Figaro*, the women characters, the Countess and Susanna, are both marked in the libretto as much more intelligent and - especially in the case of the Countess - more virtuous than their male counterparts. This configuring of the situation differs somewhat from the DaPonte's model, the play of the same name by Beaumarchais. I do want to suggest that this change in emphasis is motivated by feminist interests. Rather this reversal of what was taken to be natural order is something of a displacement of the more explosive issue of class politics, a subterfuge that was all too evident to contemporaries. But whatever the covert motivation, Mozart did create quite positive female characters for this opera.

I want to examine in particular the music written for the Countess. On the one hand, as Greg Sandow pointed out recently in the *Village Voice*, when around Susanna she chatters, gossips and giggles, "true to the sexist idea that women never can be quiet." Yet, on the other hand, the Countess turns out to be truly noble. How is Mozart's construct manifested in music? How do we come to know this about the Countess?

The Countess is first introduced to us in her aria, "Porgi amor," the first of her two important soliloquies. The Countess knows that her husband is habitually unfaithful to her; and indeed, her involvement in the opera's farcical plot is motivated by her desire to trick him -- if necessary -- into returning to her. In this first aria, she sings that she must either get him back or die. (Thus do men define the male-centered essence of female existence. At least the plot swings around so that the Countess doesn't have to choke on her ultimatum.)



W O M E N

The instrumental introduction to the aria is burdened with layers of aristocratic ornaments and frippery, just as she -- the countess -- is framed with elaborate white wig and cascades of lace. Yet when she sings, her mode of expression is astonishingly linear and decisive. There is nothing frivolous in her stylistic bearing. Indeed, if her utterance were not encased in this ornate orchestration, her melodic line would sound downright heroic.

Her construction, in other words, is the inverse of the Maidenform woman, underneath whose apparently authoritative, business-like manner in public lurks just a girl in frilly underwear. Underneath the Countess' frills and apparent superficiality, she is *just like a man*. As male constructions of woman go, the Countess is quite admirable, perhaps as good as one can manage given our inherited models. (So long as our cultural semiotics rest on polarized binary opposition between the stereotypes of "real men" and "real women", all those who fall in the middle will suffer. What Mozart's dilemma points up is the necessity for new ways of constructing gender in our cultural production. (Fortunately, the increasing participation of women and openly gay and lesbian artists seems to be accelerating the breaking down of the old models and the assumptions on which they rely.)

The Countess' second soliloquy is the prolonged scene containing the aria, "Dove sono." She begins the sequence with a recitative in which she expresses her humiliation at having to stoop to such antics in order to get the Count back; then reflects nostalgically on the time when their love was mutual and finally fantasizes how her own constancy may finally win him back. Mozart's music carefully regulates the various stages of this psychological journey: it is initially fragmentary and then lyrical though complacent -- for in desiring to retreat into the past, the Countess cannot summon up sufficient energy to escape the gravitational pull back to her opening pitch. But at last, when she imagines her ability to get the Count back in the future, she marshals the necessary melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic forces to transcend her stasis. Once she envisions her goal, she moves confidently (in her private music, anyway) to overcome all obstacles and to seize what is rightfully hers. Once again, it is she (the enslaved aristocratic woman) who presents the most heroic and radical music in the opera - music that speaks of subversive overthrow of the intolerable *status quo*. She is the reluctant revolutionary disguised as a woman.

Don Giovanni is a rather more problematic work. The political axis upon which the opera is situated is a good deal less clear-cut. On the one hand, Giovanni is a corrupt aristocrat who is as intent on claiming his right to his peasant girls on their wedding nights as was the Count in *Figaro*. But on the other hand, he is a social rebel who flamboyantly defies the rigid strictures of society (as represented by both father and the spoilsport women) and who, although he is punished at the end, commands our sympathies. It is with Giovanni that we are encouraged to identify throughout the opera -- to him belong physical energy and ease of musical expression. He alone knows truly how to manipulate notes: in contrast to the noblewomen and Don Ottavio, all of whom are given high, treacherously difficult parts that are riddled with artifice, Giovanni sings "naturally," in a medium range, and as though stylistically unmediated. He is musically seductive - even irresistible. Moreover, his commentaries gloss virtually every other character for us: we perceive them through his eyes.

A case in point is Donna Elvira, a lady who has been seduced and abandoned by Giovanni but who follows him, partly for the sake of revenge but more because (as she never tires of telling us) she still loves him. In her first scene, she sings what is -- significantly -- an old-style rage aria, "Ah, chi mi dice mai." Her part lies intermittently very high, with an erratic melodic line that causes her quite literally to shriek. She is thus portrayed as hysterical, shrill, irrational. As she sings of the crime against her, she is undercut by lecherous asides by Giovanni and his servant, Leporello, who finds this whole scene hilarious. Mozart cleverly intertwines the two parts so that she is *musically* humiliated from the outset. A cruel joke is lodged in the unfolding of her complaint: the vicious asides seem organically inevitable, necessary for completion of the harmonic syntax and for the resulting image of musical perfection.

As the opera continues, Elvira is repeatedly debased before our very ears. Time and time again, she is tricked into thinking that Giovanni might one again care for her. Invariably she confesses that, despite his treatment of her, she still loves him. In some horrible way, she is a parody of *Figaro's* Countess, in that she is always prepared to return pity and love for cruelty. There have even been critics who have tried to make the case that she is finally the heroine of the opera because of her forgiving nature. Such explanations are, I believe, desperate attempts to salvage what is essentially an amoral composition, to reaffirm its perfection, to impose an interpretation that makes the piece seem not only less repugnant but even feminist. But this is not how Mozart writes her part. For it is *Mozart* finally who skewers her, who makes her musically ridiculous, who renders her dilemma consistently silly.

Donna Anna fares somewhat better in Mozart's hands. She is the only character with the moral strength genuinely to challenge Giovanni. The text has her resist him throughout, devote herself single-mindedly to accomplishing the revenge of her rape and her father's murder. And she shares with the Countess a directness of purpose and power in her musical discourse.

Yet even if it can be argued that Mozart respects her reactions, critical readings of Donna Anna - at least as far back as E.T.A. Hoffman - have converted her into another Elvira. That is, she has been interpreted as having desired her rape (despite everything she says to the contrary and the struggle we ourselves witness) and as loving her rapist. The argument (as always) seems to be that she protests too much. In his recent book on Mozart, Wolfgang Hildesheimer suggests that surely she ought to have recovered from the incident much more rapidly than she does; and the fact that she persists so intensely in her prosecution can only be motivated by her own awakened desire. Moreover, she clearly has no interest in her own fiancé; and since a woman has to be fixed on some man, it must be Giovanni. Perhaps the male listener himself is so seduced by Giovanni that he can scarcely imagine a woman refusing to submit.



▽

**"Underneath
the Countess'
frills and
apparent
superficiality, she
is just like a man."**

In other words, a very common mode of reading this opera fall in line with many other arguments in our culture to the effect that women want to be raped, even when we say "no", even when we resist. We seek vengeance whether because we feel guilty about having liked it or because we want to lay emotional claim to the rapist. Whether Mozart meant to write it in this way or not, the fact that critics have read the opera so consistently in this light is extremely chilling. For if a society takes an artifact to mean a certain thing, then it does mean just that - or at least it does so as long as that shared understanding holds sway.

If it can be argued, however, that Don Giovanni occasionally has moments in which he might sympathize with women, *Così fan tutte* is one prolonged bad joke. It is not even subtle about its misogyny: the title, "All women are like that," announces it; the plot revolves around it; and the set-pieces are all permeated with anti-woman sneers. The nineteenth century - even Wagner, who is not ordinarily regarded as a feminist - was scandalized by the blatant immorality of this opera, and it was roundly condemned. Today we congratulate ourselves on being able to rise above these matters: we seem consistently to privilege aesthetics over ethics.

Once again, Mozart participates with great relish in the enterprise. His ladies are virtually travesties of his earlier "heroines." Fiordiligi, for instance, is another shrieker, her lines in "Come scoglio" even more erratic and irrational than Elvira's. We know in advance that the women have been set up for humiliation in the manner of Elvira, that there is no basis in reality for their sorrows: their apparent moral dilemmas are tempests in teapots. And throughout, simultaneously with their emotional outpourings, the orchestra giggles and directs us to perceive these as comical histrionics. Which of course they are: Mozart wrote them that way.

In the midst of all this, however, there appears quite unexpectedly a trio among the two women and Don Alfonso, the sadistic cynic who set up the practical joke. This trio, "Soave sia il vento," comes as close as anything I know to epitomizing sublime beauty and perfection in Mozart's music. I used to think of this trio as compensation for suffering through the humiliation of the rest of the opera. But it now seems to me as the worst part of the bad joke. It proposes the possibility of perfect harmony among the still unwitting victims and the perpetrator of the crime against them. This harmony is false to the core - a trick played on us by the master of the ineffable, the magician of perfect universal order. For what does it mean to have something morally repugnant wrapped in garments of transcendental beauty? Is it really laudable that Mozart's music can distract us from what is at stake?

The overt theme of *The Magic Flute* is the transfer of patriarchal power. It presents two parental forces: the Queen of the Night (the mother-goddess, representing darkness, femaleness, superstition, irrationality, seduction, manipulation) and Sarastro (the father-priest, representing light, masculinity, Enlightenment, reason, lawful order, morality). The Queen is a virtuoso coloratura who seeks to dazzle with her pyrotechnics. Her music is carefully constructed from the excesses of the pre-Enlightenment style. For instance, in her opening aria, "Du, du wirst sie zu befreien gehen," she finally forgoes verbal articulation altogether for the sake of spinning forth and enfolding us in coils of glittering (if substanceless) ornamentation.

I used to think that her music was benign: I had heard it only in the context of the *Ted Mack Amateur Hour*, in which almost weekly some demure young woman would attempt these arias, smiling as sweetly as possible throughout the ordeal. It was only much later that I was able to hear how utterly vicious this portrayal is - and yet how very consonant with other traditions in our cultural heritage that caricature powerful women as witches, dykes, and man-eating amazons. In contrast to her, Sarastro sings with straightforward, calm, rational (if fatuous) declamation, surrounded by orchestrations that mark him as a sage.

Pamina is the Queen of the Night's daughter. She has been kidnaped and is being held captive by Sarastro. At the request of the Queen, Tamino goes to rescue her - only to find that the patriarchal Enlightenment is absolute truth and that the Queen is absolute evil. Tamino is initiated into the mysteries of the faith. Pamina too is permitted into the hallowed halls, but only on condition that she submit unquestioningly to patriarchal law, that she silence herself and expect no direct access to knowledge. She becomes the quintessential dutiful daughter of the patriarchy, who is (incidentally) required to repudiate the mother. She, as the model of femininity, sings beautifully -- no shrieks, no ornaments. But she is also betrayed by the supposedly humane Sarastro: in the midst of one of the tests about which she has, of course, been kept ignorant, she becomes so distraught at Tamino's snubbing of her that she almost commits suicide. Once again, it is the old story that she must have his love or die, and we as listeners are directed to relish her lament, "Ach, ich fühls," as aesthetic object. Her tormented aria operates by withholding from us the cadence that spells closure and death, and Mozart teases us by making us desire both that inevitable conclusion (her death) and also its deferral (the continuing spectacle of her suffering). She is Sarastro's dutiful daughter and also his plaything.

It will undoubtedly be objected that these are works from the past, from a time when values were different from ours, and that it is not appropriate to apply our later ethical standards to these documents. It is true that these are works of the past, and I would not be so concerned with them if they were not still performed year in and year out; if they were not taken to be manifestations of perfection, the pinnacle of cultural achievement. Indeed, if the people who study, perform, and listen to these operas did so critically, there would be no need for this paper. But I see no evidence whatever that we try to distance ourselves from the ideologies they articulate. The misogyny in these operas is never (or very rarely) problematized in performance -- the way it is now, almost as a matter of course, with no less a canonized figure than Shakespeare. We choose to keep these images ever before us, to teach people to love and submit to them unquestioningly.

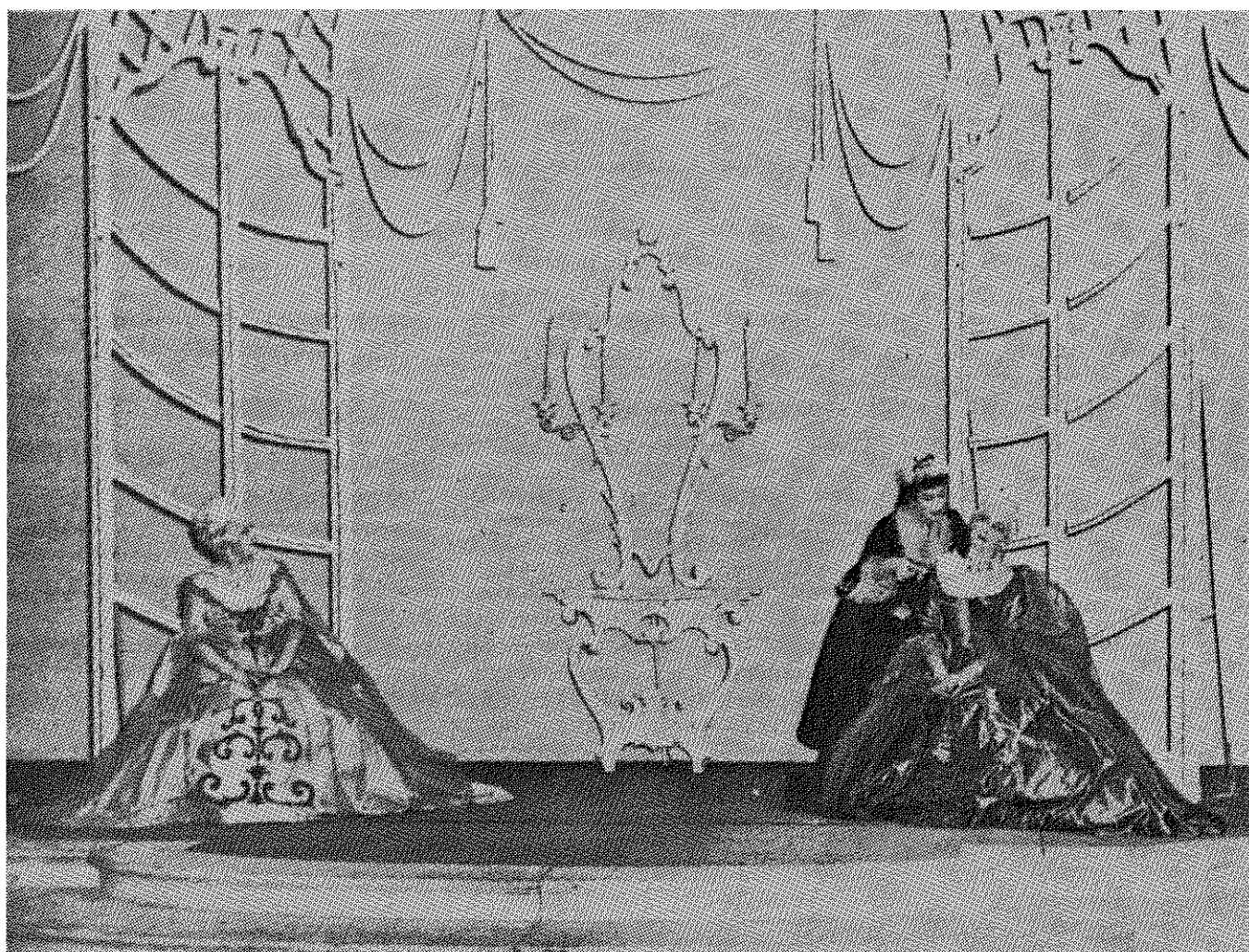
And we also make use of these models in order to justify new compositions that perpetuate the custom of constructing more and more brutal portraits of women, women who are then killed off as jokes. It is when I truly scrutinize these scores, read the standard interpretations, and witness their new offspring that I feel very alienated, despite, or perhaps because of my patriarchal drag. For it becomes clear that I am really in a boy's club. I can either laugh nervously at the jokes and hope to escape detection - or else begin to protest.

This is not an argument for censorship. Indeed, when we as women try to uncover how we learned we were supposed to love our abusers, to submit silently to patriarchal law, to identify against ourselves, we can begin to find clues in these elite cultural models that have participated for so long in the reproduction of such social values. These peices need to be studied very carefully - but as *social texts*, rather than as aesthetic objects of Great Art before which we humble ourselves. It is precisely because this music is so powerful and so seductively beautiful that it and its agenda need to be deconstructed. If it didn't work, we wouldn't need to break it.

If I were to accept the alternatives offered in *The Magic Flute*, I would have to choose to be either Pamina or the Queen of the Night. I too learned in graduate school that in order to be admitted to the hallowed halls, I had to become a dutiful daughter. I had to silence my own observations and submit to the patriarchal law of my discipline. A strong tendency in me still wants to find a way to recoup Mozart, so that I too can continue to adore his music unproblematically. But to continue thus to submit is to be an Elvira, to love my abuser despite the humiliation he heaps upon me, because of his great beauty. I find I must either acknowledge that the perfect humanistic world necessarily includes misogyny and accept that, or else declare that world to fall very short of perfection and part company. If anyone asks, "Why are you dragging sexual politics in here?" I can only respond, "Sexual politics are already here, and they always have been here. I am simply pointing them out."



'It's precisely because this music is so powerful and so seductively beautiful that it and its agenda need to be deconstructed.'



So given the choice, I would rather be the Queen of the Night, raging in the manner of "Der Hölle Rache" against the atrocities of patriarchal law and culture rather than remaining demurely silent. But I resist that too, for I refuse to identify with qualities such as obscurity, irrationality, and superficiality. To charge *Così fan tutte*, "All women are like that," I must answer calmly and firmly, *No*. Insofar as I claim the right to rationality, voice, and intellectual substance, I am no longer willing to be his apologist, no longer willing to be one of Mozart's women.

"Mozart's Women" previously appeared in *Hurricane Alice*, Vol. 3, No. 3.

Susan McClary is Associate Professor of Musicology at the University of Minnesota. Her publications include articles on seventeenth century style, on ideological dimensions of music by Bach and others, and on problems in the reception of new music. She is co-editor of a volume forthcoming from Cambridge University Press, Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception, and she wrote the afterward to the translation of Jacques Attali's Noise. She has also just completed a piece entitled Susan Does the Elders.