



translation, should one be made, and I think one is certainly merited. Waisman himself would do a magnificent job, as he is as strong a writer in English as he is in Spanish.

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RECOGNITION IN MOZART'S OPERAS

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Of the many scholarly publications on Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart that appeared in 2006, a year that marked the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the composer's birth, Jessica Waldoff's *Recognition in Mozart's Operas* is one of the more substantial and thought-provoking. Its observations have been carefully assembled over a number of years (Waldoff began publishing on this topic in the early 1990s) and it contains interesting reinterpretations of some of Mozart's operas (most notably *La finta giardiniera* and *Così fan tutte*). It also advances a theory of recognition – and the 'recognition scene' in opera – that is meticulously devised and applied. The question of whether this theory of recognition is well formed enough to influence opera theory in general is more vexed, however, and I shall discuss this point in due course.

Waldoff begins her book by claiming that issues concerning plots and plotting have been 'marginalized' (7) in opera studies. She believes that we have given too much primacy to music, and that Joseph Kerman's notion of the composer as dramatist has resulted in 'musical drama' being reduced to 'dramatic music' (83–84). This is not a new idea, but the way in which she redresses the balance is certainly novel: she immerses herself in an analysis of those 'turning-points' in plots where truths are revealed and fortunes reversed, and she attempts to show how the ingredients of such 'recognition moments' can radically alter an opera's meaning. Along the way, she calls on Mozart himself, who says in a letter dated 13 October 1781 that 'an opera is sure of success when the plot [*Plan des Stücks*] is well worked out' (95). We should, however, be cautious here: Mozart is not saying that if the plot is not well worked out then the opera will fail; and he does not tell us exactly what is entailed by a plot being 'well worked out'. In this respect, it might have helped the argument if a 'control work' had been discussed, where the claim could be made that the weakness of the plot indeed caused the opera to 'fail' – *Così fan tutte* is not such a work for Jessica Waldoff, as we shall see – or where some clearly stated essential ingredients of a 'well-worked-out' plot were obviously missing.

The theoretical aspects of this study have their roots in the pioneering work of the literary theorist Terence Cave, whose important study *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) was published more than twenty years ago. Cave and Waldoff both take their cue from Aristotle's *Poetics*, which states that the most important part of tragedy is the plot (*Poetics*, 50a), and that tragic plots tend to have three important ingredients: recognition (*anagnōrīsis*), reversal (*peripeteia*) and suffering (*pathos*) (*Poetics*, 52a–b). The focus here on tragedy is obvious, but for Aristotle 'recognition' essentially means the unmasking of disguised or estranged persons. None of Mozart's operas is quite a Greek tragedy – not even *Idomeneo*, which comes closest to this category – and in the context of the Enlightenment, in any case, recognition might be seen to encompass more complex experiences than the detection of camouflaged persons. Waldoff has therefore expanded Aristotle's ideas to include the recognition of new types of knowledge, or new moments of self-awareness on the part of operatic characters – and sometimes new insights by their audiences. Hence she is able to claim that the most problematic moments in Mozart's operas 'are recognition moments, but have not been understood as such because of the neglect into which recognition has fallen' (15). Moreover, these



types of ‘recognition’ crucially imply that a ‘re-cognition’ and a ‘reversal’ of previous perspectives have been reached, and that ‘knowledge is therefore inherent in recognition’ (6).

The disadvantage of this approach, as well as its strength, is that once this very broad ‘recognition perspective’ is accepted, then almost any opera can provide appropriate material for analysis, at least at some level. *Le nozze di Figaro*, for example, can be seen as a clever play on the comic conventions of disguise and recognition; *Don Giovanni* proceeds by a series of recognitions of persons and feelings (Anna recognizes the Don as a murderer, Elvira plays out the growing awareness of her own complicated feelings towards Don Giovanni, and so on); and in *La clemenza di Tito* we see a series of attempts by Vitellia to ‘reverse’ her actions, as the ‘process towards recognition’ (276) of the negative effect of her deeds is gradually revealed in the opera. As for *Die Zauberflöte*, Tamino’s growing understanding of the demands of integrity and virtue allows ‘recognition’ to be recast as ‘enlightenment’, or even as a kind of reflection of the values of ‘the Enlightenment’ (18, 75). Other works by Mozart, such as *Apollo et Hyacinthus*, *Mitridate* and *Lucio Silla*, could doubtless have provided further modes of significant recognition, but Waldoff does not consider them in this study.

But this simple relabelling of operatic events as ‘recognition problems’ is not going to get us very far on its own, of course, and there are at least three reasons for this. First, in some operas the chain of recognition events may not provide the primary interest (as in *Così fan tutte*). Second, even in operas where recognition is important (think of *Don Giovanni*), some principal characters (Don Giovanni himself, for instance) may resist or sidestep recognition as a transforming force, and these characters’ actions therefore require other explanations. Third, the relationship between recognition scenes in operas and the success of their plot trajectories is complex and requires careful analysis – especially if recognition is going to make its mark as a transferable explanation for the effectiveness of certain types of plot within opera in general. Waldoff deals with the first two of these issues interestingly and thoroughly. For the third she provides a beginning, but it is a beginning that seems only to be a random accumulation of issues, not a strategy for future work.

Interestingly enough, almost half of the book (140 pages out of 312) is devoted to two operas, *La finta giardiniera* and *Così fan tutte*, about which Waldoff tells us that recognition scenes do not provide the primary interest and do not automatically lead to resolution themselves. Waldoff’s justification for this observation is that ‘recognition moments’ in such works simply take their place among a range of devices that provide occasion for the display of character and feeling. In *La finta giardiniera* the inconsistencies and implausibilities of the plot ‘should not be understood as flaws but as giving occasion to the sentiment’ (120), because this is a plot ‘steeped in the literary cult of sensibility’ (106) and, as Samuel Johnson observed, ‘if you were to read such works for the story your patience would be so much fretted that you would hang yourself’ (119). In such works, recognition can postpone an act of reconciliation, rather than precipitate it, and therefore we must value recognition differently. In *La finta giardiniera* (Act 1, Finale), for instance, Belfiore thinks he recognizes Sandrina as his former lover Violante, an identity that Sandrina first confirms and then denies, and this thwarted recognition scenario is played out twice more in the opera. As Waldoff observes, ‘recognition in this opera is an affair of the heart, and each new refutation of it offers a fresh opportunity for sentimental display’ (125).

Armed with this description (it is not quite a theory) of structural prolongation, we are invited in *Così fan tutte* to consider ‘the role sentiment plays in the opera’s crucial recognition scenes’ (187). The problem, however, is that these recognition scenes do not add dynamism to the plot; rather, they add to the dramatic intensification of characters, and to the building-up of personas through the display of a mosaic of aspects or ‘affects’ (as in baroque opera). The lack of overt continuity and consistency displayed by the characters seems to lead to some special pleading in the search for a plot rationale. For example, we are first entreated to see this as a tale of exploitation – Fiordiligi, for one, is ‘easily victimized’ (224). But later we are told that she might be ‘complicit in her own wrongdoing’ (262), and later still that any wrongdoing may be somewhat beside the point, since the question raised by the opera is apparently whether ‘feeling makes its own virtue’ (263). Certainly, these statements by Waldoff might be descriptions of gradual shifts in the perceptions of an audience, but they do not quite make it clear how the display of feelings could be the prime motivator for a



plot as such. After all, ‘the opera’s attempt to distinguish between an appropriate and an “excessive” sensibility’ is dependent ‘on its ability to dramatize the sentimental experience convincingly’ (188). It is this ability to dramatize (as well as intensify) experience, then, that requires more analysis.

Another thought-provoking discussion in the book revolves around the *lieto fine* ending to *Don Giovanni*. The Don is a character who, in the final confrontation with the Commendatore, refuses to recognize his crimes, and his descent to hell is followed by the moral truth recognized and asserted by the closing chorus – the wicked shall die in a fashion that befits the way they live. Waldoff supports the retention of this chorus, since ‘to disrupt the precarious balance between recognition denied and exalted would be to set the opera out of joint’ (183). But for this balance to work, the character of Don Giovanni must clearly be portrayed as irredeemably evil, someone who is in the wrong without question: presumably this is why Waldoff tells us that ‘Don Giovanni is no tragic hero’, because tragic heroes (unlike the Don) have a ‘moment of recognition’ as do ‘Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, Faust’ (178).

But the opera’s central character is not quite so clear-cut, and the question that is left unanswered (even unasked) by Waldoff is why, exactly, Don Giovanni denies ‘recognition’. As others have suggested (see, for example, Felicity Baker, ‘The Figures of Hell in the *Don Giovanni* Libretto’, in *Words about Mozart: Essays in Honour of Stanley Sadie*, ed. Dorothea Link and Judith Nagley (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2005), 77–106), it could be that he did not really ‘murder’ the Commendatore, since the latter insisted on the duel that killed him, and duels had their conventions. Or there could have been a moral complexity behind Donna Anna originally inviting ‘a man in a cloak’ into her room, even if she thought it was Don Ottavio; or it could be that Don Giovanni does not really deny God (as an atheist might), but rather is only ‘indifferent’ to religion, as Leporello hints on at least two occasions, in the way an enlightened agnostic might be. If the last possibility is deemed to have been the case, then Don Giovanni’s refusal to accept complete responsibility for his deeds, and at the same time having the courage to perpetuate his lack of convictions, ought to attract some moral credit in an ‘Enlightenment’ figure. After all, Don Giovanni seems, on the evidence, to be more passionate than Don Ottavio, more honest about his motivations than Donna Elvira, more courageous than Leporello and more consistent than Zerlina. These qualities do not make his moral credit a certainty, but at least they create enough equivocation for an audience to hesitate over the whole-hearted condemnation of the character, and instead to come to a more complex kind of recognition, one that cannot be validated by a simplistically damning *lieto fine*.

This leads us to the final question posed by this theory: what exactly is the relation between the recognition episodes and a climactic, effective plot? The most detailed demonstration of this process concerns Waldoff’s discussion of *Die Zauberflöte*, where ‘the layering of repetition, recollection, recognition, and knowledge’ (30) in the Act 1 finale is shown to have a cumulative effect. For example, Tamino’s music at ‘O ewige Nacht’ recalls the Queen’s first words to him earlier in the opera (‘O zittre nicht’), and he now ‘re-cognizes’ her differently as a force for evil. Even so, this analysis amounts to little more than the treatment of musical repetition as a reminder of a previous encounter; it does not entirely expose music’s role as an agent for transformation. Something more, perhaps, needed to be added to this section in order to uncover the complexity of the experience involved. (One possible beginning for a more sophisticated treatment of reminiscence-as-culminating-transformation might be Lawrence Kramer’s discussion of ‘revenants’ in chapter 6 of his study of Schubert song, *Franz Schubert: Sexuality, Subjectivity, Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 152–172.) More importantly, in spite of the many detailed excursions through the plots of these operas, there is a failure to describe clearly the structural ingredients of a well-formed plot, and their relation to each other. This lack in the discussion of plots makes the wider applicability of Waldoff’s approach difficult to assess.

One particularly telling symptom in this respect is the hazy treatment of the central concept of dénouement and the failure to distinguish it clearly from ‘climax’ (two instances can be cited at pages 54 and 57), ‘climactic recognition’ (54, 104), ‘reconciliation’ (211, 250), ‘real dénouement’ (176) and several other near-cognate terms – or, indeed, to place dénouement clearly within a structural scheme. For example, in *Così fan tutte* ‘the reconciliation is brought about at the dénouement’ (211), while *Don Giovanni* ‘points away



from reconciliation at the *dénouement*' (250) (what kind of *dénouement* is that?), and in *Figaro* "Dove sono" finds fulfilment in the opera's final *dénouement*' (92) (where are the others?), whereas the ending of Christoph Friedrich Bretzner's *Belmont und Constanze* provides a 'true *dénouement*' (64) (what exactly is a false one?). To make sense of this, we might extrapolate from the discussions and postulate a kind of adaptable model (which is never clearly stated in Waldoff's book) that comprises a five-part plot trajectory: §1, the presentation of the initiating situation; §2, the introduction of secondary conflicts; §3, a climax, or series of climaxes (where there is a change in the protagonist's affairs, and reversals of some kind); §4, the playing-out of the protagonist's triumph or loss against the antagonists (with perhaps some final moments of suspense); and §5, catharsis – a release of tension as conflicts are finally resolved and equilibrium (at least a temporary one) is reached.

If this really is the model we should be holding in our heads as we read this book, then '*dénouement*' (= 'unravelling') would seem best applied to §4 and/or §5 of the whole plot, rather than to the climax at §3. Also, since the whole scheme is a general tension-and-release model, it could presumably be applied complete, but in miniature, to the dramatic trajectories of §2, §3 and §4 taken on their own. This would then explain why it is possible to have intermediate climaxes and *dénouements*, without them being *the* climax or *dénouement* of the work as a whole; 'sectional' applications of the model would have a different significance from 'total-narrative' applications. And presumably this would have implications for the operation and explanation of 'recognition' and 'reversal' at those two differing levels.

Finally, we might ask what kind of 'truth' recognition brings. This is a question that will inevitably draw less on the work of Terence Cave than on the metaphor of Plato's cave. Drama is a shadow on the cave wall that reflects events in the real world to some extent, but sharp 'recognitions' of features of the shadows should not be taken too easily to be direct indications of wider 'truths' about the real world. Much of Waldoff's book seems to be concerned with this kind of equivalence – that *La finta giardiniera* reflects 'the larger culture of sensibility' (106), that the conclusions of operas 'culminate in a moral, philosophical or other "truth" that recognition brings' (3), that *Die Zauberflöte* is a kind of exemplification of the values of the 'Enlightenment' (18, 75) (despite Sarastro's harsh punishments of disobedient servants, the ethnocentric depiction of Moors or the presence of magical and pantomimic events in the opera), and so on. Probably a more realistic approach would be the one that she adopts in relation to *Così fan tutte*: 'nor can the matter be resolved by critical debate, for the problem will reassert itself every time the artwork is beheld' (223). This, of course, sums up the strength of artworks, and it also hints at the potency of Jessica Waldoff's book: we may not be able to agree on its 'truth', but we can certainly welcome its importance and interest without reservation.

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