

OPERA ATELIER

timeless



The Marriage of Figaro
By Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Study Guide

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The Marriage of Figaro 2010

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About Opera Atelier

Opera Atelier holds a unique place in the North American theatre community, producing opera, ballet and drama from the 17th and 18th centuries. These productions draw upon the aesthetics and ideals of the period, featuring soloists of international acclaim, period ballet, original instruments, elaborate stage decor, exquisite costumes and an imaginative energy that sets Opera Atelier apart. Opera Atelier is not in the business of “reconstruction”, rather, each production is a new creative effort and takes its own place in history. We strive to create productions that would have been recognized and respected in their own time while providing a thrilling theatrical experience for modern audiences.

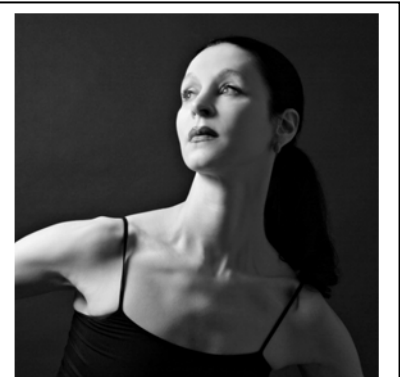
Founded by Marshall Pynkoski and Jeannette Lajeunesse Zingg in 1985, Opera Atelier has been acclaimed throughout Canada, in Houston, Cleveland, New York, Stuttgart, Halle, Bremen, London (BBC Proms), Paris, Montreux, Citta di Castello, Singapore, throughout Japan and, most recently, in Seoul Korea. We collaborate with some of early music’s most distinguished artists including Andrew Parrott, Trevor Pinnock, Hervé Niquet, Marc Minkowski and many others. Opera Atelier’s 2000 production of Lully’s *Persée* (performed for the first time since the 18th century) was hailed as “the operatic event of the year, a triumph for director Marshall Pynkoski, choreographer Jeannette Zingg, their design team and their cast....” William Littler, *The Toronto Star*

Mr. Pynkoski and Ms. Lajeunesse Zingg also direct the School of Atelier Ballet (SAB) which operates under the umbrella of Opera Atelier. Graduates of the SAB are performing professionally in companies throughout North America and Europe including the National Ballet of Canada and Opera Atelier.

Opera Atelier’s commitment to education extends to their Making of an Opera Program, which has introduced thousands of children to all aspects of production and performance. Opera Atelier has received four Lieutenant-Governor Awards for Excellence in Arts Management.



Marshall Pynkoski



Jeannette Lajeunesse Zingg

Baroque Opera Explained

Baroque opera has its beginnings in the late Renaissance in Italy. It was originally conceived as an attempt to revive ancient Greek drama. Although no classical Greek music survived, Renaissance scholars were aware that Greek drama included declamation, and choral chanting. Consequently, early attempts at reviving this art form included these elements in addition to stories based on Classical themes and mythology.

As absolute monarchs throughout Europe identified themselves more and more strongly with Greek heroes and myth-makers, they appropriated these stories and frequently used them as a means of personal promotion.

By the 17th century, opera had become a highly respected and codified art form in its own right. The gorgeous and elaborate productions of the 17th and 18th centuries were expensive to mount and required exceptionally well trained singers, instrumentalists, dancers, machinists and scenic artists.

The greatest composers of the world lent their talents to developing this art form which came to be seen as one of the sublime examples of human creativity. Opera encompasses all of the arts, and enjoyed unparalleled popularity from its conception right up to today.

Opera is the stylish, dazzling, often beautiful, often sad, warm hearted, funny, serious and even sexy form of music that has enriched our lives for hundreds of years. Originally an art form for a privileged few, opera has evolved into an international multi-media crowd pleaser.

The word “opera” is Italian and comes from the plural for the word “opus” which means work.

Opera combines the best of all worlds- spectacular singing, rich orchestral sounds, drama, dance, beautiful sets, lavish costumes, elaborate lighting and special effects. These artistic qualities combine to make opera one of the most powerful and comprehensive art forms.

The word “baroque” was originally used as an insult to describe art or music which was overly extravagant, even slightly bizarre. It comes from the Portuguese word *barroco*, a misshapen pearl. In the 20th century it has become the respectable name for music from about 1600, when opera was born in Italy, until about 1750, the year of Johann Sebastian Bach’s death.

The Characters and Voice Types in *The Marriage of Figaro* (in order of vocal appearance)

Figaro, <i>Count Almaviva's valet</i>	Baritone
Susanna, <i>Countess Almaviva's maid, engaged to Figaro</i>	Soprano
Dr. Bartolo	Bass/Baritone
Cherubino, <i>a page</i>	Mezzo Soprano
Count Almaviva	Baritone
Don Basilio, <i>a music-master</i>	Tenor
Countess Almaviva	Soprano
Antonio, <i>the gardener</i>	Bass/Baritone
Don Curzio, <i>counselor at law</i>	Tenor
Barbarina, <i>Antonio's niece</i>	Soprano
Marcellina	Mezzo Soprano

Synopsis *The Marriage of Figaro*

Act One

In a room of Count Almaviva's castle.

Count Almaviva's valet, Figaro, and the Countess' maid, Susanna, are preparing for their wedding later that day. Susanna considers it suspicious that the Count has chosen to give them a room which adjoins the apartments of both master and mistress, because she knows that the Count wishes to seduce her. Figaro is furious when he hears this and resolves to foil the Count's plans.

The appearance of Marcellina and her lawyer Dr. Bartolo introduces another obstacle to Figaro's happiness. Figaro has never settled a debt to Marcellina which he contracted with the understanding that if he could not pay, he would marry her. Susanna teases Marcellina mercilessly until she leaves.

Cherubino, a page boy, joins Susanna and explains that the Count is angry with him because of his impertinent behavior regarding the females in the castle. Cherubino confesses that his latest passion is the Countess herself. The Count arrives and Cherubino hides in order to avoid being caught once again alone with a woman, and the Count believes Susanna is alone when he enters her room. He begins to proposition her until interrupted by the arrival of Susanna's music master (and the Count's procurer) Don Basilio. The Count conceals himself behind the same chair as Cherubino, who hastily slips around it and kneels on it while Susanna covers him with some laundry. Basilio gossips about Cherubino's infatuation with the Countess. The Count is so furious that he comes out of hiding and while holding forth about the page's appalling behavior he throws the laundry off the chair revealing Cherubino. Aware that the boy has overheard him propositioning Susanna, he hastily dispatches Cherubino to join the army. Figaro enters and mockingly describes the glories of war.

Act Two

The Countess' bedroom.

Figaro and Susanna persuade the Countess to teach her husband a lesson and put an end to his ongoing affairs. Basilio is to be sent to the Count with a note stating that the Countess is having an affair with Cherubino. Meanwhile, Susanna will arrange a rendezvous with the Count at which Cherubino dressed as a woman will take her place. Cherubino arrives and the Countess and Susanna dress him as a woman. The Count knocks at the door as this is happening and the Countess in confusion hides Cherubino in her dressing room. The noise of Cherubino upsetting some furniture awakens the Count's suspicions and he demands to know who is hiding there. When the Countess refuses to unlock her dressing room door, the Count compels her to accompany him as he searches for tools to break the door down. Susanna takes advantage of their absence to take Cherubino's place and the page jumps out of the window. When the Count forces the dressing room door open, he and his wife are astonished to see Susanna emerge. The gardener bursts in complaining that someone has just jumped out of the window and although

Figaro attempts to assume the blame, the Count begins to realize he is being duped. Marcellina and Bartolo enter and complicate matters further with their claims for satisfaction of Figaro's debt.

Act Three

A hall in the palace.

The Countess dictates to Susanna the letter which arranges the proposed rendezvous with the Count. The Count continues to press Figaro to marry Marcellina. He is thwarted when Marcellina suddenly recognizes Figaro as her long lost son by Dr. Bartolo. A double wedding is proposed: Figaro to Susanna and Bartolo to Marcellina. Cherubino enters disguised as a village girl offering flowers to the Countess but is unmasked by Antonio. The Count's fury is averted when Barbarina reminds him of his late night visits to her bedroom. She now asks to marry Cherubino.

The Count's spirits rise when the note arrives – apparently from Susanna – inviting him to meet her that evening in the garden. Figaro notices his master with the love note but cannot guess who sent it.

Act Four

The Garden

Figaro discovers that Susanna appears to have suggested a secret meeting with the Count. He is furious not knowing that the Count is to meet the Countess who will be dressed in Susanna's clothes. Figaro conceals himself at the rendezvous point and watches with increasing jealousy as his master seduces the supposed "Susanna." The appearance of the "Countess" gives the Count the opportunity to hurry his supposed "Susanna" away and for the *real* Susanna to play the Countess to Figaro's vengeful protestations of adoration. Recognizing Susanna's voice, Figaro realizes his mistake and they are reconciled. He begs her to forgive him as does the Count of his wife when the trick is revealed and all ends in a bittersweet celebration.

Dance in *The Marriage of Figaro*

Jeannette Lajeunesse Zingg, Choreographer & Co-Artistic Director

Mozart wrote several dances for *The Marriage of Figaro*, beautifully woven into the action of the opera. Dancers appear with the chorus of villagers to help Figaro in his plan to foil Count Almaviva's seduction of Figaro's fiancée Susanna. Then, as the Count and Countess argue, we hear the approach of the homecoming hunters who dance an elegant Hunter's Dance. This is followed by a Spanish Fandango, appropriate to the opera's Spanish setting and indicative of the new interest in "National" styles which had taken hold in Europe. *Watch for these dances at the end of Act III.*

The Hunter's Dance is a reflection of Mozart's dance rhythms with steps which are moving from the Baroque into early Romantic Ballet. The Fandango is based on 18th century Fandango steps, as performed in Spain, accompanied by historically accurate castanet rhythms. Mozart used a traditional tune for the Fandango along with other Spanish dances was enjoying great popularity as a theatrical form. His use of dances in both *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* at dramatically crucial moments show his love and respect for the ballet. Indeed, Mozart was an enthusiastic dancer himself and often took part in pantomimes and ballets for his own pleasure.

Ballet Terms

Jeannette Lajeunesse Zingg, Choreographer & Co-Artistic Director

Corps de ballet: A group of dancers in a ballet company separate from soloists and principals.

Renaissance Dance: Renaissance dance was the first dance style to be recorded. The High Renaissance dates from approximately 1400 to 1600 although none of these periods can be pinned down to exact dates. Renaissance social dancing varied from lively group dances such as the Branle, to stately court dances such as the Pavane. Theatrical dances were often versions of social dances with complex patterns. The dances of the commedia dell'arte were very acrobatic in contrast to the court ballets.

Baroque Dance: The Baroque period 17th and 18th centuries developed both theatrical and court choreographic styles greatly due to the Academy of Dancing established during the 1660's at the behest of Louis XIV. Many Baroque dances have come down to us through dance notation. The vocabulary of steps is huge and far more virtuosic than in earlier periods.

Early Ballet: Early ballet began to evolve out of Baroque toward the end of the 18th century. It shares many aesthetic principles with the Baroque but is also an attempt to reflect Greek and Roman antiquity due to the discoveries at Pompeii and Herculaneum.

Romantic Ballet: Romantic ballet (approximately 1830 - 1860) was a revolutionary change in aesthetic with story ballets and a change from Greek myths to European fairy tales as subject matter.

Classical Ballet: Classical ballet came after the Romantic and is characterized by brilliant virtuosic technique, the short tutu, and the predominance of the ballerina.

Pas de deux: A dance for two.

Directing *The Marriage of Figaro*

The idea of assimilating the characters of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* to the stock figures of commedia dell'arte or "Italian Comedy" initially came from viewing a series of 18th century engravings illustrating Beaumarchais original text.

They depicted the characters of the play in a manner astonishingly reminiscent of the familiar personae of the commedia. On examination, da Ponte's libretto, based on Beaumarchais work, confirmed the initial intuition, and there proved to be no difficulty in analogizing the figures of the opera with those of the commedia. Perhaps this is not surprising. Commedia dell'arte has had a considerable influence on French theatre since the time of Molière. Like so many of the scenarios which have survived from the commedia tradition, *The Marriage of Figaro* presents a comedy of intrigue, and the diversification of characters in the comedy closely parallels that of the traditional commedia dell'arte.

Baroque Acting and Gesture

Marshall Pynkoski, Co-Artistic Director

Over the past 25 years Opera Atelier has developed an extremely detailed and recognizable performance style based on the gestural acting/oratorical technique of the 17th and 18th centuries. Essays in classical oratory by Quintillian and Cicero provided a model for Baroque actors, as did postures and gesture taken from both classical and contemporary paintings and sculpture. Rhetorical gesture was designed to accompany individual words of text, rather than to display the pervading emotions. Like the text, gestures were coherently and gracefully linked to provoke the maximum response from the spectator. Ideally, the use of gesture assists the actor in eliciting an emotional response from the audience, while he maintains control of his technique – a necessity when dealing with the sheer density of text of most Baroque opera and drama. The Baroque actor is a storyteller. It is his job to make the audience feel what he describes. The Baroque actor strives to ensure that audience members are not voyeurs, rather they are participants in the emotional journey of each player.

The gestures for both rhetoric and opera fall into the following categories:

- Emphatic gestures – in which the actor enforces the important words by gesture;
- Imitative gestures – in which the actor imitates, for example, the gentleness of a scene he talks about with a gentle gesture;

- Affective of expressive gestures – in which the actor expresses a particular passion such as fear or grief with specific gestures.

Some of the gestures can be combined to form a complex gesture expressing two or more meanings at once. Each of them can be performed in such a way as merely to suggest its meaning rather than to make it explicit. Baroque gesture and rhetorical speech patterns prevailed on the European stage throughout the nineteenth century.

Opera Atelier's Set Design

The proscenium stage that we know today was invented in the 17th century. Before this time theatrical events took place out of doors on movable carts and platforms or in the banqueting and reception halls of palaces and great homes. Opera as we know it was invented in this period as an entertainment for rich and powerful patrons wealthy enough to commission these spectacular and frequently allegorical dramas set to music. An increasing demand for these entertainments led to the creation of public theatres with seating arranged around a stage that very much resemble a picture in a frame. The scenic designer of these productions (who often worked as an architect, engineer and painter) treated the stage as his canvas and carved and gilded proscenium as his frame.

Part of the challenge in designing the various locations specified in an opera was creating the illusion of depth on a frequently shallow stage. We need only to look at the painting of the period to discover the inspiration for theatrical designer of the day. Artists since the renaissance had perfected the study of perspective drawing and painting. These principles were used by stage designers to create painted scenery that reduced in scale as it approached the back of the stage. This “forced perspective” was employed on painted backdrops, side panels that slid back and forth into the wings and borders that were raised or lowered from the ceiling. Using these elements the designer could create changeable scenes of pastoral landscapes, turbulent seas, cloudscapes (often people with gods and goddesses) or virtually any desired location. Wooden clockwork machinery operated by stagehands was concealed below or above the stage and moved the scenery and provided the means for many special effects; hand cranked waves could churn a painted sea, chariots flew through the air on ropes and demons and dragons ascended from hell through trap doors. All theatres at the time were lit with candles or oil lamps and it is not surprising that most eventually burnt to the ground. A famous and perfectly preserved example with original machines and scenery is the Drottningholm Court Theatre in Sweden.

Opera Atelier is a company devoted to the production of period inspired opera, ballet and drama. As part of a creative team, the set designer's task is to understand and visually interpret the style and technology of the baroque stage. While never recreating historical designs, Opera Atelier produces original sets and costumes inspired by these early sources.

Having researched the conventions of the early stage, the designer must then study the story line of the opera by reading the libretto and determining the changes of location from scene to scene. At this point he or she must consult with the director about an overall visual concept for the piece.

Ultimately, a good design is one that is both beautiful and functional. To ensure that it works in conjunction with the movements on stage required that the designer work closely with the director from the start. Drawings, painting and scale models are employed to establish the mood of each scene and to determine entrances, exits, and special effects. Generally a complete miniature set is created in advance so that the designer, director, carpenters and scenic artists can consult on the practicality and cost of the design. The designer must work with a technical director who oversees the construction and installation of the set, a lighting designer who will help create the changing atmosphere on the stage and prop makers who build furniture and objects handled by the singers or actors.

The Orchestra

Excerpts from Tafelmusik's study guide, *Go for Baroque* by Allison Mackay.

How is a baroque orchestra different from a modern orchestra?

1. Opera Atelier's orchestra, [Tafelmusik](#), plays on so-called "original instruments" - the instruments which the composers of baroque music played themselves. Orchestral instruments have changed over the years to reflect changing tastes in sound production. Modern violins have to be loud enough to be heard in the back row of a large concert hall; the violin of Bach's time was usually played in a small church or the salon of a palace and the warm sound of gut strings (made from sheep intestines) was loud enough to fill the intimate space.
2. One of the most striking features of a baroque orchestra is the continuous presence of the harpsichord. It doubles the line played by the cello and bass in the left hand and makes the orchestra sound louder by filling out the harmonies with chords. The harpsichord's distinctive sound is created by quills made from bird feathers which pluck the strings, making the bass line sound clearer and the rhythms more driving.
3. Baroque orchestras were usually directed by one of the players instead of a separate conductor (although at Opera Atelier, we have a conductor because there are soloists and choristers who need direction).

The Orchestra - A Baroque Innovation

In Renaissance instrumental ensemble music, each part was played by one musician. Baroque composers continued to compose solo and chamber music but they also experimented with creating a fuller sound by putting several performers on one part to form an orchestra.

Baroque composers began to compose more extended instrumental pieces than in former times and they created forms in which several movements could be grouped together. Sometimes these movements were in contrasting but related keys. Our modern system of major and minor keys is an invention of the baroque period; baroque composers were the first to think of their music as a series of chords built above a bass line, each having a relationship with the main note of the key.

A Convincing Fight!

Jennifer Parr, Fight Director

What is stage fighting? It is exactly that, fighting for the stage; but what does that mean?

Perhaps we should start with what it is not. It is not fencing. Although a stage fight should look as though it is being made up before your eyes, it is, in reality, a very carefully choreographed set of movements similar to a dance. Stage fighting is sometimes referred to as ‘combat mime’ because fighters must work together to create an illusion of spontaneity, an illusion of danger for the audience while doing their best to protect each other from any real danger of injury.

In the 17th and 18th centuries the ‘Science of Arms’ or ‘Art of Self Defense’ was an inescapable part of the life of every man of the upper classes. Not only was the ability to handle a sword necessary for war but it was also fashionable. Duels were constantly fought throughout this period although they were against the law, and boys would be taught from a young age ‘the art of elegantly dispatching a neighbour to the next world.’ Some girls managed to share their brothers’ lessons, or otherwise learned the skills necessary to protect their own honour; some even fought duels, but they were the exception not the rule.

When a stage fight is choreographed for an Opera Atelier production it draws on this wealth of historical material and then goes beyond the reality. A fight is always a ‘spectacle’, a display of virtuoso skill with the apparent chance of danger similar to a trapeze or tightrope act. At the same time a stage fight must also be something more than spectacle; it must tell the audience something important about the characters involved, and must advance, or give a new twist to, the story.

The process of creating a stage fight always begins with the libretto and music of the opera and with research into the historical period. The next step involves in-depth discussions between the director and fight director to determine the role of the fight in the director’s overall vision of the opera, followed by discussions of set and costume design and casting. The fight director then prepares the choreography of the fight and teaches the performers (singers and/or dancers) working constantly with the director.

Opera Atelier stage fights have sometimes featured the use of broadsword and spear but usually focus on the rapier, either single rapier, or in combination with a second rapier, dagger, buckler, or cape – typical weapon combinations of the period. The first Opera Atelier production to feature stage fights was the gala performance of *The Loves of Mars and Venus* in 1990. Since then many more fights have been featured in productions ranging from Mozart’s ever popular *Don Giovanni* and *The Marriage of Figaro*, to the exciting ‘new baroque’ performances of Charpentier’s *Medée*, Gluck’s *Iphigénie en Tauride* and Lully’s *Persée* (on both stage and film).