

The Marriage of Figaro

Music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart • Libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte

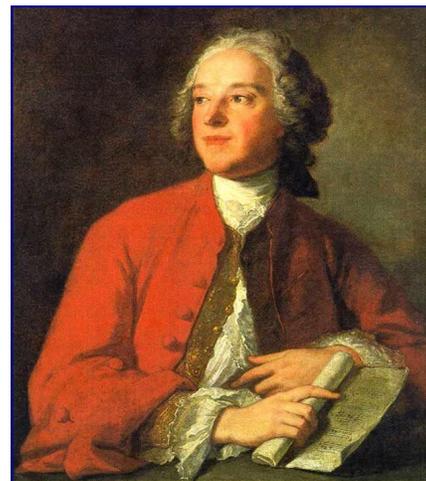
Study Guide to the Opera

Mozart's *Crazy Day* Opera

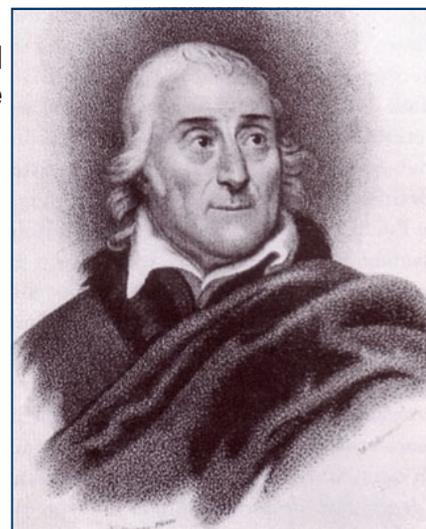
by Beverly Crawford

Scholars have claimed that Pierre Beaumarchais based his plays *The Barber of Seville*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, and *The Guilty Mother* on people and events in his own crazy life. Beaumarchais was described as "a biographer's nightmare"—his activities included watchmaker, harp player, lover, spy, publisher, playwright, pamphleteer, and gunrunner for the American Revolution. He wrote *The Marriage of Figaro* while George Washington was struggling to keep his army alive at Valley Forge in 1778.

The *Figaro* play so shocked Louis XVI that he banned it for several years. It finally premiered in 1784, and was soon enjoyed across Europe except in Vienna, where Joseph II had permitted the publication of translations but forbidden the staging of the play. Mozart was inspired by the successful Viennese premiere of Giovanni Paisiello's opera buffa version of *The Barber of Seville* (1783), so Mozart took *The Marriage of Figaro* to Lorenzo da Ponte, who reworked the story in poetic Italian. The composer was drawn to the story for its romantic relationships, not its politics, so he and da Ponte cut characters, speeches, scenes, and whole counterplots, creating a delightful version that pleased the Emperor. Figaro's inflammatory political monologue in Act IV, for example, was turned into a warning about women. Yet several spiky points remain imbedded within the main action, its delicious intrigues versified in a rich variety of forms. All of Mozart's characterizations are deeper and richer than those of Beaumarchais; the Countess' arias, which make her so human and sympathetic, have no counterparts in the play. Mozart and da Ponte also removed some of the sexual innuendo between the Countess and Cherubino, creating a safer, typical adolescent character with a crush on an older woman. The essential humanity of each individual, whether nobleman or servant, received the same thoughtful treatment by Mozart and da Ponte, so the Beaumarchais play about *The Crazy Day* (*La folle journée*), became a wonderfully heartwarming and enduring opera, *The Marriage of Figaro*.



Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais (1732-1799), best known for his three Figaro plays



Lorenzo da Ponte (1749-1838), Venetian opera librettist for 28 operas by 11 composers



Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791), classical composer of over 600 works, including operas in German and Italian

The Marriage of Figaro Synopsis

PLACE: A Country estate outside Seville, late 18th Century

ACT I. While preparing for their wedding, Figaro learns from Susanna that their philandering employer, Count Almaviva, has designs on her. At this news, the servant vows to outwit his master. Before long the scheming Bartolo enters the servants' quarters with his housekeeper, Marcellina, who wants Figaro to marry her to cancel a debt he cannot pay. After Marcellina and Susanna trade insults, the amorous page Cherubino arrives, reveling in his infatuation with all women. He hides when the Count shows up, furious because he caught Cherubino flirting with Barbarina, the gardener's daughter. The Count pursues Susanna but conceals himself when the gossiping music master Don Basilio approaches. The Count steps forward, however, when Basilio suggests that Cherubino has a crush on the Countess. Almaviva is enraged further when he discovers Cherubino in the room. Figaro returns with fellow servants, who praise the Count's progressive reform in abolishing the *droit de seigneur*—the right of a noble to take a manservant's place on his wedding night. Almaviva assigns Cherubino to his regiment in Seville and leaves Figaro to cheer up the unhappy adolescent.

ACT II. In her boudoir, the Countess laments her husband's waning love but plots to chasten him, encouraged by Figaro and Susanna. They will send Cherubino, disguised as Susanna, to a romantic assignation with the Count. Cherubino, smitten with the Countess, appears, and the two women begin to dress the page for his farcical rendezvous. While Susanna goes out to find a ribbon, the Count knocks at the door, furious to find it locked. Cherubino quickly hides in a closet, and the Countess admits her husband, who, when he hears a noise, is skeptical of her story that Susanna is inside the wardrobe. He takes his wife to fetch some tools with which to force the closet door. Meanwhile, Susanna, having observed everything from behind a screen, helps Cherubino out a window, then takes his place in the closet. Both Count and Countess are amazed to find her there. All seems well until the gardener, Antonio, storms in with crushed geraniums from a flower bed below the window. Figaro, who has run in to announce that the wedding is ready, pretends it was he who jumped from the window, faking a sprained ankle. Marcellina, Bartolo, and Basilio burst into the room waving a court summons for Figaro, which delights the Count, as this gives him an excuse to delay the wedding.

Intermission

ACT III. In an audience room where the wedding is to take place, Susanna leads the Count on with promises of a rendezvous in the garden. The nobleman, however, grows doubtful when he spies her conspiring with Figaro; he vows revenge. Marcellina is astonished but thrilled to discover that Figaro is in fact her long-lost natural son by Bartolo. Mother and son embrace, provoking Susanna's anger until she too learns the truth. Finding a quiet moment, the Countess recalls her past happiness, then joins Susanna in composing a letter that invites the Count to the garden that night. Later, during the marriage ceremony of Figaro and Susanna, the bride manages to slip the note, sealed with a hatpin, to the Count, who pricks his finger, dropping the pin, which Figaro retrieves.

ACT IV. In the moonlit garden, Barbarina, after unsuccessfully trying to find the lost hatpin, tells Figaro and Marcellina about the coming assignation between the Count and Susanna. Basilio counsels that it is wise to play the fool. Figaro inveighs against women and leaves, missing Susanna and the Countess, ready for their masquerade. Alone, Susanna rhapsodizes on her love for Figaro, but he, overhearing, thinks she means the Count. Susanna hides in time to see Cherubino woo the Countess—now disguised in Susanna's dress—until Almaviva chases him away and sends his wife, who he thinks is Susanna, to an arbor, to which he follows. By now Figaro understands the joke and, joining the fun, makes exaggerated love to Susanna in her Countess disguise. The Count returns, seeing, or so he thinks, Figaro with his wife. Outraged, he calls everyone to witness his judgment, but now the real Countess appears and reveals the ruse. Grasping the truth at last, the Count begs her pardon. All are reunited, and so ends this "mad day" at the Almaviva court.



1786 playbill for *Le Nozze di Figaro*

In 1782, Joseph II issued an edict that cast listings for operas performed at the imperial theaters were to be omitted. The *Figaro* playbill does not mention da Ponte or Beaumarchais.

Characters

Figaro [FEE-gah-roh] *bass-baritone*

A barber who is valet to the Count and engaged to Susanna.

Susanna [soo-ZAHN-nah] *soprano*

The Countess' witty and beautiful maid.

Count Almaviva (il Conte) *baritone*

[all-mah-VEE-vah] [eel KOHN-teh]

Employer of Figaro and Susanna who avoids performing the wedding because of his affections towards Susanna.

Countess Almaviva (la Contessa) *soprano*

[lah kohn-TESS-ah]

The Count's wife. Still in love with him, she knows he plans to cheat on her.

Cherubino [kehr-oo-BEAN-oh] *mezzo-soprano*
(TROUSER ROLE)

The Count's young page. An amorous boy, infatuated with all women including Barbarina and the Countess.

Dr. Bartolo [BAR-toh-loh] *bass*

Once the Countess' guardian, a Seville doctor who holds a grudge against Figaro for helping the Count "steal" her away.

Marcellina [mar-chell-EEN-ah] *mezzo-soprano*

The housekeeper for Bartolo. She makes a bizarre contract with Figaro; he must marry her if he cannot repay his loan.

Don Basilio [bah-ZEEL-yoh] *tenor*

The music master who constantly intervenes and spreads gossip.

Don Curzio [dohn KOORT-syoh] *tenor*

A lawyer hired to add legal authority to Marcellina's contract with Figaro.

Barbarina [bar-bah-REE-nah] *soprano*

The cute daughter of Antonio who is in love with Cherubino.

Antonio [ahn-TOH-nyoh] *bass*

The Count's tipsy gardener, Barbarina's father, and Susanna's uncle.

Villagers

OPERA MYTHBUSTERS: *Le droit de seigneur*

by Beverly Crawford

With the exception of a few isolated cases, serfdom had ceased to exist in France by the 15th century. Noblemen nevertheless maintained a great degree of seigneurial privilege, or *droit de seigneur*, over the free vassals that worked the lands under their control and could, for example, levy taxes on their land, charge fees for the right to use their mills, ovens, or wine presses, and demand a portion of vassals' harvests in return for permission to farm. Nobles also maintained certain judicial control over violation of their seigneurial rights.

The most famous *droit de seigneur* (or *droit du seigneur*), the right of local landowners to sleep with newlywed brides, is popularly interpreted as an example of feudal tyranny. However, there is only one piece of medieval testimony indicating anything like

actual sexual relations between the lords and the peasant brides, and the evidence concerns only sexual harassment. The lords may have used the right as a display of superiority over their dependent peasants, and in this context, the symbolic use of the right was known in several European regions; in France, for example, the lord could put a naked leg onto the bride's bed, specifically called *droit de cuissage*.

The modern myth of *droit de seigneur* is a result of the 19th-century European understanding of the Middle Ages, including popular images of the master with the serving maid. This myth began in France, first in 1786 when Beaumarchais and Mozart brought the idea to widespread public attention with *The Marriage of Figaro*, and then continued when the French Revolution abolished seigneurial rights in 1789 and relegated *cuissage* to history.

In the 1850s a widespread quarrel broke out over the reality of the *droit de cuissage*, which jurists, philosophers, and playwrights had made into an emblem for seigneurial oppression. *Cuissage* obstinately continued to enjoy popular belief, leading to art works and writings that defended the progress of history. Participants in the intense debate combed available texts, bringing to light most of the legitimate medieval documentary sources. Few sources have appeared since. The controversy helped to construct a new image of the Middle Ages as a time of strangeness, polarizing interpretations of the Middle Ages and gradually molding contemporary ideas into fact. From the Middle Ages to *The Marriage of Figaro* to Mel Gibson's *Braveheart*, the ultimate symbol of feudal barbarism is still the *droit de seigneur*.



Le droit du Seigneur (1874) by Russian painter Vasily Polenov (1844-1927)

Da Ponte: From Ceneda to New York

CENEDA Emanuele Conegliano was born Jewish in 1749, in Ceneda, the Republic of Venice. His family was converted to Catholicism by Bishop Lorenzo da Ponte, and since the eldest son normally took the name of the presiding priest, he became Lorenzo da Ponte. In 1773 he was ordained a priest, but six months later ran away to Venice. The Venetian Republic was in rapid decline at the time, and everyone was partying. Crowds flocked nightly to the city's seven opera houses and then to the gambling houses. Carnival occupied nearly half the year. It was a good place for a young man who was looking for some excitement, and he devoted himself to "cards and love." In 1779, da Ponte was charged with bad living and banished.

VIENNA Two years later he arrived in Vienna, having worked in the theater and wanting to write librettos for opera buffa, the new comic form. In 1783, Emperor Joseph II installed an Italian opera company in Vienna's Burgtheater, and da Ponte became the troupe's librettist. Soon he met Mozart, and in the space of four years, the two men produced *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan tutte*. A month after the premiere of *Così*, Joseph II, who loved da Ponte, died. Joseph's successor was his brother, Leopold II, who dismissed da Ponte because of his continuing intrigues. The police ordered da Ponte to leave Vienna.

LONDON He settled in London, and da Ponte soon became the librettist to the Italian opera company at the King's Theatre. After six years he was fired and then failed at several businesses. He also co-signed loans for scoundrels; in one three-month period, he was arrested thirty times. In 1805, at risk of debtor's prison, he emigrated to New York. It is strange to think that the man who wrote Mozart's librettos spent the last third of his life in New York, unsuccessfully running a boarding school, stores, and a distillery.

NEW YORK Da Ponte befriended the young Clement Moore, who became the author of "'Twas the Night Before Christmas." Thanks to Moore's father, da Ponte became the first professor of Italian at Columbia College, indeed the first in America and the first Jew on its faculty. Eventually he opened an Italian bookshop, through which he supplied Columbia's library and the Library of Congress with most of their early Italian holdings.

In 1825 an Italian opera troupe led by Manuel García, a celebrated tenor, came to New York. When da Ponte and García met, García broke into an aria from *Don Giovanni* and then was persuaded to add *Don Giovanni* to the schedule; thus America saw its first performance of a Mozart/da Ponte opera. Da Ponte had not heard *Don Giovanni* in forty years. Soon afterward he brought in another Italian opera company, and at the same time, campaigned for a permanent home for opera in New York, which in 1833 became the beautiful Italian Opera House, the first opera theater in the United States. Da Ponte died quietly in 1838, at the age of 89; he is thought to be buried in Queens.

Adapted by Beverly Crawford from "Nights At the Opera: The life of the man who put words to Mozart," by Joan Acocella, published in *The New Yorker*, January 8, 2007

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