



THE ABDUCTION FROM THE SERAGLIO

An in-depth guide by Stu Lewis

INTRODUCTION

In a way, it sounds like a show-biz cliché. A young man with a talent for music, a former child prodigy, decides to move to the big city to make his mark as a composer for the stage. There he meets up with a cantankerous playwright with whom no one else wants to work, who presents him with an idea (stolen from another writer) for a musical in which, by sheer coincidence, the heroine's name just happens to be the same as that of the composer's girlfriend. Yet this is exactly how the Lyric's season opener, *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, came to be written.

Mozart's arrival in Vienna in 1781 coincided with a great flowering of culture in that city. Emperor Joseph II was one of history's great enlightened monarchs, a man who believed that the arts were an important component of a great empire. Three years earlier, he had helped found a German performing company, the National Singspiel, dedicated to producing a theater tradition in Austria's native language rather than relying on Italian models. Since German audiences were partial to the spoken word, the singspiel, as opposed to the Italian opera practice, consisted of spoken dialogues supplemented by musical numbers, much like the Broadway shows of our own time.

The unpopular playwright referred to above was Gottlieb Stephanie, despised for his rude, deceitful, and slanderous behavior. Nevertheless, Mozart was able to look beyond his reputation to see a highly skilled playwright, and shortly after making his acquaintance, he wrote to his father that the two men were now "old friends." Shortly afterwards, Stephanie presented Mozart with a libretto that he had been working on, an adaptation of Christoph Bretzner's "Belmont und Konstanze," which was made possible by the loose copyright laws in effect at that time. Rather than accept the libretto as written, however, Mozart actively collaborated with Stephanie in making numerous changes to the libretto, most noticeably expanding the role of the villain Osmin, a character in whom Mozart saw endless comic possibilities, especially in view of the fact that the acclaimed bass Ludwig Fischer, known for his spectacular low notes, would be playing the role at the premiere. Another major change from Bretzner's original was a reduction in the amount of spoken dialogue and a corresponding increase in the amount of music.

The opera had its premiere July 16, 1782, and although the initial audience reception was poor, due to heckling from the large number of musicians who resented the upstart composer, it drew praise from Gluck, one of the older generation's greatest composers, and it soon was being performed throughout the German-speaking world, to great acclaim. Three weeks after the premiere, Mozart married his own Constanze, over the strong objections of his father, who believed that his son was in need of a wealthy wife so that he could pursue his career without financial worries. Nevertheless, Constanze (Weber) was truly Mozart's soulmate, and judging from all available records, it was an idyllic, though all-too-brief, marriage.

The Abduction from the Seraglio was a major breakthrough in music written for the stage, not only for its brilliant arias and ensembles but also for the advances Mozart had made in the use of the orchestra, leading to the legendary (though likely apocryphal) dialogue between the Emperor and the composer: “Too monstrous for our ears, and monstrous many notes.” “Exactly as many as necessary, your Majesty.”

Nevertheless, Mozart had apparently set the bar so high for the German singspiel that no one could match it. With only one mega-hit to its credit, the theater closed, leading to the next chapter in Mozart’s composing career. However, near the end of his brief life, Mozart returned to the singspiel form when he teamed up with his friend Schikaneder to compose the work which many consider his greatest masterpiece, *The Magic Flute*. In fact, many listeners might well detect stylistic similarities between these two singspiels.

Though this opera may not be as famous as Mozart’s later work, during Mozart’s lifetime it was the most popular of his operas. Mozart had written several operas prior to his arrival in Vienna, but few are performed today with any regularity, though the last of these, *Idomeneo*, a classical tragedy is staged occasionally, as is the early work *La finta giardiniera*, recently performed by the UMKC opera department. In *The Abduction from the Seraglio* we see Mozart becoming MOZART, and there was no turning back.

P.S. The Lyric has three tragedies on the bill this season. If you don’t want to be too depressed by this fare, don’t skip this delightful comedy.

THE CHARACTERS

Belmonte (bel-MOHN-te)/tenor/a wealthy young man

Pedrillo (pe-DREE-oh)—tenor—Belmonte’s friend

Konstanze (kohn-STAN-ze)/soprano/Belmonte’s girlfriend (sometimes spelled Constanze)

Blonde (BLOHN-de)/soprano/Pedrillo’s girlfriend

Pasha Selim/spoken/owner of a nightclub, possibly a front for other activities; however, he is also a gentleman, at least in outward appearance

Osmín (ohz-MEEN)/bass/Pasha Selim’s right-hand man

Note: In the original, Belmonte is identified as a Spanish nobleman, and Pedrillo is his servant; Blonde is Konstanze’s servant, of British origin; and the play is set on the estate of the wealthy Pasha Selim

The music seems to divide the two pairs of lovers by social class. As is the case in many comic operas and Broadway musicals, there is a serious pair of lovers contrasted with a more comic pair. Konstanze’s music, despite the changed setting, is that of a noblewoman, more complex and demanding than that of Blonde, due partly to the fact

that Mozart knew that she would be portrayed by the leading coloratura singer in the company, Caterina Cavalieri. Blonde is the forerunner of Mozart's perky soubrettes, including Susanna, Zerlina, Despina, and Papagena, and is the operatic ancestor of such light-opera second ladies as Adele (*Die Fledermaus*), Valencienne (*The Merry Widow*), Ado Annie (*Oklahoma!*), Adelaide (*Guys and Dolls*), and countless others.

THE STORY

Any production of *The Abduction from the Seraglio* today faces a challenge. The original opera described four Europeans trapped in the palace of a Turkish despot. How does one produce it today without resorting to the racial and ethnic stereotyping which may have been acceptable over two centuries ago but is no longer so, when so many Muslims are living peacefully in our midst? Director Alison Moritz's answer is to reimagine the opera as taking place in a nightclub run by a gang boss as a cover for his less legitimate pursuits (while avoiding the term "mafia," with its equally ethnic stereotyping.) Since it is set in the U.S., the spoken dialogue will be in English, in the idiom of a Vegas club, while, in accord with the tastes of the operatic world, the musical numbers will be sung in the original German.

The following plot outline is based on the current production, with parenthetical comments explaining any major variations from the original.

The entire story takes place during a single day, in a night club owned by mob boss Pasha Selim. While the original opera was in three acts, the current production is in two acts, as described here.

OVERTURE

The overture to this opera sets up the theme of the contrast between the violent underworld with the "more civilized" world of normal society (*originally, Turkey vs. Western Europe.*) The clanging chords which open the overture are an example of Mozart's conception of "Turkish music," which often consisted of hand-held percussion instruments, 2/4 time with a heavy accent on the first beat, and long notes followed by short ones. The best-known use of such motifs in Western music is most likely the "Turkish march" in the final movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which introduces and accompanies the tenor solo, altering the rhythm of the "Ode to Joy."

ACT ONE

In the aria "Hier sol lich dich den sehen," Belmonte expresses his joy at locating the place where his beloved Konstanze is being held captive. He encounters the bodyguard

Osmin, who is singing a romantic song while working (“Wer ein Liebchen nat beflunden”), which turns into a duet—a confrontation between Belmonte and the uncooperative Osmin, who has an opportunity to show off his low notes to great effect. Pedrillo enters and joins Belmonte at the bar. Pedrillo explains the reason for their plight. Along with the two women, Konstanze and Blonde, he was captured by some “goons” and was turned over to an associate of theirs, Pasha Selim, who has been wooing Konstanze while Osmin has expressed an interest in Blonde. (*In the original, they were captured by pirates and ransomed by Pasha Selim.*) Belmonte tells Pedrillo that he has someone waiting on the outside to help them (*a ship*). Pedrillo offers to introduce Belmonte as a musician who could play in the club’s band (*an architect who could help redesign the palace*). In an aria which has become a solo favorite among tenors, “O wie angstlich,” Belmonte describes the anguish he has been through and the anticipation he feels in expecting to see her again. The two men hide as Pasha enters with Konstanze and a chorus praises their great ruler.

Pasha and Konstanze are apparently in the middle of a dialogue, as Pasha declares his love for her, while she is reluctant to explain the reason for her refusal. In the aria “Ach, ich liebte,” designated in the (*revised*) score as a “torch song,” Konstanze explains that she has sworn to be true to another man. In the dialogue that follows she adds that if it weren’t for the fact that she loves another, she might have romantic feelings for Pasha.

Konstanze exits. Pedrillo introduces Belmonte as a musician, and the Pasha offers him a spot in the band, fortunately without an audition. Osmin enters, still trying to keep Belmonte out of the club, and their conflict is expressed in a comic trio. The scene shifts to the back of the club, where Konstanze, in the aria “Weicher Wesche...Traurigkeit,” expresses her dismay at her predicament. (*There is a slight change in chronology from the original.*) The Pasha enters and again asks her to accept him, and when she refuses, his voice, for the first time, becomes threatening. Blonde enters just as he is leaving. She gives some words of encouragement to Konstanze, to no avail.

Blonde is left alone on stage. Her aria “Durch Zartichkeit und Schmeichein” describes how men should treat European women, especially English women, who in Mozart’s day were considered more independent not only than women in the East but also women in other parts of Europe. Throughout the opera, Blonde is generally given music that is lighter, but no less demanding, than that assigned to Konstanze. (*The aria, sung in the original German, does not really fit the revised version of the libretto, since it refers to cultural differences that do not play a part in this production.*) Osmin has been listening, and he tries in vain to win Blonde’s affection, leading to a comic duet between the two, “Ich gehe, doch rate ich dir”, with her high notes brilliantly embellishing his low ones. Mozart scholar Jane Glover has commented that Osmin’s love for Blonde has the effect of humanizing his character, elevating him above the status of a comic villain.

Konstanze is left alone on stage. Responding to the implied (*stated in the original*) threat of torture, in the powerful aria “Martern aller Arten” she proclaims how she can

withstand any form of torture to remain true to Belmonte. This aria is generally considered the highlight of the opera, not only because of the great display of the soprano's vocal powers but also because of Mozart's innovative use of the orchestra, including several solo passages for various instruments. All in all, this number provides a fittingly dramatic conclusion to the first act.

ACT TWO

Blonde and Pedrillo enter from different sides of the stage, and Pedrillo tells her of the escape plan. Recognizing that the overly zealous Osmin poses the most formidable obstacle to their escape, they devise a plan to drug him. Blonde sings the sprightly aria "Welche Wonne, weiche Lust" expressing her joy at her forthcoming escape, and after she leaves Pedrillo follows with "Frisch zum Kampfe," an attempt to build up his courage in what he realizes will be a risky venture. Osmin enters, and Pedrillo suggests that they should try to be friends and seal their friendship with a toast. Though he recognizes that Osmin is a "tee-totaller" (non-drinker), he tells him that he would be more fun to be around if he loosened up just a little. (*In the original, Osmin's refusal to drink is based on his Islamic faith, so agreeing to consume alcohol is a more serious issue for him.*) Pedrillo slips some sleep medication into Osmin's glass as they drink a toast to Bacchus ("Vivat Bacchus"), the god of wine. Osmin starts to drift off to sleep, and Pedrillo escorts him offstage.

The two pairs of lovers are now united, and in an extended ensemble consisting of two arias sung by Belmonte bracketing a joyous quartet, they declare that love can conquer all. The men momentarily express doubts about the ladies' faithfulness, but the four join in unison to declare the folly of petty jealousy.

Following a scene shift, Belmonte and Pedrillo are alone on stage, trying out the keys that Belmonte has somehow obtained. Pedrillo, accompanying himself on the mandolin, sings "Im Mohrenland gefangen war," a song intended to cue the women that the escape is imminent, but the keys don't fit, and they decide to use a ladder instead. There is a lot of physical comedy as the four try to overcome various obstacles. Meanwhile, the sleep medication has worn off, and Osmin enters and has Blonde tied to a chair. Refusing a bribe, Osmin declares that he wants revenge, not money, and in the aria "O, wie will ich triumphieren," Osmin expresses his joy in anticipating the deaths of his four captives.

Having heard the commotion, Pasha enters, and Osmin explains the foiled escape plan. Belmonte desperately explains that he is from a rich family and that his father will gladly pay any ransom that Pasha requests. This plea backfires, as Pasha explains that Belmonte's father is his worst enemy, a man who stole his wealth and forced him to flee his native land. He asks Belmonte what his father would have done had the roles been

reversed, and Belmonte is forced to admit that his father would not show Pasha any mercy. Pasha and Osmin exit to plan the proper punishment for the captives.

Belmonte and Konstanze sing a duet in which they proclaim that they are resigned to their impending doom. Pasha returns to inform them of their fate. Belmonte expresses the hope that his death will pay for the injustices that his father did to Pasha, but Pasha explains that he does not wish to repay one injustice with another. He insists that Belmonte tell his father that he was in Pasha's power and was spared. Pasha tells him that if he becomes a better man than his father, Pasha's mercy will have been rewarded. Pedrillo asks for mercy for himself and Blonde as well, and Pasha grants it, over Osmin's objection, telling him "If something cannot be won through kindness, it's better to do without." (*These enlightened views may seem to reflect 21st century values, but they are actually taken directly from the original.*)

No Mozart opera would be complete without a grand finale, and here it begins with an ensemble technically referred to as a "Vaudeville," a term that has absolutely no relation to the American theatrical production of the same name. It is rather a musical form in which the principal singers each sing a solo verse, while the entire ensemble joins in each chorus. Probably the best-known example of this form comes in the finale of Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*. Here the four former captives praise Pasha's merciful character individually and collectively. Blonde, however, adds a condemnation of Osmin's boorish behavior, and he responds with a repetition of his belief that the four should have been killed, but as he rushes out, the four join in articulating a more general principle, that "Nothing is as hateful as revenge. To be generous, merciful, kind and selflessly to forgive is the mark of a noble soul." The chorus follows with a "Turkish" sounding tribute to Pasha's greatness as the curtain falls.

MOZART

Of all the great composers, perhaps none has been the subject of more romantic speculation than Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. In the film *Amadeus*, Hollywood presented us with a Mozart for our own age—an irreverent, uncouth young man with an innate and inexplicable gift for composing immortal music. In the Peter Shaffer play upon which the film was based, it was clear that what we were seeing was a caricature of the composer as filtered through the deranged mind of his rival, Antonio Salieri (also a caricature). But audiences accustomed to television biopics often have missed that distinction.

When we look at the historical record, much of which can be derived from the large amount of Mozart's correspondence which has been preserved, we find a quite different picture. For one thing, he was a keen student of music theory, aware of the effects of various harmonies and key changes. He also was a devout Catholic who drew inspiration from the rituals of the church. As for the vulgarity, much of which can be confirmed from the letters, we need to remember that in the eighteenth century,

scatological humor and sexual frankness were much more acceptable than they were to become later. Rumors of Mozart's sexual affairs are unsubstantiated, and the erotic letters we do have are addressed to his wife.

But even if we strip away the myths, one indisputable fact remains: Mozart was clearly one of the greatest creative geniuses (if not the greatest) the world has ever known. In a lifetime just short of 36 years, he revolutionized Western music. Whereas most other great opera composers, with the exception of Richard Strauss and Benjamin Britten, were known almost exclusively for their operatic compositions, opera was just one area in which Mozart excelled. His symphonies clearly surpassed those of his predecessors and contemporaries, and the last four are still considered among the greatest of all time. Many of his concertos are still part of the standard orchestral repertoire, and those for oboe and clarinet are probably the most popular for those instruments. His *Requiem* is the most frequently performed version of that text. In the world of opera—his first love—he demonstrated his versatility as well, creating the finest examples of operas in three distinct genres: opera seria (serious), opera buffa (comic), and the German “singspiel,” in which *The Abduction from the Seraglio* is surpassed in popularity only by Mozart's own *The Magic Flute*.

Mozart was born in Salzburg (which was not yet part of Austria) on January 27, 1756, the son of a professional musician, Leopold Mozart. As early as age three, Wolfgang began to demonstrate such a musical talent that his father immediately recognized that he had been blessed with a remarkable gift. By the time he was six, he had already composed a keyboard piece and been taken on tour, along with his one sibling who did not die in infancy, his sister Nannerl, herself a gifted musician. By age 14 he had composed his first opera, *Mitridate*.

For the next several years Mozart traveled throughout Europe, barely managing to make a living through performing and composing. In 1781, he made the most important decision of his life, relocating to Vienna, which at that time was the cultural capital of the German-speaking world.

We have already discussed the origin of “The Abduction from the Seraglio.” Still basking in the success of that work, Mozart benefited from a fortunate twist of fate. Salieri had invited the Italian poet/dramatist Lorenzo Daponte to Vienna to collaborate with him on some Italian operas, but when their first such work did not succeed, Salieri blamed his librettist and vowed never to work with him again. This left the door open for him to work with Mozart, and the result was three of the most popular operas of all time: *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan tutte*.

Surprisingly, he then turned briefly to opera seria (serious opera) to write *La Clemenza di Tito* (1791), considered by some to be the greatest example of that form of opera. Despite some gorgeous music, the opera is rarely performed today because of its stale libretto. Later that year, however, Mozart again found his comic touch, collaborating with his good friend Emanuel Schikaneder on *The Magic Flute*, possibly intended as a tribute

to the Freemason movement, of which Mozart was an active member. (Much has been made of the supposed subversive nature of this organization; however, many Viennese had little trouble reconciling the Masons' humanism with their Catholic faith.)

At the height of his creative powers, however, the young composer was struck by a disease which his biographers have been unable to identify, though few take seriously the rumor that he was poisoned. He died December 5, 1791, just weeks short of what would have been his 36th birthday, leaving his *Requiem* unfinished. It was completed by a colleague named Franz Süssmyer, and that is the version we are familiar with today. (*Amadeus* director Peter Shaffer showed Salieri completing it.) In accord with funeral practices of the time (part of Joseph II's reforms), he was buried in an unmarked grave. Mozart does not need a stone monument, however, as his works are certainly enough of a monument for any man.

SOME ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

As noted, the current Lyric production has little to do with Mozart's time, but nevertheless some historical background might be of interest. There has been much discussion of the fact that the views of Mozart and his librettists were greatly influenced by the philosophy of the Enlightenment, a philosophical movement that focused on reason, personal liberty, and the scientific method. Far from focusing on the theoretical, these ideas had a major impact on government, religion, and the makeup of European (and later, American) society.

While many of these ideas sound totally idealistic, their proponents were to an extent motivated by commercial forces. As commerce and trade increased, certain changes in the structure of society were required. One positive result was greater religious tolerance, motivated not so much by reason as by the realization that one man's gold was as valuable as any other's. This led to a reduced role for the church. Commercial trade also led to the downfall of feudalism, which in turn led to greater central authority. In fact, many Enlightenment thinkers (Mozart among them) believed that a strong central authority, one that acted in accord with Enlightenment values, was the ideal form of societal order. As might be expected, however, there were several significant disagreements among those who adhered to Enlightenment views.

One area of disagreement was the European view of the Orient. As was discussed earlier, the original version of *The Abduction from the Seraglio* took place in Turkey, a remote location for Europeans of the time. While some Europeans preached tolerance of different cultures from their own, others saw people in the East as unenlightened primitives, lacking in the virtues practiced in their own countries. In this opera, for example, the Pasha demonstrates charitable views which, as Belmonte admits, were not adhered to in the West. However, we need to remember that Pasha Selim was not a native Turk but rather a displaced European who had somehow attained a leadership

role in his adopted land. The Ottomans had not long before been the enemies of the Austrian Empire, and though they no longer posed a threat, the Emperor believed that it was wise to continue to demonize them, and Mozart and Stephanie duly obliged.

Emperor Joseph did not think of the theater, and opera in particular, as frivolous entertainment. He rather believed that it could teach Enlightenment morality, especially to the lower classes. In a way, Pasha Selim—the ultimate Enlightenment rationalist—could be seen as a stand-in for the Emperor himself. Perhaps the most significant change that Mozart and Stephanie made in adapting Bretzner's play was a change in the ending. In the opera, Belmonte is the son of Pasha Selim's enemy, the man who forced the Pasha to leave his home country and start again. In Bretzner's version, Belmonte is Pasha Selim's son. The maxim that forgiveness was greater than vengeance would have no meaning in the original, since the Pasha would simply be acting out of family loyalty.

Kansas University professor Martin Nedbal has pointed out the prevalence of didacticism—including direct statements of the “author's message”—in many operas of the time. In this opera, for example, the message, stated by the four freed prisoners, is so important that Mozart changes the music to a minor key to get it across: “Nothing is as hateful as revenge. To be generous, merciful, kind and selflessly to forgive is the mark of a noble soul.” The point of the opera is that passion should give way to reason.

Such statements of morals also appear in two of the Mozart-Da Ponte operas. In the epilogue to *Don Giovanni*, which is often cut in the interest of time, the principal characters who are still alive join in unison to proclaim, “The fate of sinners is always equal to their crimes.” And in *Così fan tutte*, all six characters join to sing to the audience, “Fortunate is the man who is able to make the best of all adversity. Through all vicissitudes he can let Reason be his guide. That which makes others weep will be a cause of laughter for him. And, even in the midst of a whirlwind, he will find a center of tranquility.”

And at the end of *The Magic Flute*, Schikaneder has the chorus of priests proclaim, “Strength has triumphed and rewarded beauty and wisdom with an eternal crown.” In the twentieth century, when Igor Stravinsky and his librettists composed *The Rake's Progress* in a style reminiscent of the Classical period, they concluded with the entire ensemble declaring that the devil finds work for idle hands.

One area where the Enlightenment did not promote individual liberty was in the chastity of women, which represented a retreat from the more open views of Renaissance comedy. Granted, there was a practical reason for this, as people were more concerned with inheritance rights than with emotional infidelity. It is notable that in *Così fan tutte* the women who are supposedly unfaithful to their fiancés insist on marriage to their new suitors before giving up their virginity.

Fortunately for today's audiences, Mozart believed that short messages at the end of the opera should suffice to get the point across, and we can still enjoy *The Abduction from the Seraglio* as a joyful comedy.

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