

Characterization of Cherubino in the Aria "Voi che sapete"

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Abstract: Cherubino, a young male servant, plays an indispensable role in "The Marriage of Figaro." As the most important character outside the main cast, his appearances almost span the entire opera, making his character highly worthy of study. Current research primarily focuses on vocal techniques and how to interpret the aria "Voi che sapete," with some delving into the background of the work and the composer's life but still not deeply enough. This paper analyzes Cherubino's aria "Voi che sapete" from the perspectives of drama, music, and performance. The author will conduct a comprehensive analysis of Cherubino's character through examining the conflicts within the drama. "Voi che sapete," as a classical aria, employs a wide range of musical expressions, and this article will focus on the theoretical analysis of the music. The performance analysis section will also compare works performed in different contexts, ultimately allowing readers to gain a deeper understanding of the character, experiencing his innocent yet yearning love.

Keywords: Mozart, The Marriage of Figaro, Voi che sapete, Cherubino.

1. Introduction

Cherubino, a young male servant in the service of the Count in Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro", is characterized by his wit and charm. "Voi che sapete," a mezzo-soprano piece, fully showcases Cherubino's humorous, sincere, impulsive, and amorous qualities. Current research on this opera, particularly this aria, tends to focus on vocal techniques. For example, Shan Hongjian's research highlights the importance of adjusting singing techniques for interpreting Mozart's comic operas and points out differences between Chinese and Western vocalists [1]. Similarly, Wang Xiaohui, Zhang Runyu, Zhang Wen, and Xiang Weibing have all discussed the principles of singing and how performance experience shapes the interpretation of the piece [2, 3, 4, 5]. Wang Hongyue and Zhang Xiangming, along with Liao Cilin, have analyzed the technical challenges of singing the aria, offering insights for vocal music education [6, 7].

Some domestic studies also touch upon the work's historical context, costumes, and the theater. Ma Yingyi and Lu Jianmin explored Mozart's life and the social background that shaped Cherubino's character [8, 9]. Li Zhaoxin discussed "trouser roles" and compared musical examples of Cherubino's performances in different works [10]. Wang Hemeng examined how the joy inherent in comic opera is expressed [11]. Foreign research has been more diverse. Jocelyn Ho analyzed how the musical climax resonates with the audience [12]. Hadlock discussed the portrayal of male roles by female performers, focusing on the shift from castrato singers to women in trousers after the decline of the

castrati [13]. Shaftel analyzed the resolution of the second act, arguing that, as a comic opera, it maintains a sense of moderation for the audience [14].

This paper elucidates the characterization of Cherubino from the perspectives of drama, music, and performance. First, by exploring the plot of Act 2, Scene 3, the relationships between the characters, and the lyrics, the portrayal of Cherubino is analyzed. Second, the music and its relationship to the lyrics are examined. Finally, we explore the technical challenges of singing this aria and compare different singers' interpretations.

2. Dramatic Analysis

2.1. Plot of Act 2, Scene 3

In this scene, multiple character conflicts arise. The story unfolds in the Countess Rosina's room, where she laments her husband's unfaithfulness and lost love. Susanna and Figaro then enter, plotting to punish the Count by having Cherubino impersonate Susanna in the garden for a rendezvous. Cherubino, who has been given a military order after being caught flirting with Barbarina, appears dejected. He performs the aria "Voi che sapete" to express his confusion about love, seeking validation from the women present.

As the conflict escalates, the Count becomes suspicious after receiving a forged letter suggesting his wife's infidelity. Cherubino must hide while the Countess and the Count argue. To escape, Cherubino switches places with Susanna and jumps out of a window.

This sequence is full of twists and turns, adding to the dramatic tension. Cherubino's character is revealed as amorous and impulsive, and the ensuing events portray him as a comedic yet central figure.

2.2. Character and Relationships

Five key characters appear in this scene: Figaro, Susanna, the Count, the Countess, and Cherubino. Each has their own personal conflicts, which connect them closely. Figaro and Susanna, the soon-to-be-married couple, are embroiled in the Count's attempts to seduce Susanna. This creates the main conflict.

Cherubino, a servant in the Count's household, longs for love and is romantically inclined toward most of the women in the opera. This causes tension with the Count, who views the women as his property. Cherubino also has feelings for his godmother, the Countess, adding another layer of complexity to his relationships with the other characters.

2.3. Cherubino's Aria, "Voi che sapete"

In this scene, Cherubino enters the Countess's room in military uniform, accompanied by Susanna playing the six-string guitar, and sings about his emotions. The first line, "Voi che sapete che cosa è amor," expresses his desire to understand whether his feelings of love are shared. The next line, "Donne, vedete s'io l'ho nel cor," conveys his anxious yearning for acknowledgment.

The lyrics, beginning in stanza 21, describe a shift from fiery passion to feelings of coldness, contrasting opposing emotions to depict the complexity of Cherubino's experience. The recurring theme of "I don't know why" underscores his confusion and longing for love.

From section 62 onward, the music mirrors the first section, but expands on the theme, emphasizing Cherubino's inner turmoil. "Voi che sapete" vividly portrays his naivety and yearning for love, making it a key aria for understanding his character.

3. Music Analysis

3.1. Structure of "Voi che sapete"

The piece follows a ternary form with a reprise. It is composed in 4/2 time. The A section is in B-flat major, while the B section starts in F major, transitions through A-flat major, shifts to C minor, and concludes in G minor. The A' section, functioning as the reprise, returns to B-flat major. The structure can be outlined as follows: Introduction (bars 1-8), Theme A section (bars 9-20), B section (bars 21-61), Recapitulation A' section (bars 62-80). (Figure 1)

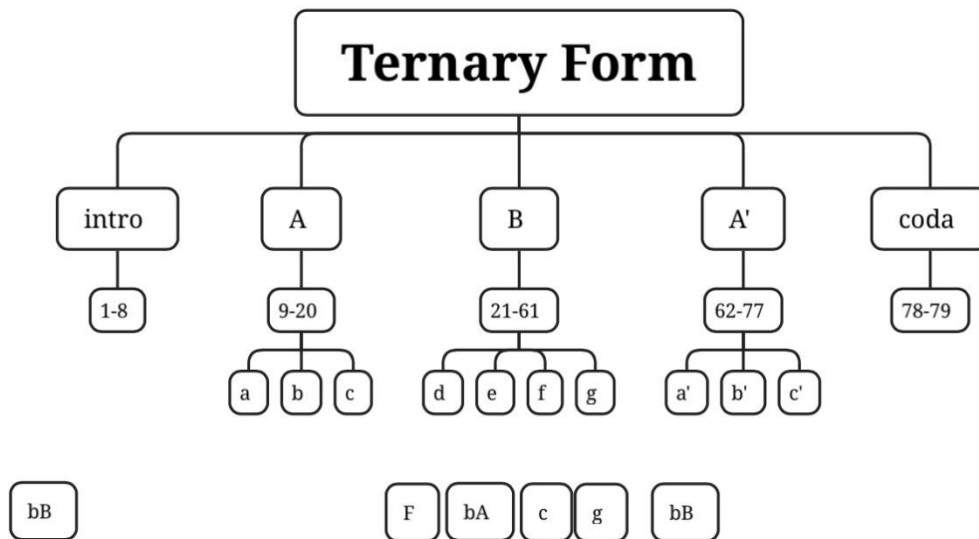


Figure 1: Musical structure of "Voi che sapete"

In the introduction, marked *p* (piano, soft), the left hand of the piano plays staccato sixteenth notes as accompaniment, while the right-hand melody is legato, connected and flowing, evoking a playful and lively mood. This dynamic reflects Cherubino's emotional fluctuations before the aria begins, setting the stage for his characterization.

The melody in section A primarily moves by step, with occasional skips. Semitone progressions are used to convey the uncertainty of youthful emotions, particularly in the phrase expressing Cherubino's mood. The frequent staccato notes in the accompaniment enhance the sense of nervousness. Combined with the narrative tone of the lyrics, the melody helps portray the innocence and hope for understanding.

In section B, frequent changes in rhythm, ornamentation, and tonality illustrate the constantly shifting inner world of a young person. The left-hand accompaniment continues with staccato notes, while the right hand introduces rich chordal textures, intensifying the emotional fluctuations and excitement.

The reprise, A', is almost identical to section A but expands the scale and repeats the phrase "Do you understand my feelings?" three times. This repetition highlights Cherubino's longing for recognition and his naive understanding of love.

3.2. Relationship Between Lyrics and Melody

In bar 13, when the lyrics express "Do you understand my feelings?" chromatic steps are introduced to emphasize the uncertainty of Cherubino's emotions about love. By bar 17, the melody features more leaps, symbolizing the anxious beating of his heart.

The melody in section B mirrors the rapid, fluctuating breathing of a person in emotional tension. Ornamentation is added at the ends of phrases, further emphasizing the instability of the character's emotions. In bar 53, the alternation between rhythmic patterns—four sixteenth notes, two sixteenth notes followed by an eighth note, and an eighth note followed by two sixteenth notes—all land on nearly the same pitch. This rhythmic instability aligns with the lyrics, which describe the unexplained sighs, restless nights, fear, and voluntary suffering that accompany youthful yearning and uncertainty.

4. Performance Analysis

4.1. Vocal Techniques

The melody of "Voi che sapete" is delicate and beautiful, accompanied by a lively and textured instrumental arrangement. The piece simulates Cherubino's rapid heartbeat and breathing through its melody, dynamics, and transitions between legato and staccato, mirroring his tumultuous emotions. Given that Cherubino sings in the presence of his godmother and Susanna, his nervousness is heightened. The use of both stepwise and leaping melodic motion reflects how Cherubino "speaks" his emotions aloud while quietly encouraging himself. Therefore, a performance that is too flat or straightforward would fail to fully capture and convey the depth of Cherubino's intense emotions.

In his research, Shan Hongjian noted that due to natural differences between Chinese and Western singers, achieving a slight vibrato or tremolo effect can be a challenge when performing this work [1]. Additionally, the piece involves numerous chromatic passages, making precise control over intonation essential. Mastering the chromatic half-steps is crucial for clearly conveying Cherubino's inner emotional state.

The Italian lyrics also require careful attention to pronunciation. Achieving clarity while avoiding rigidity is important. As Cherubino is a teenager, despite the piece being in the mezzo-soprano range, the performance should remain light and avoid excessive heaviness. Stable breath control is key to conveying the emotional depth of the piece. Many phrases end with a one-beat rest, requiring the singer to breathe quickly and effectively to avoid running out of air before the next phrase. Especially in fast, continuous sections with no breaks, singers must take large breaths to support the phrases. When breath is insufficient, quick and efficient breathing is essential.

4.2. Comparison of Performances

A comparison of Cecilia Bartoli's and Rinat Shaham's interpretations of "Voi che sapete" reveals notable differences in their approach [15,16]. Bartoli's version, featuring piano accompaniment, contrasts with Shaham's 2006 Royal Opera House performance, which is accompanied by a full orchestra. The orchestral version provides richer harmonies and a more layered auditory experience, enhancing the sense of tension in the music compared to the simpler piano accompaniment.

In terms of vocal performance, the two singers display distinct styles. Cecilia Bartoli focuses on vocal precision and technical display. Her steady breathing supports each phrase, resulting in a calm and controlled performance. While she still employs dynamics and musical expression, her portrayal draws the audience's attention primarily to her vocal technique.

On the other hand, Rinat Shaham's performance is a fully staged opera production. She incorporates lighter tremolos and more pronounced dynamics, making her portrayal of Cherubino more youthful and expressive. Her use of tremolo adds a sense of nervous tension, effectively engaging the audience with Cherubino's longing for love.

5. Conclusion

By analyzing the melody, rhythm, texture, form, and lyrics of "Voi che sapete", one can gain insight into Cherubino's character. He is a passionate, impulsive youth brimming with romantic aspirations. Although Mozart's aria does not showcase overt vocal virtuosity, it poses challenges due to its delicate and nuanced emotional shifts. As a result, an accurate interpretation of this piece requires a thorough understanding of its narrative and emotional context.

Because "The Marriage of Figaro" contains rich, subtle emotions, many scholars have pointed out that focusing solely on vocal technique is insufficient to fully interpret the aria. The author believes that future research on "The Marriage of Figaro" should delve deeper into theoretical analysis. Performers can only deliver an accurate interpretation by gaining a deeper understanding of the work's background and context.

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