

## Program 6

### *The Marriage of Figaro*, K. 492

Music by **WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)**  
Libretto, after Beaumarchais,  
by **LORENZO DA PONTE (1749-1838)**

Composed in 1785-1786.

Premiered on May 1, 1786 in Vienna.

On April 12, 1782, Pietro Metastasio, dean of 18th-century Italian opera librettists, died in Vienna. The following year, the poet Lorenzo da Ponte, a Venetian-born Jew who converted to Catholicism as a young man and took priestly orders but lived a life profligate enough to be dubbed “a kind of minor Casanova” by Eric Blom, arrived in the Imperial City to fill the void. He was so successful that he was named poet to the Imperial Theaters the following year by Emperor Joseph II, whose taste in opera ran more to the traditional Italian variety than to its more prosaic German counterpart.

Mozart, who claimed to his father to have searched through “hundreds of plays” to find a subject for a new opera, met da Ponte in 1783 and the writer agreed to furnish him with a new libretto. That promise bore no immediate fruit, but in 1785 Mozart approached da Ponte again with the idea that a recent satiric comedy of manners called *La Mariage de Figaro* by the French writer Beaumarchais might well make a fine *opera buffa*. The play in its original version was written around 1781 but was not given for some three years because of Louis XVI’s objections to the manner in which it attacked the aristocracy. (Napoleon described it as “the revolution already in action.”) Though Louis vowed, “*Cela est détestable, cela ne sera jamais joué,*” *La Mariage* was indeed staged in Paris in April 1784. It was a hit. Reportedly, some dozen German translations of the play appeared within a year, though the piece was banned in Austria for its anti-aristocratic stance. Mozart, however, thought the characterizations excellent, and he convinced da Ponte to join his plan to base an opera on it.

The pair set to work in the fall of 1785, not knowing if the result would be approved for production. Da Ponte continued the story in his *Memoirs*, written late in his life, after he had settled in the United States. (He died in New York in 1838.) “As fast as I wrote the words,” wrote da Ponte, “Mozart wrote the music, and it was all finished in six weeks. [The Overture, however, was completed only two days before the May 1, 1786 premiere.] The lucky star of Mozart willed an opportune moment and permitted me to carry the manuscript directly to the Emperor. ‘What’s this?’ said Joseph to me. ‘I have already forbidden the German company to give this play, *Figaro*.’ ‘I know,’ I replied, ‘but in turning it into an opera, I have cut out whole scenes, shortened others, and been careful everywhere to omit anything that might shock the conventionalities and good taste. In a word, I have made a work worthy of the theater honored by His Majesty’s protection. As far as I can judge, it seems to me a masterpiece.’ ‘Very well,’ said the Emperor. ‘I trust your taste and prudence. Send the score to the copyists.’”

The premiere of *Figaro* was set for May 1, 1786 in Vienna’s Burgtheater. Opera was Mozart’s first love and his highest professional ambition, and he threw himself completely into the work’s preparations. Michael Kelly, the English tenor who sang the roles of Don Basilio and Don Curzio in the first performance, recalled that he would “never forget Mozart’s little animated countenance when lighted up with the glowing rays of genius; it is as impossible to describe as it would be to paint sunbeams.” The premiere went on as scheduled, and it proved to be a fine success — the audience demanded the immediate encores of so many numbers that the performance lasted nearly twice as long as anticipated. “Never was anything more complete than the triumph of Mozart and his *Nozze di Figaro*,” reported Kelly. Intrigues against both Mozart and da Ponte, however, managed to divert the public’s attention to other operas, and *The Marriage of Figaro* was seen only eight times more during the year. It was not given in Vienna at all in 1787, though its stunning success in Prague led to the commissioning of *Don Giovanni* for that city. It was revived in Vienna in 1789 at the request of Emperor Joseph II (Mozart and da Ponte were commissioned to write *Così fan tutte* as a result of its success), by which time it had also been staged in Italy and Germany. Performances followed in Paris (1793), Amsterdam (1794), Madrid (1802), Budapest (1812), London (1812) and New York (1824), and *The Marriage of Figaro* became an integral part of the operatic repertory during the following years. In the biographical sketch of Mozart that the French novelist and music lover Stendhal published in 1815, he wrote of the essential quality that continues to distinguish *The Marriage of Figaro* as one of the supreme masterworks of musical theater: “Mozart, with his overwhelmingly sensitive nature, has transformed into real emotions the superficial inclinations that amuse Beaumarchais’ easy-going inhabitants of [Count Almaviva’s castle] Aguas Frescas.... All the characters have been filled with feeling and passion. Mozart’s opera is a sublime mixture of wit and melancholy that has no equal.”

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Mozart’s opera continues the story of Beaumarchais told by Rossini in *The Barber of Seville*, in which the titular

Figaro, the city's factotum, helps to foil the plan of Doctor Bartolo to wed his own ward, Rosina, so that the young Count Almaviva can take the girl as his bride. In appreciation, the Count hires Figaro as his personal valet. *The Marriage of Figaro* takes place several years after the Almavivas' marriage, by which time the Count has tired of his consort and frequently exercised his *droit de seigneur*, the feudal right that allowed the lord of the manor to take his pleasure with any female tenant of his estate. Rosina, now the Countess Almaviva, longs for her husband's lost affection. The opera opens on the wedding day of Figaro and his bride, Susanna, the Countess' maid.

## Act I

A half-furnished room in Count Almaviva's castle near Seville

Count Almaviva has assigned Figaro and Susanna a room in the castle which they are to occupy after their wedding. Figaro is measuring the chamber to see where the bed will fit while Susanna examines her new hat in a mirror. Figaro comments that theirs is the best room in the castle, convenient to both the Count and the Countess, but Susanna reminds him that it is equally handy for Almaviva to continue the amorous advances that he has recently been making upon her. Susanna tells Figaro not to doubt her devotion to him, and she leaves to answer the Countess' call. Figaro vows to have some fun with his libidinous master, and he runs off. Doctor Bartolo enters with the housekeeper, Marcellina, who claims that she will break up the impending wedding unless Figaro repays a loan she made to him, the collateral for which was the valet's own hand in marriage. Bartolo proclaims his delight at the prospect of revenging himself on Figaro by marrying him off to the aging Marcellina. Bartolo leaves as Susanna returns, and she and Marcellina have a catty exchange before the housekeeper storms off. Next to arrive is Cherubino, a lusty young page who is madly in love with all women, especially his godmother, the Countess. He has been biding his time, however, in a dalliance with Barbarina, the daughter of Antonio, the gardener, but he was apprehended in that venture the day before by the Count, and ordered to leave the castle. Cherubino laments his anticipated exile, and then sings a song in praise of love.

The Count enters unexpectedly to continue his advances to Susanna; Cherubino takes cover behind a large chair. Hardly has the Count begun his proposition for a moonlight meeting in the garden than Don Basilio, the castle's music master and resident gossip-monger, is heard approaching. Cherubino deftly scampers into the seat of the chair as the Count ducks behind it; Susanna covers the page with a dress. Basilio presses the Count's suit upon Susanna, telling her that she would be better off with a generous lord than a whipper-snapper page boy, who, he adds, was seen lurking suspiciously near her room. When Basilio recounts the rumor that Cherubino has also approached the Countess, the Count leaps from his hiding place, and insists that the page be driven out of the castle at once. The Count uses the dress in the chair to demonstrate how he had found Cherubino hidden under a table cloth in Barbarina's room only yesterday, and the page, once again, is uncovered in an embarrassing situation. Susanna nearly faints when the Count accuses her of being a brazen hussy; she protests her innocence. The Count suddenly realizes that Cherubino has heard his own incriminating words to Susanna, but before he can deal with that matter, Figaro leads in a chorus of peasants. They praise the Count for abolishing his *droit de seigneur*, though his private actions with Susanna contradict his public statements. Figaro asks him to bless their marriage by placing a veil on Susanna's head, but the Count avoids the issue by ordering that the ceremony be delayed. After the chorus marches off, the Count returns to Cherubino, whom he commands to leave immediately to join the army in Seville. Act I closes as Figaro lightheartedly chides Cherubino about the rigors of military life.

## Act II

The Countess' boudoir

The Countess, alone, grieves over her husband's lost love. Susanna enters followed soon by Figaro, who reveals a plan intended both to chastise the Count for his unseemly behavior toward Susanna and to distract him so that the marriage can proceed as planned. He has sent an anonymous note to the Count claiming (falsely) that the Countess is to meet a lover in the garden that evening. Further, the Count has been led to believe (also falsely) that Susanna will keep an assignation with him. Cherubino, not yet departed for his military service, is to be disguised as Susanna. Figaro goes off and Cherubino enters, eager to share his latest love song with the ladies. He agrees to Figaro's charade, and Susanna starts to help him undress. When she goes to fetch a garment, the Count is heard knocking loudly at the door. Cherubino dives into a dressing room, and the Countess nervously admits her husband. A sound from the closet prompts him to accuse her of concealing a lover there. She tells him that it is only Susanna, but her refusal to unlock the dressing room further enflames his jealousy. He angrily departs to get tools to pry the door open, taking the Countess with him.

Susanna has returned unnoticed to the boudoir during their exchange, and she immediately surmises what has happened. She releases Cherubino, who escapes by jumping from a window into the garden below, and she takes his place in the dressing room. When the Count and Countess return, the Countess confesses that it is, indeed, Cherubino in the dressing room, and in a disheveled state, at that. The Count advances with his sword drawn, and both he and his wife are astonished when Susanna demurely steps out of the inner chamber. The Count, baffled,

mumbles an apology to his wife, who uneasily passes the incident off as a test of his faith in her. Figaro arrives, announcing that it is time for the wedding to begin. The Count questions him about the unsigned note that he has received, but the valet denies any knowledge of it. Suddenly Antonio appears, furious that someone has vaulted into his prized carnations. Figaro claims that it was he who jumped from the room, saying that he was conferring with Susanna and became confused by the Count's clamorous entry. Antonio then hands over some papers that the man dropped upon landing, which the Count grabs and discovers to be Cherubino's commission. Figaro cleverly explains that he was taking the commission to have the required official seal affixed to it. The riotous confusion of Act II reaches its peak when Marcellina, Bartolo and Basilio storm in, boisterously claiming that Figaro must cancel his wedding to Susanna and instead marry Marcellina to settle her claim. The Count says that he will judge the matter in due course.

Act III  
A large hall in the castle

The Count is musing over the situation when Susanna enters. She tells him that she is now willing to meet him in exchange for the dowry he promised, which she will use to pay off Marcellina so that she can marry Figaro herself. Figaro comes in, and when the Count overhears their whispered exchange he realizes that he is the butt of their plot. They depart, and the Count vents his rage over being tricked by his servants. Marcellina and Bartolo enter, accompanied by Figaro and the lawyer Don Curzio. Curzio has reviewed Marcellina's suit against Figaro, and decreed that Figaro must marry her. In the heated discussion that follows, Figaro is revealed to be the long lost son of Marcellina; Bartolo is his father. Susanna returns to find Figaro embracing Marcellina, and her anger at seeing her fiancé in the arms of her supposed rival quickly changes to happiness when she learns what has happened. The Count fumes over his ill fortune while Marcellina and Bartolo decide that the day's wedding must be a double one. All exit.

Barbarina and Cherubino appear for a brief exchange in which she tells of her intent to dress him as a girl so that he can join a chorus of peasant lasses who are going to serenade the Countess. The Countess enters and sings of her longing for the faded days of youthful love and her sadness at being reduced to stratagem in an attempt to reclaim her marriage. Susanna comes in, and she and the Countess concoct a letter saying that the maid will meet the Count that evening in the garden. Their plot hinges on exchanging clothes, so that the Count's tryst will actually be with his own wife and not with Susanna. They seal the letter with a pin, which the Count is to return if he accepts the invitation. The peasant girls (and the disguised Cherubino) enter bearing flowers, and present them to the Countess during their song of praise for her. The Count has meanwhile learned from Antonio that Cherubino is still lurking about the castle. They burst in, head straight for the page, and pull off his headdress and substitute for it a soldier's hat. The Count's vow to punish Cherubino is cut short by Barbarina, who claims that the Count has promised her anything her heart desires during the times that she has entertained him. What she wants, she says, is Cherubino for a husband. Figaro enters with the announcement that it is time to begin the celebration. The wedding procession enters. Two young girls bear Susanna's veil, which the Count takes and places on the bride's head. She slips the assignation note to him, and he pricks his finger on the pin. The Count promises a splendid evening of festivities.

Act IV  
The garden

Barbarina is searching desperately for the pin that the Count has given her to return to Susanna to acknowledge their rendezvous. Figaro and Marcellina appear. Figaro learns from Barbarina that she was carrying the pin to Susanna, and he concludes that he is to be cuckolded on his wedding night. He runs off to plot revenge. After Marcellina and Basilio comment on the situation, Figaro returns and delivers a diatribe about women. Susanna and the Countess appear, disguised in each other's clothes. Figaro hides from them in an arbor, where Susanna spots him. She sings ambiguously of her approaching bliss, and then ducks into hiding. Figaro assumes that he is undone. Cherubino barges in, and pesters "Susanna" (i.e., the Countess in disguise) for a kiss. The Count is heard approaching for his tryst with Susanna, and his arrival chases Cherubino into the bushes. The Count begins his seduction of "Susanna," but she flees when Figaro emerges from the arbor; the Count departs in another direction. A voice from the bushes warns Figaro to keep quiet, and he recognizes it as Susanna's. He grasps the situation at once, and begs his fiancée's forgiveness for his jealous suspicions. The Count returns, and Figaro continues the charade by proposing passionate love to "the Countess" (i.e., Susanna in disguise). The Count calls everyone together to witness this infidelity. He finally receives his proper comeuppance when the Countess again appears and reveals her true identity. The Count asks her forgiveness, which she graciously grants. The opera ends with general rejoicing and happiness.

