

Articoli/Articles

## PHYSIOLOGY AND PATHOLOGY IN MOZART-DA PONTE'S OPERAS

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### SUMMARY

#### IN MOZART-DA PONTE PHYSIOLOGY

*With the precious collaboration of Lorenzo Da Ponte, Mozart created a label that produced three of the major masterpieces in the history of opera: Le nozze di Figaro (1786), Don Giovanni (1787) and Così fan tutte (1790). These operas illustrate a varied microcosm of features that make up human beings and their passions, such as love, death, the supernatural, honour, fear, frustration, faith friendship, pride, etc... Here, we are going to investigate how Da Ponte and Mozart look at the human machine in its physiological and pathological meaning, with particular attention to the relationship between words and music: both the “three ages of man” (Cherubino-Don Giovanni-Don Alfonso) and the fake illnesses of Figaro, Leporello, Ferrando and Guglielmo are just a few examples of that wider microcosm of the “human comedy” that this trilogy portrays.*

1.

*I cannot write poetically, for I am not a poet. I cannot make fine artistic phrases that cast light and shadow, for I am not a painter. I can neither by signs nor by pantomime express my thoughts and feelings, for I am not a dancer; but I can do it by tones, for I am a musician<sup>1</sup>.*

**Key words:** Mozart - Da Ponte - Opera - Physiology - Pathology - Enlightenment

This famous sentence by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart perfectly shows his thoughts regarding the link between words and music in an opera. In his theatrical works, dramaturgy – even if it is, undoubtedly, important – is not the touchstone (“.. think in an opera the poetry must be submitted to the music”)<sup>2</sup>, even when the librettist is a man of a genius with a great sense of theatre, like Lorenzo Da Ponte.

By teaming up with this solid, journeyman Italian poet, Mozart created a label that produced three of the major masterpieces in the history of opera: *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786), *Don Giovanni* (1787) and *Così fan tutte* (1790). These operas illustrate a varied microcosm of features that make up human beings and their passions, such as love, death, the supernatural, honour, fear, frustration, faith friendship, pride, etc...

Here, we shall investigate how Da Ponte and Mozart look at the human machine in its physiological and pathological meaning, with particular attention to the relationship between words and music (the latter, in Mozart’s own words, sublimates and ennobles this bond).

In these three operas, references to disease, illness, impairment and to a general alteration in health (real or pretended, as we’ll soon see, a very important distinction) is widely represented, such as the reference to particular details of articulation and sensoriality<sup>3</sup>. This is a short list of the most evident ailments of the main characters:

- Hormonal disorders / Sexual excitement: Cherubino – Don Giovanni
- Fainting / Tachycardia / Confusional state: Susanna – Count Almaviva – Zerlina – Leporello
- Sprained ankle: Figaro
- Stuttering: Don Curzio – Don Alfonso
- *In articulo mortis*<sup>4</sup>: the Commendatore - Don Giovanni – Ferrando – Guglielmo

- State of anxiety / Panic attack: Dorabella – Leporello
- Articulation of movement: the Statue of the Commendatore
- Oral inflammation: Leporello
- Tertian fever: Leporello
- Poisoning: Ferrando – Guglielmo

So, let's look at a particular case that is portrayed in the three operas.

2.

Søren Kierkegaard, in his enlightened philosophical analysis of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*<sup>5</sup>, was the first to intuit that Cherubino and Don Giovanni have more than one thing in common. If the latter seduced more or less 2065 women (according to the famous catalogue compiled by Leporello: an average of 82 girls per year, if we suppose that he is 40 years old and started when he was 15), the young pageboy is not far behind: in a single day he hits on – sometimes in a clearly erotic manner – Susanna, the Countess and little Barbarina. We can agree with Kierkegaard that Cherubino is nothing but Don Giovanni as a young man, still a virgin, before he wrote a single victim into his catalogue. The satyriatic and hormonal disorders that upset them are the same, the only difference being the different meaning of their desire, merely fictional for Cherubino, strictly concrete for Don Giovanni: “dreaming desire” vs “wishing desire,” as Kierkegaard would have said. But are we sure that this *fil rouge* between the fervour of an adolescent and the craving of an adult wasn't created voluntarily, before Kierkegaard, by Mozart himself? In *Le nozze di Figaro*, Cherubino has two arias, “Non so più cosa son, cosa faccio” (n.6) <sup>6</sup> and “Voi che sapete” (n.12), the second of which is supposed to be, literally, a song that the young pageboy sings to the Countess and Susanna. So, it is also called *diegetic music*, real and outside the fictional world of the operatic singing<sup>7</sup>.

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“Non so più cosa son, cosa faccio” is instead a true symbol of his restless condition:

Non so più cosa son, cosa faccio,  
Or di foco, ora sono di ghiaccio  
Ogni donna cangiar di colore,  
Ogni donna mi fa palpitar.

Solo ai nomi d’amor, di diletto,  
Mi si turba, mi s’altera il petto,  
E a parlare mi sforza d’amore  
Un desio ch’io non posso spiegar.

Parlo d’amor vegliando,  
Parlo d’amor sognando,  
A l’acque, a l’ombra, ai monti,  
Ai fiori, a l’erbe, ai fonti,  
A l’eco, a l’aria, ai venti  
Che il suon de’ vani accenti  
Portano via con sè.

E, se non ho chi m’oda,  
Parlo d’amore con me

Likewise, among the numerous occasions that Don Giovanni has to declare his status of serial lover, one stands out above the others, the aria “Fin che han dal vino” (n.11), in which all his sexual lust finally breaks out (so much so that he looks forward to adding ten more women to his list during the next night!):

Fin ch’han dal vino  
Calda la testa  
Una gran festa  
Fa preparar.  
Se trovi in piazza

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Qualche ragazza,  
Teco ancor quella  
Cerca menar.  
Senza alcun ordine  
La danza sia;  
Chi 'l minuetto,  
Chi la follia,  
Chi l'alemanna  
Farai ballar.  
Ed io frattanto  
Dall'altro canto  
Con questa e quella  
Vo' amoreggiar.  
Ah! la mia lista  
Doman mattina  
D'una decina  
Devi aumentar!

What do all those arias have in common? Yes, surely, the *verve* of orchestration, the speed of agogic (one is *Allegro vivace*, the other *Presto*), the vocal agility that suggests a state of sincere excitation. But they also share another feature, a short rhythmic pattern, anapaest (short-short-long, U U — ) in Cherubino's aria, dactylic (long-short-short, — U U) in Don Giovanni's aria<sup>8</sup>.

U U — U U — U U —  
Non-so-più-co-sa-son-co-sa-fac-cio  
— U U [U] — U U [U]  
Fin-ch'han-dal-vi-no-cal-da-la-te-sta

This reversible pattern (a long accent preceded or followed by two short ones) could also be called *madrigalism*, a sort of musical illustration of a heartbeat related to the rhetorical figure of *assimilatio* (assimilation), therefore “the ornament by which the meaning of the text is unveiled in such a way that the things found there seem to come to life”<sup>9</sup>.

Looking at it in this way, we find this pattern in the Mozart-Da Ponte trilogy each time there is physical excitement, even just in an allusive way; for example, in the *stretta* “L’arte schernendo, l’arte adoprando” of Figaro’s aria “Se vuol ballare, signor contino” (n. 3), or in the orchestral part that introduces Susanna’s aria “Venite, inginocchiatevi” (n.13). Even in “Madamina, il catalogo è questo” we can find that rhythm, the best aria to understand the real nature of Don Giovanni. Also, in “Voi che sapete” there is a dactylic beat, but the rhythm is slower, singing that the excitement, though present, is latent.

So, Cherubino is an embryonic stage of that erotic drive which will explode with Don Giovanni. And what happens to this drive when Don Giovanni himself reaches old age? In the opera he is spared the embarrassments of his dotage by burning in the fires of Hell. But, to reason broadly, we might see the character of Don Alfonso (*Così fan tutte*) as his last, extreme incarnation. He (“vecchio filosofo”, old philosopher) doesn’t believe in matrimonial fidelity, due to his personal experience (“Ho i crini già grigi / *ex chatedra* parlo”, “my hair is grey / I speak from a teacher’s desk” he says in the first Terzetto), but he knows that it could be very dangerous to provoke it with tricks and proofs (advice that Guglielmo and Ferrando don’t follow, thus triggering the opera’s plot). For Don Alfonso, eroticism is very present in his memory but by now far from being put into practice. The emblem of this Olympic disenchantment is the *incipit* of terzetto “È la fede delle femmine” (n. 3)”, which contains the well-known adage

È la fede delle femmine  
Come l’araba fenice:  
Che vi sia, ciascun lo dice;  
Dove sia, nessun lo sa

that is a parody of an original by Metastasio<sup>10</sup>. The rhythmic pattern is even anapest, but disguised by the repetition of the syllables, which slow down its *ictus*. The tempo marking is *Allegro*: compared with

the tempos of the other two aforementioned arias (*Allegro vivace* and *Presto*), it is a clear slackening. So, the cycle is completed: thanks to their relationships with the sexual sphere and musical transfiguration of their heartbeats, Mozart and Da Ponte have illustrated the ages of three different men: the precociousness innate in Cherubino, the voracious appetite of Don Giovanni, and the mature quiescence of Don Alfonso portary, respectively, the excitement before the unknown, the full delight of *eros* and the subsequent aloofness.

3.

The last case shows an instance that spans over the whole trilogy; let's focalize our attention on other interesting cases (one for each opera) in terms of their pathologies, with the help of some medical publications of that age, among which the notable *Dizionario universale di medicina e di chirurgia, chimica, etc...*, written by Robert James, translated by Denis Diderot and printed in Venice in 1753<sup>11</sup>. In *Le nozze di Figaro* anything can happen (the original definition, "the crazy day" is really suitable<sup>12</sup>). At a certain point, at the end of Act II (n.16), Figaro, pressed by the Count's questions about what has just happened (Cherubino hiding in the Countess' closet, his escape, the arrival of Susanna, etc...) lies, trying to avoid focusing suspicions on Cherubino (the pageboy that has jumped from the balcony, noticed by the gardener Antonio).

To justify himself, Figaro says that "Saltai giù dal terrore confuso.../ E stravolto m'ho un nervo del piè" (I jumped down confused by terror / and I have injured a foot's nerve). This is not true, therefore he's simulating an injury ("fingendo d'avarsi stroppiato il piede", pretending to have injured his foot, says the libretto). Dr. James wrote that "it happens when you stumble while you are running, jumping or walking" and "starts from a violent effort, usually accompanied by dangerous symptoms, because a dislocation of the foot compresses the ligaments, the tendons and nerves, which can't be without

too much pain”<sup>13</sup>. To realize this foot dislocation musically, Mozart uses a well-known rhetorical expedient, the so-called *Lamento*, a chromatic descending figure by semitone in a range of falling fourth, common especially in Baroque music, but not only<sup>14</sup>.

Furthermore, this situation is the true division between two sections (the *Allegro molto* “Ah signor” and the *Andante* “Vostre dunque saran queste carte”) and sounds like a modulation to a very, very far tonality, that well illustrates Figaro’s injury with a musical representation of his pain. But we mustn’t forget that Figaro is pretending; so, while the melodic line describes pain, the harmony conveys the truth. That modulation, which seems so strange, is simply a common passage from F major to Bb major, so a normal modulation to the fourth grade (as if to say that Figaro’s injury isn’t really serious; on the contrary, it could be very common, maybe false...). If we consider the main tonality of the Finale (E major), this modulation appears as a simpler modulation to the fifth grade. It’s the melody that deceives us, suggesting that Figaro has suffered a real injury, while the harmony, in its simple linearity, reveals the sham. However, the Count remains fooled by it.

Let’s move on to *Don Giovanni*. In the Finale Secondo, there is a moment where natural law seems to be subverted. After Don Giovanni’s mocking invitation to the Commendatore’s statue, the latter’s ghost arrives at the libertine’s dinner table. However, the scene is anything but surreal and oneiric: the stony guest is there, physically present, since Leporello and Donna Elvira have already seen it. The dialogue between the Commendatore and his assassin is interrupted by exclamations from Leporello, who is gradually shaken, scared and imploring:

LA STATUA  
Don Giovanni, a cenar teco  
M’invitasti e son venuto!

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DON GIOVANNI

Non l'avrei giammai creduto;  
Ma farò quel che potrò.  
Leporello, un'altra cena  
Fa che subito si porti!

LEPORELLO (*facendo capolino di sotto alla tavola*)

Ah padron! Siam tutti morti.

DON GIOVANNI (*tirandolo fuori*)

Vanne dico!

LA STATUA (*a Leporello che è in atto di parlare*)

Ferma un po'!

Non si pasce di cibo mortale  
chi si pasce di cibo celeste;  
Altra cure più gravi di queste,  
Altra brama quaggiù mi guidò!

LEPORELLO

(La terzana d'avere mi sembra  
E le membra fermar più non so.)

DON GIOVANNI

Parla dunque! Che chiedi! Che vuoi?

LA STATUA

Parlo; ascolta! Più tempo non ho!

DON GIOVANNI

Parla, parla, ascoltandoti sto.

As we can see, at a certain point Leporello's terror so overwhelms him that he has clear symptoms of convulsion, in his words due to Tertian Fever. This fever originates with a malaria infection and – according to Dr. James - “when it is regular and true, the body articulations are weak, there is headache, there is a pain to the kidneys

and vertebrae which rises up the back and extends to the epigastrium [...] sometimes accompanied by tremor of the whole body”<sup>15</sup>.

We note from the score that Mozart illustrates this tremor with a simple and effective expedient, placed in Leporello’s vocal line. The Commendatore, hieratic and grotesque, sings long notes with wide octaves almost devoid of melody, in keeping with his otherworldliness; Don Giovanni, who thinks he has the situation in hand, has a vocal line which rises up without excitation to a high register, suggesting that he is fearless. Leporello at first has a line which is very similar to Don Giovanni’s (maybe because he is trying to be brave, in imitation of his master’s brashness), but then moves to a ternary pattern, triplets that proceed in close notes over the words “La terzana d’avere mi sembra / e le membra fermar più non so”, I seem to have the Tertian fever / and can’t stop my body.

These are the only triplets in the vocal parts of the three characters in the whole scene. It’s no coincidence that by using them, Mozart wants to stress Leporello’s fever symptoms (which are actually tremors of fear, not of Tertian fever), differentiating them from the surrounding action by means of a different (not yet used) pattern that aptly and realistically illustrates the rhythmic and paroxysmal “tremito di tutte le membra”, according to Dr. James.

In the third and last opera, *Così fan tutte*, there is even a poisoning: at the end of Act I (n. 18) Guglielmo and Ferrando, because their professions of love have been rejected by Dorabella and Fiordiligi, drink poison. Obviously, it isn’t real poison but a ruse to test the effect that this *coup de theatre* has on their beloveds. But it works – thanks to the fake desperation of Don Alfonso – and the two men simulate the effects of a real poisoning. The arrival of the doctor is part of the joke (the doctor is actually the maid Despina, disguised as a man), who at first wants to know the causes of the poisoning and then performs a wonderful and amazing recovery, thanks to a prodigious magnet.

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DESPINA

Non vi affannate,  
Non vi turbate;  
Ecco una prova  
Di mia virtù.

FIORDILIGI E DORABELLA

Egli ha di un ferro  
La man fornita.

DESPINA

Questo è quel pezzo  
Di calamita:  
Pietra mesmerica,  
Ch'ebbe l'origine  
Nell'Alemagna,  
Che poi sì celebre  
Là in Francia fu.

*(Tocca con un pezzo di calamita la testa ai finti infermi  
e striscia dolcemente i loro corpi per lungo.)*

FIORDILIGI, DORABELLA E DON ALFONSO

Come si muovono,  
Torcono, scuotono!  
In terra il cranio  
Presto percuotono.

What has happened? What is this “pietra mesmerica” (mesmeric stone) that has so quickly resuscitated the two fake suicides? Clearly, the reference is to mesmerism and its inventor: Franz Anton Mesmer, a German doctor who, in the second half of 18th Century, came up with his “animal magnetism” theory, which purported to cure of illnesses by applying magnets to strategic points on the body, where the substance responsible for the correct functioning of the human machine (“fluid”) was blocked or congested<sup>16</sup>. This theory was highly successful and its fame spread through-

out Europe, despite the fact that the scientific community repudiated Mesmer as a quack. Mozart himself met him, and indeed it was at Mesmer's home in Vienna that Mozart's first opera, the *singspiel Bastien und Bastienne* had its debut in 1768<sup>17</sup>. But, Mozart and Da Ponte's opinions about this seem rather skeptical and satirical. First, this magnet heals healthy people, not sick people, and the way in which it happens is openly ridiculous: in fact, the "doctor" who performs the "cure" is merely a housemaid in disguise. Second, he (or rather she) claims to cure arsenic poisoning almost in real time; instead – James informs us – with this particular kind of poisoning "death doesn't come quickly, but with fevers, constipations, paralysis, tremor and, sometimes, mind alienation"<sup>18</sup>. But the really interesting aspect is the musical expression of this passage. Over the words "Là in Francia fu", Despina's vocal line produces a trill on D (unison with violins and violas), a figure soon reprised by flutes, oboes and bassoons, while, as the caption says, Despina "Tocca con un pezzo di calamita la testa ai finti infermi e striscia dolcemente i loro corpi per lungo", She touches with a piece of magnet the sick men's heads, and softly runs it over their whole bodies. The convulsions that follow – a sign that life is coming back into the men's bodies – are testified by the words of the two girls: "Come si muovono / Torcono, scuotono! / In terra il cranio / Presto percuotono" (How they move / writhe and shake! / They soon smack their skulls on the ground). What has happened (or, better what has been faked) in this scene? Two bodies, which after having been in contact with a "mesmeric stone" start to writhe, not so differently from the frogs that Luigi Galvani used in those same years for his experiments<sup>19</sup>. Here, the arcane is revealed: Mozart tries to illustrate the concept of electricity – an idea not so far from Mesmer's hypothesis – through a musical figure of the trill, which is closer both to the idea of electric current and its effects on an animal's body (tremors, spasms, etc...). Its etymology helps us in this situation. *The Dizionario Universale*

*della Lingua Italiana*, written by Carlo Antonio Vanzon (1842)<sup>20</sup>, states in regard to the verb “Trillare” (to trill): “from Tritulare, which means to shake, writhe, move convulsively”<sup>21</sup>. So, the rhetorical expedient used by Mozart bears new meanings: this opera was written in 1790, just one year before the publication of Galvani’s *De viribus electricitatis in motu muscolari*<sup>22</sup> (whose results were already known before, anticipated by other scholars such as Ludloff, Franklin and Priestley). We mustn’t forget that Mozart, in his private library, had books on metaphysics and – as they were called at the time – natural philosophy; and Da Ponte too was somewhat familiar with these topics, since his brother was doctor in Padua and he had himself thought of becoming one, as he confesses in his *Memoirs*<sup>23</sup>.

4.

To conclude: both the “three ages of man” (Cherubino-Don Giovanni-Don Alfonso) and the fake illnesses of Figaro, Leporello, Ferrando and Guglielmo are just a few examples of that wider microcosm of the “human comedy” that this trilogy represent. However, here we can point, better than in other situations, to Mozart’s genius, because of the highly abstract nature of the subject (pathology and, by extension, human physiology). Mozart manages to resolve it in a really masterful way, giving his listeners much food for thought and genuine enjoyment. This is that inexplicable (but extremely evident) essence which governs Mozart’s art: “I can do it by tones, for I am a musician”.

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1. “Non so scrivere in modo poetico: non sono un poeta. Non so distribuire le frasi con tanta arte da far loro gettare ombra e luce: non sono un pittore. Non so neppure esprimere i miei sentimenti e i miei pensieri con i gesti e con la pantomima: non sono un ballerino. Ma posso farlo con i suoni: sono un musicista.” (Letter from Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart to his father, November 8th 1777). Cfr. Sapethling R (eds), *Mozart’s letters, Mozart’s life*. New York: Norton; 2000. p. 34.
2. “[...] la poesia [che] deve assolutamente sottostare alla musica” (Letter from Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart to his father, October 13 rd 1781. *Ibid*, p.67).
3. Rumph S, The Sense of Touch in ‘Don Giovanni’. *Music & Letters* 2007;88(4):561-588.
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10. The original, placed in *Demetrio* (1731, and already used by Goldoni in his *La scuola moderna*, 1748) said “E’ la fede degli amanti” instead of “delle femmine”. Little more politically correct.
11. *Dizionario universale di medicina di chirurgia di chimica di botanica di notomia di farmacia d’istoria naturale &c*. Del signor James a cui precede un Discorso istorico intorno all’origine e progressi della medicina tradotto dall’originale inglese dai signori Diderot, Eidous, e Toussaint. Riveduto, corretto, ed accresciuto dal signor Giuliano Busson. Venice, Pasquali, 1753.
12. The original title of the pièce by Beaumarchais was “La Folle Journée, ou le Mariage de Figaro”.
13. All quotations from Dr. James *Dizionario universale* are my translations from the Italian.

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14. Since this descending succession of notes imitates a sort of lamentation, it has been widely used in sacred music: an example for all, the *Crucifixus* of Bach's Mass in B Minor.
15. "Quando è regolata e vera, le articolazioni sono deboli, v'ha doglia di capo, sentesi a' contorni delle prime vertebre del dorso un dolore di reni, che sale lungo la schiena e si stende fino all'epigastro [...] talora accompagnato da tremito di tutte le membra".
16. Pattie F, Mesmer and Animal Magnetism: A Chapter in the History of Medicine. Hamilton, Edmonston; 1994.
17. Steptoe A, Mozart, Mesmer and 'Così Fan Tutte'. Music & Letters 1986; LXVII, 67(3): 248-255.
18. "La morte non vien a precipizio, sopraggiungono le febbri ettiche, stitichezza, la paralisi, il tremore e talvolta l'alienazion di spirito"
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