Turtles All the Way Down: Performative Translations

⊙ Svend Erik LARSEN
Aarhus University

Abstract: The relation between the three basic genres—epic, poetry, drama—is often characterized through comparative descriptions of form, themes, plot, and characters. Despite their multiple variations and subgenres, the overarching genres are *grosso modo* recognizable across periods and cultures. Yet, when the problem of translation is introduced in the genre description a fundamental difference comes to the surface. While epic and poetry may or may not be translated without losing their genre status or their value, a dramatic text must be translated from text to stage. The text itself may or may not be translated; but being only a pre-text for a performance, its status as a *dramatic* text, rather than just a text, requires a multidimensional translation for every performance. This *constitutive translation*—in a broad understanding of translation—and its relation to the dramatic text, itself subject to a verbal translation or not, provides the dramatic text with a unique dynamic cultural significance. With a focus on Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's and Lorenzo da Ponte's recreation of Pierre-Augustin de Beaumarchais's French comedy *Le Mariage de Figaro* (1783) as the Italian opera *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786), the article discusses constitutive translation.

Keywords: theater, translation, comedy, opera, Beaumarchais, Mozart, *Le nozze di Figaro*

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Genres and Translation

Across differences in literary and cultural traditions the basic generic forms of lyrical poetry, epic texts, and drama are, in most cases, recognizable for readers with different cultural backgrounds, even if genres branch out in multiple local formal and discursive varieties. If not identical in detail there are, notwithstanding, strong affinities between such cultural variations, also when creative writers experiment beyond the pale of a clear generic order: blended forms, formal disruptions, and interaction with non-verbal genres like film, painting, and print. Cross-

overs between fictional forms and discourses normally used to make reliable references to our world of experience such as docu-fiction; not to mention cultural cross-overs like *Macbeth* adapted as a Japanese *kabuki* or *Romeo and Juliet* as a Korean *pansori*.

From different viewpoints, theories of literary genres abound within and across cultures and literary traditions (Fowler). Theoretically, generic forms have been defined according to their internal formal features, to their cultural and aesthetic value on a highbrow-lowbrow scale, to their thematic priorities, to their market potential, to their communicative functions in the context of education and politics, or to their social appeal in general. Some approaches may show a predominantly descriptive orientation, soon to be made redundant by the actual mutations of artistic practices; others may favor a prescriptive take with open or tacit censorship waiting around the corner, soon to be undermined by creative writers who never turn that corner, but take other routes to explore new forms, media, or publication venues.

If we now add translation to the general understanding of genres, a fundamental difference between non-performative and performative genres becomes visible. In the long and winding history of genres there are of course numerous verbal and non-verbal translation processes involved when stories, characters, and motifs have travelled along trade routes and other border-crossing trajectories of cultural exchange, making possible, for example, the Japanese and Korean adaptations of William Shakespeare as local performative genres or the imitation of *haiku* poetry in Western modernism. As to epic or poetry in verse or prose, verbal and non-verbal translation may or may not be involved, in as much as transfer between languages or other media does not constitute their genre specificity. Literatures around the world are replete with non-translated texts in these categories which for that reason do not cease to be examples of epic and poetry or be of lesser cultural and aesthetic value than their translated cousins.

The performative genres are different. They are constituted by a translation, often captured by the catchphrase “from page to stage” (Ingham). A text of a novel or a poem is the finished version at a certain point in time and remains a finished text even though it may not be the final text. By contrast, a dramatic text is never a finished text regardless of the version we have in front of us; actually, it is best understood as half a performance, the other half being what happens in an embodied performance on stage or in a studio, which eventually may become material for a recording and a later broadcast. Its status as a dramatic text, and not just a text, is conditioned by its multidimensional translation into a performance through bodies, light, props, etc. Here, I use the term “translation” in a broad sense: a transfer of a manifestation of meaning through rewriting or recreation in various media within or across specific cultural contexts (Larsen, “Translation”; Reynolds).

In this sense, a dramatic text is more like a musical score, a predefined choreographic design of a ballet or the script and storyboard of a movie. As a text the dramatic text belongs to a certain historical period and a particular place; yet, as a performance it always happens here and now for audiences in ever new periods and places—until the text is forgotten as a pre-text, as it were, for a performance. Therefore, each performance reinterprets and perhaps rewrites the text in new ways relevant for the actual audience within a given cultural setting, including improvisations and interaction with the audience, new technologies and media as part of the props, and reinterpretations of cultural values different from what the author might have known or accepted (Bassnett 153–157; Canalès 25–44; Reynolds 113–119).

A non-performative text may exist in one or a set of possible original versions that may or may

not be translated, whereas a dramatic text put on stage beyond the play's temporal, geographical, and linguistic origin, is most often based on modifications and in many cases also translations to make the performance vital in a new cultural context. Verbal translation itself is a communicative exercise in which the criteria for how to handle the source text is co-determined and maybe over-determined by the target text, its context, and readership. Thus, both the verbal translation of the dramatic text as well as its constitutive translation into a performance will have to take their liberties with the source text and the tradition of its performances to revitalize text and tradition as an actual performance. The constitutive translation resulting in a performance is a multimedia cultural process here and now, overdetermining the use of the dramatic text whether translated or not.

In this perspective, a non-essentialist, functional definition of an original text could run like this: a text waiting to be (re)translated. However, for dramatic texts the situation is different. Like the generic group of epic and lyrical texts, a verbal translation of a dramatic text may or may not occur; but its constitutive translation must occur for the text to be performed. Hence, the performance has a status like the mythical build-up of the universe in some Asian cultures. Supported by elephants standing on the shield of a giant turtle, the answer to the question "what supports the turtle?" is assumed to have been: beneath the turtle there are turtles all the way down. If the performance stands on the back of a dramatic text, beneath the performance there are translations all the way down.

The following pages will operate in the vast generic landscape of comedy (Billig; Stott; Weitz) to discuss some implications of the notion of constitutive translation using one main example: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's and Lorenzo da Ponte's adaptation of Pierre-Augustin de Beaumarchais's comedy *Le Mariage de Figaro* (1783), performed just three years later as the opera *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786).

Despite following Beaumarchais's text closely regarding characters and plot, da Ponte's libretto in Italian is not a translation but a radical rewriting of the French text to suit the opera's musical requirements: arias, choirs, and joined singing from duets to octets, as well as musical parts without speech but various forms of action. Until the 1950s it was common to translate libretti for performances in local languages; later, operas have normally been sung in the original language wherever they are performed. When recorded as a CD or a DVD the accompanying booklet will bring readable but not singable translations in several languages, whereas live performances will often bring a translation for local audiences above the stage or on the back of the seat in front of each spectator, thus turning the libretto into a meta-text of the performance.

Here, the French comedy is mainly used to illustrate the basic constitutive translation from text to performance via Beaumarchais's subtle deliberations on the role of comedy in his own cultural and political context a few years before the French Revolution in 1789. I shall pay most attention to Mozart/da Ponte's opera, its adaptation of Beaumarchais's text and the multidimensional translations that create and recreate *Le nozze di Figaro* as a performance with references to a few of them.

Comedy

Comedies would have a hard time being successful as a performance if they did not display at

least three features of the events and experiences shaping the text or, if only implicitly present in the text, show the potential to do so in the staging. If not, the performance will fall flat. The first such feature is contemporaneity. Comedies allude to experiences or events which form part of the everyday lifeworld of the audience. Such elements may be topical for the audience of the first performances but lost for a later audience, or refer to characters, settings, opinions, and motifs of a broader cultural relevance and thus ready to be exploited by performances for future audiences. Or they may be of a more general nature like love, power play, stupidity, betrayal etc.

The second feature on my list is immediacy. This term covers the predilection in comedies for mental states of uncontrollable obsessions like irresistible greed, lust, and power mongering. Moreover, most often comedies are not only rife with innuendos but also explicit in their preoccupation with everything bodily, from sex to acrobatic agility as in *commedia del arte*. Ideally, this immediacy will translate into familiar and equally spontaneous passions of the laughing audience; yet, like a good joke told in the wrong context, divergent cultural norms for corporality, self-control, and sex also generate changed performative practices. Honesty and genuine empathy are in short supply in comedies, and reflection and afterthought rarely serve profound self-recognition and personal development, but are invested in cunning and cheating, at times leading to a highly ambiguous and ironic moral education of the audience, based as it is on the cynical scheming that makes a moral conclusion possible.

The final basic feature is secularism. Comedies focus on social interaction between people, not on religion or similar transcendental matters. If included nonetheless, they are introduced with a view to hypocritical representatives of the clergy, the institutional superficiality of the church, the self-indulgence of philosophers and lawyers, or the limited influence of the few honest representatives of other major institutions. Thus, as a playful yet temporary turning the world upside down, comedies have the potential for social controversy. Also values of a higher order like honor and friendship are entirely embedded in social traditions and behavior, making it up to each performance to redefine the delicate balance between permissible and impermissible social transgression for audiences in shifting contexts. Without the audacity of going to the limit of the permissible, a performance risks being killed by boredom; going beyond, it may instead in some contexts be killed by censorship.

Comedies may share some of these features with other genres: contemporaneity is key to realist writing; immediacy is not alien to the steaminess of folk tales or erotic literature, and secularism is known as a fundamental characteristic across the world in multiple texts from novels to satire appearing during the last centuries. However, only comedies have persistently shown all three features throughout the history of the genre, although with a different weight in different cultural contexts. This is so, I will claim, because they must be reduplicated by the constitutive translation that shapes a successful comedy performance for new audiences.

Contemporaneity of a dramatic text written in earlier centuries has for a long time been represented by costumes and props from the time of its origin, while performances realized after World War II tend to come closer to a modern audience with a contemporary setting, often provoking a debate of the limits of permissible transformations of the classics. The immediacy of a performance exploits the fact that it takes place in a bodily co-presence of audience and actors, inviting not only improvisations and interaction with the audience, but also challenging the contemporary audience's acceptance of staged nudity, violence, and various repulsive bodily eruptions that call for immediate reactions, today often in reduced scenography which implies

that the acting bodies take center stage, as it were. Finally, secularism is often manifested as a satirical edge in its references to social institutions from family via government to transnational financial and political structures, now often with an emphasis on individual psychology and ethics, situating everything within the material world of human experience. The importance of the three basic features for the constitutive translation of a text into a performance does not come from their capacity to prescribe what a correct performance should look like; rather, they indicate three semantic areas for which directors must find expressions on stage, often experimental ones, for the performance to be an intervention in the lifeworld of an actual audience.

In many traditional comedies the stock characters do most of the job. In older dramatic texts and their performances, they represent recognizable and stable social positions. There are the clever underdogs coming up with the diligent scheming which for a moment unravels the power of the rather narrow-minded and self-indulgent representatives of the upper classes, often being carried out with the aim of making the young lovers happy against the premeditated plans of their families. If this structure of actors and action looks overtly simplified, it also, like the six strings of a guitar, allowed for infinite variations and, due to its recognizability, guaranteed immediate contact with the expectations of new audiences. However, in Europe from the 16th century on, with playwrights like William Shakespeare, Felix Lope de Vega, and Molière, comedies began to develop more complex characters. Without doing away with stock characters altogether, they began to highlight the individuality of characters on different levels: individual voices, opinions, self-development, social criticism, and emotions. This development runs parallel to changes in other literary genres such as the modern novel, other media like portrait painting, other discourses such as philosophy of politics and science, and other ideas of humanity based on the individual human being. All these developments merged into one cultural force in the run up to the social eruption in the French Revolution.

Precisely at this historical juncture, Beaumarchais and Mozart/da Ponte wrote and composed their comedies, at the same time exploiting and revising the stock characters and the standard plot. They pointed forward to the next centuries rather than backward to the old tradition of the genre and, by doing so, opened new possibilities for constitutive translations for future performances, though Beaumarchais's comedy less so. Nonetheless, his preface to *Le Mariage de Figaro* leaves no doubt about his awareness of the controversial contemporaneity of his text and its performative potential. Situating his characters, setting, and plot in the pre-revolutionary France of his time, and with only a badly hidden criticism of the feudal society and its privileged classes, Beaumarchais was treading on shaky ground dangerously close to the investigative gaze of censorship. In the preface he explicitly defends his comedy against censorship and demonstrates an impressive diligence toward maintaining a delicate balance between the limits of the genre and the play's provocative political implications. His argument draws attention away from the dramatic text itself to the potential effects of the performance. If the text is the sole interest of censorship and its verdict of the writer, the performance is different, which offers Beaumarchais the opportunity to detach himself from any responsibility for the contentious lines of some of the characters.

First, Beaumarchais attempts to define tragedy and comedy in a complementary opposition regarding the dramatic text, but at the same time he underlines that when brought on stage, they are placed together on a sliding scale from atrocities to the limits of propriety:

With intrepid means the tragic playwright has the courage to disclose atrocious crimes:

> conspirations, usurpation, murder, poisoning, incest, fratricide, parricide, regicide, etc. etc. The comedy is less audacious and never exceeds the limits of propriety, because its scenes are taken from our customary manners, its subjects from society. (*La folle* 25; my trans.)

Performances of both genres produce a morally elevating distance in the audience to the staged events, yet with different means—one by repulsion, the other by laughter, both clearly anchored in contemporary society. Indirectly, Beaumarchais claims a performance of his comedy would never transgress the fine line between propriety and impropriety. Yet, at the same time he asks: How can one write a decent comedy—in both meanings of "decent"—without precisely showing what goes against social decorum and established practices? Thus, good manners and theatrical propriety are caught in a paradox that gives life to a comedy performance as an entertaining and morally educating genre: "Hence, it is neither the vice nor the events it fosters that generate theatrical indecency, but its lack of teaching and morality. If the writer is either weak or timid and does not insist on the morality of his subject, then the piece will be ambiguous and vicious" (27; my trans.).

Going one step further, Beaumarchais now claims that the words of the characters are simply what individuals like the characters would say in a real-life situation put on stage, but not his own words. His characters are not examples of the usual stereotypes of the genre. His argument implies a connection with the contemporary modern novel's narrative technique of using various narrators and points of view as a reflection of human life with individual minds as its shifting prisms: "Everyone speaks their own language: May the god of natural propriety protect them from doing anything else! Please, make me responsible only for the examination of their ideas, but do not try to claim that I make them speak my own words" (41; my trans.).

Giving himself the license to make the individualized characters utter whatever words he pleases, Beaumarchais only claims responsibility for the potential education to propriety of the comedy as a whole, that is to say when and if it is projected on stage in the right way through the constitutive translation of the dramatic text. Yet, this is not Beaumarchais's responsibility; his job is only with his text to offer the possibility of education to propriety. Thus, comedies become not only a means of teaching people good manners but could just as well be an instrument capable of stirring up the basic collective values of a society. Beaumarchais himself eventually succeeded in avoiding censorship for *Le Mariage de Figaro* despite the initial opposition from Louis XVI. However, being a nobleman close to the court, after 1789 he was first prosecuted by the revolutionary state, then worked for it, then was accused again, and finally liaised with it once more before his death in 1799. The playwright himself exemplified how the double-edged genre of comedy, both as text and performance, thrived in the volatile cultural and political context toward the end of 18th-century Europe. The traditional happy closure of the conflicts of the comedy dissolved into irony, potentially breaking up accepted truths and stability in favor of open-ended individual perspectives. This shift opened for modern performances of comedies new options for innovative dramaturgical investments in the constitutive translation from text to stage.

From Beaumarchais to Mozart/da Ponte[1]

The roles of *Le Mariage de Figaro* only include contemporary characters from a recognizable

French social world around 1780, including variations on the character typology of comedies: the master and his wife, Count and Countess Almaviva, both somewhat pompous and too full of themselves; the clever servant and his even more ingenious fiancée, Figaro and Suzanne; and an amorous adolescent from a noble family, Chérubin; plus some comical figures from the household. As in many other comedies, sex forms the dynamic center, easily grasped by any audience and with the potential of showing when people are most uncontrollably passionate and most irresistibly ridiculous. The plot centers on a rather traditional intrigue, namely, on the capable servants and their aim to obtain the right to marriage, while avoiding the threat of a forced relationship stemming from patrons or parents, authority figures who, in the end, must accept their marriage. In this case, it must be arranged that Figaro and Suzanne end up in their own bed, which is brought on stage in the first act, and that the Count does not succeed in getting Suzanne into his, despite his traditional right to the first night with the bride. This sounds like business as usual in a comedy.

The mockingly innocent Beaumarchais, however, managed to turn his comedy into a hand grenade on stage (Goldzink; Howarth). The play was censored in Paris and Vienna because of the thinly disguised attack on the privileges of nobility. Yet, the text did not say a word about fortune or political power; things were—in the manner of comedy—sidetracked toward a matter of sexuality. Nevertheless, many of Figaro's lines, and one long soliloquy in particular (Beaumarchais, *Trilogy* Act V, Scene iii), leave no doubt that social power, privileges, and their abuse constitute the real focal point (Gossman). Genuine love is on the side of the servants, while the easily agitated, lecherous Count deceives his rightful and faithful wife—as one does as a nobleman—to her great distress. The obstinate Figaro asks the rhetorical question: "Are we but soldiers who kill and are killed for reasons they do not know?" (Act V, Scene xii). No wonder Beaumarchais tried to avoid responsibility for his characters' utterances.

The center of gravity in Beaumarchais is the question of honor (Bowman), yet here only in libidinous affairs. Honor is challenged when the Count's expectations of spending a pleasant night with Suzanne, the chambermaid of the Countess and Figaro's bride-to-be, are dashed. The intrigue that prevents the Count from achieving his aim is that the Countess and Suzanne exchange clothes, leading to the Count courting his own wife whom he takes for Suzanne, while watching Figaro embrace Suzanne, who is dressed up as his own wife. When honor is central, public humiliation of the proud Count is the proper retaliation. He is made to believe that his honor has been offended, and thereby his public status: "When dishonor is public, the revenge has to be the same" (Act V, Scene xiii), he exclaims not knowing he has been trapped. In the end though, the Count realizes he has been treated "like a child" (Act V, Scene xix), and he must also add to his own humiliation by asking for forgiveness from his wife for his fury. Disgraced, the Count strives to gain the upper hand again, by calling his plea a gesture of "generous pardon" (Act V, Scene xix), which, being generous, conforms to his former superior status despite his now having been made a fool.

The Countess, mockingly kneeling while dressed as Suzanne, sees right through his embarrassment and gets to her feet: "In my place you would rather say: *no, no!* But for the third time today, I forgive without conditions" (Act V, Scene xix). Here, she refers to two earlier scenes where she forgives the Count for his affairs and his unjustified suspicion that his wife is infatuated with the young Chérubin. Stubbornly, the Count refuses three times saying *no, no*, before he eventually caves in. Thus, everything ends merrily, though with the bitter tone of all comedies: the problems solved at the end are less comprehensive than those that unfold in the comedy. In all likelihood, the Count will soon chase another maid.

Mozart/da Ponte's *Le nozze di Figaro* repeats almost the entirety of Beaumarchais's intrigue and retains his characters with some name changes into Italian. The essential difference is that the center of gravity becomes forgiveness and the emotional relations between people, instead of the socially defined honor-based hierarchy. Nonetheless, the hierarchy remains as a depiction of the social universe, though now without being an important matter for everyone, except for the Count (Barshack; Nussbaum). This is, of course, not an ideological change made over the three years from 1783 to 1786, but rather a symptom of a broader and more persistent transition of genres, moral values, and ideas of humanity in the 18th century (Lachmayer). Beaumarchais's comedy remains within the universe of social power and privilege he exposes to criticism and allows the ending to reassemble the social shards of the order blown to pieces by the humiliations of the Count and successful scheming of the servants supported by the Countess. Yet, as the playwright himself suggested, a performance can emphasize the reestablishment of traditional order and present the rebellion against the Count as a passing and accidental crisis. On the other hand, the text also invites an alternative constitutive translation of the comedy. Figaro's challenge to the arbitrariness of the execution of power that may kill him as a soldier also allows for performances with another perspective: individual freedom from the oppressive social effects of inherited power and privilege. By contrast, the opera points to another trend in its contemporary world of European enlightenment: the universally shared basic nature of all of humanity based on a common capacity for emotions like empathy and sympathy (Larsen, *Between Truth* ch. 4). Two scenes from the opera may serve as illustration. They build on the two scenes of forgiveness that the Countess recalls in the final scene of Beaumarchais, both significantly different in the opera where they redirect the entire perspective of the opera from social honor code to that of universal humanity inherent in each individual human being.

The first parallel scene is more elaborated in the opera in its combination of text and music. When Beaumarchais's Count suspects his wife of being infatuated with Chérubin, he becomes angry, and she is offended in her honor by his general neglect. However, she also worries about her husband's possible loss of honor, as provoked by the unjustified suspicion. In fact, she has met with the adolescent, but only alongside Suzanne, with both of them dressing up Chérubin as a girl. By the time the Count enters, Suzanne has left the room, and the boy hides in a closet. When the distrustful Count walks out with the trembling Countess to find a key to the closet, Suzanne reenters and lets out Chérubin. He then proceeds to jump out of the window while she takes his place. Unsurprisingly, the Count is baffled to discover Suzanne and not the boy. In the comedy, the Countess humiliates her spouse by pardoning him and at the same time reminding him that he is not able to show her the same generosity. Two proud people confront one another, and for once the Countess can put down the Count (Beaumarchais, *Trilogy* Act II, Scene xix).

In the structurally identical but more elaborated scene from the opera that comprises almost the entire second act, the Countess is hurt by her "cruel husband" in her feelings as an honest person with a "faithful heart," neglected by him and asking for his pity. The Count immediately "begs forgiveness" and repeats his repentance in an appeal to her sense of pity. Here, he does not show a surplus of pride but a deficit of emotion (Mozart/da Ponte, CD libretto 85–90). The Countess enjoys the situation and drags it out, for "He who can't forgive others / doesn't deserve to be forgiven," the Countess and Susanna sing in unison. Finally, he admits: "I wronged you, and I repent it!" and all three of them sing in unison that they have learned from this event (86–88). The scene is much longer than in the comedy, and there is a certain playfulness in the dialogue and

the music, which is one continuous flow where the three voices at times sing on their own, at times in unison. It is a play with general human emotions—not social emotions of honor and shame—and the very extension of the situation is part of everybody's pleasure, immersing themselves in delightful and ambiguous emotions. Indeed, play it is: they are warming up to prevent the Count from having his way with Susanna. Nonetheless, the combination of words and music at times reveals that Susanna is perhaps not always unimpressed by the seductive skills of the Count (108–109). Emotional volatility is the main driving force, while the Count's sense of honor and his resentment indicate simply his own position.

This development is strongly supported by the music, which then allows the final scene—my second example—to embrace the full meaning of the emotionally based processes of forgiveness (Benoit-Otis, "Mozart"; "clémence"; Nagel; Nussbaum). In the opera, we are made to believe that forgiveness is not a final and unique event, however beautifully seductive and restorative it may appear in Mozart's music. It will be forgotten the next day. As in Beaumarchais, Susanna and the Countess have changed their clothing, and the Count is provoked into losing his temper, believing he finally has visual proof that his marital honor has been offended by the false Countess in the arms of Figaro. The Count does not, however, cry for his lost honor, but rather practically regrets that he is without arms; he calls his armed guard to take hold of what he believes to be two culprits. First Susanna disguised as the Countess, then Figaro, and finally all the characters on stage beg on their knees for the Count "forgive me/us" (158). Three times repeating *no*, *no*, he is as unforgiving as Beaumarchais's count.

Without interruption in the music, although with a change of tempo and tonality, the real Countess enters. In the comedy, she forgives everyone unconditionally (Beaumarchais, *Trilogy* Act V, Scene xix), and by this gesture spares the Count further humiliating himself were he to show repentance on top of being outsmarted by his servants and wife. Everything ends happily for the time being. However, in the opera, she ironically asks the Count to forgive them all, knowing as does everyone else that it is the Count who has wronged them. Thus, she leaves the initiative to him, and it is by this move he knows that he is cornered, whether he accepts it or not. At this point, the world is held awestruck and in wonder, with a few bars of complete silence while all characters hold their breath, transfixed: will he instead request forgiveness for himself? In response to the Countess, he does kneel and ask, thus accepting his wrongdoing. The silence marks the exit from the old universe of honor and privilege and the entry into a new world of sympathy, empathy, and forgiveness. Out of the Count's plea rises a harmonious but polyphonic choir of all who are on stage, opening a vision of another world: "Oh, heavens! What do I see? / A delusion! A vision! / I can't believe it" (Mozart/da Ponte CD libretto 158).

The opera is a powerful genre to bring about what Beaumarchais pointed out in his preface: the characters speak with their own voice, not his. In an opera, the music and the text can work against each other as two different or complementary voices, or—in this opera—up to eight different characters can unite, each with their own tune and force, singing the same or their own lines, simultaneously singled out and kept together by the music. Like the novel with several hierarchically organized narrators, the opera also exposes this individualizing differentiation in an artistic form that further develops in operas over the following centuries. This possibility is specifically exploited in the finale immediately after the forgiveness scene. It is almost identical to the parallel scene in the comedy, but the music makes a world of difference, mainly because the final forgiveness scene is still fresh in our ears. Some contemporary performances offer different

stagings of this finale, and a few comments to one of them in particular will also be my finale.

Finale: Some Recent Opera Performances

In the performance in Salzburg from 2006, staged by Claus Guth and conducted by Nikolaus Harnoncourt, the finale got a twist due to a reinterpretation of Cherubino as the linchpin of the performance (Mozart/da Ponte DVD). The staging avoids overt contemporary references in clothes and props, as in for example Peter Sellars's production from the 1990s, which was set also in 1990s New York, and for that reason became rapidly outdated (Levin 74, 93). The 2024 Salzburg performance followed the same idea and set the opera in a contemporary urban milieu with quite a few visits to bars. Many productions still interpret contemporaneity as meaning the 1780s, for example a production from 1983 by the Zheng Xiaoying Opera Centre, Beijing, sung in Chinese (Nozze). While the majority of modern productions have abandoned this practice and attempt to create a sense of contemporaneity with the actual audience, it made good sense for a Chinese audience to present a foreign musical form with no references to Beijing in the 1980s nor to the Qing dynasty in the 1780s, a choice that made the constitutive translation underline the foreignness for the audience.

Other performances rely on symbolic scenography with no clear historical reference, yet clearly recognizable for a modern audience. The recent production at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen used an identical scenography throughout, a kind of pyramid with stairs and doors on different levels, immediately recognizable by the audience as an image of the hierarchical structure of the social universe. During the overture, a drunken gardener enters, staggers to the top and takes a nap, and all actors move up and down to illustrate the dismantling of the stable order of things turned upside down. Now and then a pregnant housemaid appears at the bottom, probably one of the Count's erotic conquests, reminding us that he is likely to continue his career as a womanizer also after curtain fall.

In Salzburg, Guth in 2006 created a contemporary production with no precise temporal and spatial coordinates, therefore possessing a more lasting appeal than the programmatically contemporary versions. Guth's rather abstract contemporary scenography leaves space for Cherubino as a symbolic figure who underlines the crucial role of forgiveness in Mozart/da Ponte. The name Cherubino means the "little angel"; he personifies still innocent but awakening erotic love, which he feels but probably has no part in yet. He is also the god Amor, inculcating the capacity of love in everyone, at last also even in the Count. From the opening scene, Guth has reduplicated him with a silent male adolescent in the same dress but featuring wings as Amor. Invisible to the characters, the figure is present throughout, dancing around and with them when love escapes them from jealousy, selfishness, and hatred. As a dream of self-abandoning love, he is present at the end, smiling when all finally unite into one closely knit group singing harmoniously of the vision they have gained with the Count's completion of the act of forgiveness opened by the Countess. Everyone is made equal in a moment of shared emotional empathy and reconciliation.

But a sudden shift from the narrative ending on stage to the ending addressing the audience takes place over 3–4 bars with no singing, and only a few descending chords played hesitantly by pianissimo strings supported by a single tenuous woodwind that holds the same high pitch tone.

Like the complete pause before the Count repents, this short voiceless passage announces that we are now leaving both the world of the absolute honor code and the imagined world of forgiveness and reconciled harmony, instead entering the real social world of the audience. During the few chords the harmonious group disintegrates, and they all begin shoving one another around. The fragile imagined universe of reconciled harmony has only lasted a few moments and proves to be but a pipedream. When the full orchestra again takes the lead, they all joyfully sing that only love and joy are left after a turbulent day, everything else is now forgotten.

However, the audience have seen the operatic comedy; we know they are lying, and they too now show it. While they all are singing merrily in unison, they split up, looking away from and pushing each other. The winged Cherubino jumps out of the window in despair, while the singing Cherubino drops to the floor, either unconscious or dead. In this interpretation, the adolescent Cherubino, sung by a mezzo-soprano, is a transitory and evanescent figure, an image of lost innocence enjoyed by the Countess and Susanna in an earlier scene, when they slowly caress the youngster while crossdressing him as a girl.

The opera has shown a universe of vulnerable and scheming individuals governed by the intensity of their emotions in the here and now—individuals who are bound to continue to be victims of chance events, of suspicion and misunderstandings, and of a disenchanted world that makes it necessary to utter and receive forgiveness, but with no belief in the possibility of lasting social harmony (Žižek). Guth's constitutive translation of the libretto to an opera performance brings the opera into the world of a modern audience faced with the hope of social stability, unity, and harmony and the fear of social volatility, solitude, and discord.

Note

1. In English references the title of the comedy and the opera is the same: *The Marriage of Figaro*. To better distinguish between the two plays and their characters with almost identical titles and names, in this article I use the original titles and names for the works of Beaumarchais and Mozart/da Ponte.

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