Undressing Cherubino: Reassessing Gender and Sexuality in Mozart's 'Le nozze di Figaro'

Description

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Abstract: Undressing Cherubino: Reassessing Gender and Sexuality in Mozart's Le nozze di Figaro Although Le nozze di Figaro is one of Mozart's most celebrated operas, we have not yet understood one crucial element. On the surface of the drama, the opera seems to be about class disruption: the Count is the head of the household, but it is his servants who run it. This plot is made evident to the audience, and it is the message that most critics draw from the work. However, there may be a second meaning below the surface that is, in fact, more subversive than the overt one. While class structures are questioned in the foreground, another more hidden narrative explores alternate depictions of femininity and sexuality. This covert meaning is arguably embodied in Cherubino. This character is portrayed as an adolescent boy despite the fact that the role calls for a female singer. Cherubino is understood to be male, and functions as one in the drama, but, as I will suggest, may in fact be conceived as female. As a pagegirl raging with sexual love for all the women in the palace, Cherubino may be seen embodying a prototype of femininity that is contrary to the heterosexual norms of the overt...
This analytical study explains how Mozart's music for Le Nozze di Figaro, Don Giovanni and Così fan tutte ‘sounds’ the intentions of Da Ponte’s characters and their relationships with one another. Mozart did not merely interpret Da Ponte’s characterisations but lent them temporal, musical forms. Charles Ford’s analysis presents a new method by which to relate the music of the operas to the narrative. The first chapter of this thesis examines how both Pierre-Augustin Beaumarchais’ play Le mariage de Figaro and Mozart and Da Ponte’s operatic adaptation could point towards alternate depictions of women. The following two chapters survey the various ways an alternate gender identity for Cherubino can be expressed through features of the libretto (chapter 2) and the score (chapter 3). Drawing from my experience of performing Cherubino, the fourth and final chapter assesses the findings of the previous two and shows that while elements of the text and music may have characteristics that can be assigned gender attributes, neither can intrinsically embody masculinity or femininity. With this finding comes the understanding that who and what a character is is marked not by the outlines of libretto and score but by acts of musical performance.

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