

Analysis of Two Arias from Mozart's *Le Nozze Di Figaro*

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart lived from 1756-1791 and was a prolific and renowned Classical composer. He had a large operatic output, the three most famous being: *Le Nozze di Figaro* (1786), *Don Giovanni* (1787) and *Così Fan Tutte* (1790). Lorenzo da Ponte, a prominent Venetian opera librettist and poet, wrote all three operas' librettos. *Le Nozze di Figaro* (The Marriage of Figaro) is Mozart's first and arguably greatest operatic masterpiece. It is an opera buffa (comic opera) in four acts and its libretto is based on a stage comedy by French playwright Pierre Beaumarchais' *La Folle Journée, ou Le Mariage de Figaro* (1784). The premiere was given in Vienna in 1786 with Mozart conducting the first two performances.

The opera spans a single day in the palace of Count Almaviva in Spain (despite the opera's Italian text) and its plot is a continuation of *The Barber of Seville*, another Beaumarchais play written eleven years earlier in 1773. It features a busy and slightly confusing tangle of character interactions, a hallmark of Mozart operas, but simply put is a story about Count Almaviva's newfound interest in other women besides his wife Rosina, including his servant Figaro's fiancée, Susanna. To restore the Count's love for his wife, Figaro, Susanna and Rosina devise a plan to embarrass the Count and expose his wrongdoings. Simultaneously, Count Almaviva is bent on delaying Figaro's marriage to attain Susanna for himself. In the end, goodness prevails and the Count makes up with his wife Rosina, uniting the two couples in their rightful places. The opera features a dozen incredible arias, two of which will be discussed. Both sung by Countess Almaviva (Rosina), the arias "Porgi, Amor" and "Dove Sono" each portray similar feelings of

agitation and sorrow. However, each yield contrasting results through features of marked differences as well as contain likenesses worthy of note.

“Porgi, Amor” No. 10 is a cavatina, meaning short or simple song. Consisting of only four lines, phrases are repeated for emotional effect and the melody is slow, simple, repetitive and steady with few decorations. It is also the first scene of Act II. Sung by soprano Countess Almaviva, it is Rosina’s first entrance on stage and she is completely alone, making the aria an aria d’afetto, a private confession type aria very common to the genre. She laments the loss of her husband’s love for her. The simplicity of the staging, with its first-time occurrence of a single character on stage, and the simplicity of the aria itself along with the relatively stark orchestration all enhance the sadness and pity the audience feels for Rosina. Stripped of any frills, long melismas, large range and showy orchestration, the audience is forced to feel completely and only the heartbroken lament of Countess Almaviva. Further enhancing the emotional effect is its slow tempo, marked *Larghetto*. It is not the first solo scene (Figaro has a solo scene in Act I’s Scene II), but it is the Countess’ first appearance and the second scene with only one character on stage.

Mozart sets the following text: “Porgi, amor, qualche ristoro / Al mio duolo, a’ miei sospir. / O mi rendi il mio Tesoro, / O mi lascia almen morir.” which translates in English to “Oh love, grant some relief / To my sorrow and my sighs. / And if you won’t give me back my loved one, / At least, I beg you, let me die.” It is worth citing the original to notice the rhymes and syllabic consistency lost in the English translation. The average or “mean” syllable amount is nine per line (however, the singer can arguably add a couple syllables melismatically, as, for example, done in the 1961 recording by Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and Carlo Maria Giulini). For practicality’s sake, it’s perhaps

most informative to look purely at the Italian text: the first line “Porgi, amor, qualche ristoro” has eight syllables (due to the elision between “Porgi” and “amor”), the second, “Al mio duolo, a’ miei sospir” has seven syllables (being a tronco line), the third, “O mi rendi il mio Tesoro” has eight syllables (due to the elision between “rendi” and “il”), and the last, “O mi lascia almen morir” has eight syllables as well (due to the elision between “lascia” and “almen”).

The almost complete consistency of syllables per line goes hand in hand with the overall simplicity of the four-line aria (the unique eleven syllable line can be considered longer due to two extra sdrucchiole, or weak syllables on “a” before “miei” and ei of “miei”), but even more expressive is the uniformity of stressed syllables per line. Each line has exactly four stressed syllables despite the lack of complete syllable length consistency. The first line’s strong syllables occur on (underlined) “Porgi, amor, qualche ristoro,” the second on “Al mio duolo, a’miei sospir,” the third “O mi rendi il mio tesoro,” and the fourth, “O mi lascia almen morir.” Thus, the rhyming words ristoro and tesoro are both accented on the middle syllable, and the rhyming words sospir and morir are both accented on the second syllable, lending further symmetry and inner-text relations to the simple yet evidently thoroughly constructed aria.

An interesting aspect to this aria is its decidedly long orchestral introduction. Unusual for most arias, especially those of Mozart, perhaps the orchestral introduction can be viewed as an overture of sorts to the second act as a whole, rather than purely setting up the aria. The introduction and aria are in E-flat major; the 17-measure introduction is relatively simple, with mostly I-V motion in the bass. The second violins and violas maintain rhythmic interest via a repeated neighbor motive of syncopated

sixteenth notes, as exemplified in mm. 3-9 and during the aria in mm. 18-25 and 45-49. A rhythmically similar arpeggiated triad also maintains rhythmic interest via the bass picking up the sixteenth note motive in mm. 7 and 9, in concurrence with the viola's final syncopated motives before m. 18. Significantly, the motive in the violas and violins changes from a simple neighboring chromatic motion to pedal-like repetitions of the E-flat major triad to signal the impending cadence of the introduction.

Beyond these motives, a particularly Mozartian quality is found in the overall increasing rhythmic drive to ultimately lead to the PAC in E-flat major at m. 17. Beginning with m. 1's eighth notes, the rhythm is quickly accelerated in m. 2 with dominating sixteenth notes. The bass then increases rhythmic drive with its adoption of the syncopated sixteenth note motive in m. 7. In addition, the violins increase rhythmic complexity with dotted sixteenths and double-dotted eighth notes in mm. 9 and 13 respectively. Lastly, the B-flat clarinets switch from eighth to sixteenth and to finally dominating thirty-second notes between mm. 1-16. It is somewhat striking for such fanfare to be made for the contrastingly simple, sad and stripped down aria to follow. Perhaps Mozart didn't like the idea of beginning Act II immediately with a forlorn, potentially depressing aria and opted to make up for it with a comparatively elaborate orchestral introduction.

The form of "Porgi, Amor" is a bit hard to pin down as it is musically through-composed despite repetitions of the text. Nonetheless, one can at the very least conclude that there exist two large sections, an A and B. A contains two subsections, a and b. Subsection a contains the first two lines, or half, of the text. The first phrase lasts from mm. 18-25 with an E-flat HC in m. 25. Notable is the switch to dominant B-flat harmony

at m. 25 with this cadence. The following phrase, b, is preceded by two instrumental measures that confirm this dominant tonicization with the bass simply playing two B-flats in the first measure and two Fs in the second. Thus, Mozart, in a typical sneakily smooth and almost covert fashion, immediately modulates to V (B-flat major) without a pivot chord, but includes the V/V with Fs in the bass. The singer begins again in m. 28's downbeat at the same time a B-flat PAC is accomplished.

Measures 28-30 mark the second phrase, labeled b, for the obvious reason that it's in the dominant key, but also because of its differences with a in regards to structure. The phrase length has been reduced from 8 to 3 measures here, along with an added following 4-measure phrase (overall adding up to 7, thus uniting the a and b sections under the umbrella larger section of A). Thus, a B-flat PAC occurs in m. 30, followed by an instrumental 1.5 measures simply moving from bass B-flat-F-B-flat, followed by the second 4-measure phrase from m. 32 to the downbeat of m. 36. A fermata occurs at this downbeat and B-flat PAC. Measures 34-36 can be viewed as a linking passage and retransition back to the home key due to the addition of A-flat in mm. 35-36, proposing once again B-flat as the dominant of tonic E-flat instead of its own key. This marks the end of the 4 lines of text, the 3rd line having occurred in mm. 28-30 and the 4th in mm. 32-36. Due to this completion of text and the ensuing differences of orchestration and phrase structure, one can view the music after 36's downbeat as large section B.

Section B essentially re-emphasizes the lamenting quality of the text with its two text repetitions. With the intense HC of m. 36 harkening the return to E-flat major, an E-flat PAC is accomplished in m. 45. Measures 36-45 (labeled c) repeat all four lines of the text in a hurried manner sung with almost entirely sixteenth notes with a few exceptions

of eighths and dotted eighths, along with quarter notes occurring between mm. 44-45 to emphasize the E-flat PAC and confirmed return to tonic key. The next phrase (d) lasts from mm. 45-49, with repetitions of lines 3-4 of text and also ends on a downbeat (as subsection b's second phrase), cadencing with an E-flat PAC. What follows is a 2.5 measure postlude with another reiterated E-flat PAC. Thus, Mozart maintains interest with a heavily repeated, short and simple text via a through-composed setting in which phrase length, structure, orchestration and key areas are all subject to change in a non-repetitive fashion.

The second aria "Dove Sono I Bei Momenti" occurs in the eighth (out of fourteen) scene of Act III and is also sung by Countess Almaviva. It is her second and her final aria of the opera. The aria is of interest in its contrast from Rosina's earlier aria for several reasons, most notably its greater complexity in all facets, most notably its overall structure. Fittingly, as the plot thickens and becomes more complex between the second and third acts, so too does the text and overall aria itself. The aria occurs when the Countess is waiting for Susanna to find out about the Count's reaction to their proposition to fool him. Because the Countess is alone again, it is also an aria da fetto. There is no break from the preceding recitative of the scene; only a mere one beat rest separates the aria from the recitative. The structure is far more complex than the Countess' earlier aria because it contains two large parts, marked off with tempo markings: the first, *Andantino* and the second, *Allegro*. They contrast greatly in mood as well.

The *Andantino*, sharing roughly the same tempo as the first aria, also shares its hopeless and lamenting quality. The *Allegro* section on the other hand, presents a more exasperated and energetic Countess, exclaiming with resolute feeling: "Ah! Se almen la

mia costanza / Nel languire amando ognor / Mi portasse una speranza / Di cangiar
l'ingrato cor” translated to “Ah! If only my devotion / In longing for his love / Could give
me some hope / Of changing his ungrateful heart.” The first Andantino section, with the
words “Dove sono I bei momenti / Di dolcezza e di piacer, / Dove andaro I giuramenti /
Di quell labbro menzogner? / Perche mai, se in pianti e in pene / Per me tutto si cangio, /
La memoria di quel bene / Dal mio sen non trapasso?” translated to “Where are those
cherished moments? / Of sweetness and pleasure? / Where have they gone, / The vows he
so deceitfully made? / Why then, when everything’s changed / Into tears and pain for me,
/ Has the memory of that happiness / Never left my breast?” on the other hand paints a
portrait of Rosina’s feelings of hopelessness for her situation. It simply expresses her
feelings out loud to only herself, in a similar fashion to “Porgi, Amor, Qualche Ristoro,”
both serving to paint a portrait of the narrator’s feelings and lacking in any real action.
The Allegro section however, as mentioned, shows her resolve before she leaves the
stage to change his ungrateful heart with her devotion.

Thus, the through-composed Allegro, or C, section is extroverted, while the ABA
da capo aria form of the Andantino is comparatively introverted. This effect of portraying
two contrasting sentiments within one aria is only occasionally done in Mozart’s operas.
This combination of a through-composed and da capo aria form illustrate the lack of
restriction Mozart imposed upon himself regarding strict aria forms, lending an element
of freshness and unpredictability to arguably all his operatic output.

To elaborate on Mozart’s formal procedure, as stated previously, the first 51
measures is in da capo aria form, or ABA. In this Andantino section, it is slightly
modified (though by no means unusual for the form) with A B A’, due to the truncation

of the return to A and its different ending. The first A section contains the first four lines of the aria. The first phrase occurs in mm. 1-8 with the words (English translation): “Where are those cherished moments / Of sweetness and pleasure?” lines 1-2 of the text, ending on a C major HC. To mark the sweetness of memories past, Mozart marks the dynamic dolce (sweet) above the oboes, who, after two bars of silence, emit a warm and charming melodic fragment with neighbor tones, a grace note and sixteenth. The next phrase only contains the next line of text and is four measures from mm. 9-13, ending in a C major IAC. However, the cadence is not very strong as the next phrase too begins on m. 13 with an overlap between its entrance and m. 13’s cadence. The next strong cadence occurs at the end of the next phrase, reciting the fourth line of text, from mm. 13-18 with a PAC in C major. This somewhat weak cadence thus makes sense in the large scheme of things, because all together, ten measures are used for the last two lines of text, almost equal to the eight measures used for the first two lines.

The next section, B, occurs immediately in the dominant in m. 19, lacking in any pivot chords (recalling the immediate modulation in “Porgi, Amor, Qualche Ristoro”). Measure 19 features nothing but Gs in the bass and horns (corni), as well as a G and B in the bassoons (fagotti) and a G and most modulatory-implying F# in the oboes, perhaps acting as a semblance of a transition to G major. The singer resumes in mm. 20-22 with a partial phrase that briefly forays into G major’s parallel minor in m. 21. This change into a minor key fittingly occurs over line 5, “Why then, when everything’s changed,” portraying the contrast between her sweet memories and her current heartbreak. There is a small internal PAC cadence in g minor in m. 22, but the real cadence occurs in m. 27 after line 6, “Into tears and pain for me,” occurring within mm. 23-27, once again in gm

with a HC. During this phrase, e-flats are introduced, further tonicizing g minor. The next phrase, like the last, is four measures, between mm. 27-31, in which the b-flats and e-flats resolve upwards and F#s are reintroduced for the return to G major with a G IAC cadence in m. 31.

The return to G major fittingly occurs over the text “Has the memory of that happiness / Never left my breast” (lines 7-8). Rosina can’t and doesn’t want to forget the happiness of her former and hopefully to-return love, signaling a return to her longing and almost hopeful mood that becomes more anchored in the coming Allegro section. Measure 32 begins the repetition of lines that lasts the rest of the aria, sharing a similarity to the quality of repeated lines in “Porgi, Amor, Qualche Ristoro,” though in a much less simple fashion. The last phrase of B occurs in mm. 32-36 over a repetition of lines 7-8 with added orchestral decoration and slightly altered vocal line. A G major PAC occurs in m. 36, marking the end of the B section with a fermata rest afterwards.

Sticking to da capo aria form, A returns, though slightly truncated by four measures, thus receiving the label A’. The first phrase is almost identical to A’s first phrase, differing only in slightly altered orchestration and vocal melody. It shares the same eight-measure length and lines 1-2 of the text and is of course, back in C Major, again with absolutely no pivot chord and prepared only by the extended rest of m. 36, if at all. The bass adds an F to the typical I-V progression to further demarcate the modulation back to C Major and disappearance of G major’s leading tone. The next phrase lasts from mm. 45-51 over lines 3-4 of the text. Here, differences with A are more apparent; in A, lines 3-4 were separated over two different roughly 4.5 measure phrases, while in A’, lines 3-4 are contained in one seven-measure phrase, causing A’ to be three

measures shorter than A. Just as important is the final cadence of A', which is a dominant seventh C major HC, opposed to the simple HC concluding the A section. Further, this dominant seventh harmony, occurring for the first time in the aria, is marked with a sforzando, emphasizing the emotionally charged line: "Where have they gone, / The vows he so deceitfully made?" This marks the conclusion of the Andantino da capo aria section of the entire aria.

The next Allegro section, C, is through-composed and thus much freer and less predictable than its Andantino predecessor. The phrases are longer; for example, the first phrase lasts from mm. 52-63 over all last four lines of the text: "Ah! If only my devotion / In longing for his love / Could give me some hope / Of changing his ungrateful heart." These last four lines are obviously repeated throughout the rest of the aria in a dramatic fashion in which they are at first repeated in whole, and then only lines 11-12, and lastly only the final line 12 of the aria. The first phrase ends on a HC in C major in m. 63, though forays into C's parallel minor occur between mm. 55-58. An orchestral roughly three measures follows, accelerating the aria and portraying Rosina's newfound resolve and energy with repeated eighth notes in the bassoons, horns and bass, along with a fast, descending chromatic oboe melody in m. 65. Measures 66-80 mark the next phrase, though mm. 66-68 contain line 9 of the text, followed by 2.5 measures of instrumental music repeating material of mm. 64-65. In m. 71, the vocalist resumes the phrase, repeating line 9 and continuing with lines 10-12 without rest up to m. 80, which ends in a PAC in C. Thus, the repetition of lines 9-12 does not occur all at once, owing to the extra isolated repeat of line 9, defining the through-composed nature of the Allegro section and eliminating any real structural repetition of section C's first phrase.

As mentioned, only lines 11-12 are repeated next for the phrase between mm. 80-92. Line 11 is cut in half with rests in m. 81 and 83, while line 12 is unbroken in its twice occurrence within a repeated vocal line. Another PAC in C major occurs in m. 92. The final phrase occurs in mm. 92-103, with line 12, “Of changing his ungrateful heart,” repeated twice. Then, only the words “ungrateful heart” are repeated twice more, in accordance with the technique of repeating a smaller and smaller number of lines that Mozart has employed throughout the Allegro section. Measure 103 expectedly ends with a C major PAC; it is interesting to note that every single real cadence of the Allegro section is a C major PAC, perhaps serving to further mark the resolve of Rosina and the drawn-out resolution of the entire aria. Finally, a 7.5 measure postlude concludes the “Dove, Son I Bei Momenti” aria, with simple I-V harmonies, as well as syncopated sixteenth notes and triplets that resemble the orchestral introduction to Rosina’s first aria, “Porgi, Amor, Qualche Ristoro.”

Evidently, Mozart allowed himself as much freedom as restraint in composing within either through-composed or strict aria forms, yielding a flexibility and consistent freshness in style that has obviously never gotten old with *Le Nozze Di Figaro* being in the top ten operas performed most globally.

"Porgi, amor, qualche ristoro"

Section Sub Measures

Lines

Cadences

Notes

Intro

1-17

1-2

E♭: PAC (17)

E♭: HC (25)

Inst. / Leads to B♭M w/ I / II

A

a

18-25

3

B♭: PAC (30)

Instrumental dominant harmony

b

26-27

28-30

31

32-36

4

E♭: HC (36)

B

c

36-45

1-4

E♭: PAC (45)

d

45-49

3-4

E♭: PAC (49)

Postlude

49-51

(E♭: PAC) (51)

"Dove Sono I Bei Momenti"

A

1-8

1-2

C: HC (8)

9-12

3

C: IAC (12)

13-18

4

C: PAC (18)

Instr. GM harmony introduced

B

19-20

5-6

G: HC (27)

21-27

7-8

G: IAC (31)

27-31

7-8

G: PAC (36)

32-36

A'

37-44

1-2

C: HC (44)

45-51

3-4

C: HC (51)

Dominant 7th chord

C

52-63

9-12

C: PAC (63)

(C: HC (56))

63-65

9-12

Accelerating Effect Interlude (C: PAC (80)) (in orchestra)

66-80

11-12

C: PAC (92)

80-92

12

C: PAC (103)

92-103

(C: PAC (108))

Postlude

103-110

Mm. 57-60 return in 77-80