



The Marriage of Figaro

EDUCATIONAL STUDY GUIDE

THE BASICS

The Marriage of Figaro (*Le nozze di Figaro*)

Premiered on May 1, 1786 at the Burgtheater in Vienna, Austria

Music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte (1749-1838)

Based on Pierre Beaumarchais's comedy

La Folle Journée, ou Le Mariage de Figaro

CHARACTERS

Name	Description	Voice Part
Figaro	The count's valet	Bass-baritone
Susanna	The countess's maid	Soprano
Dr. Bartolo	Doctor/lawyer from Seville	Bass
Marcellina	Bartolo's housekeeper	Mezzo-soprano
Cherubino	A young page	Mezzo-soprano
Count Almaviva	Employer of Susanna & Figaro	Baritone
Don Basilio	A music teacher	Tenor
Countess Almaviva	The count's wife	Soprano
Antonio	The count's gardener & Susanna's uncle	Tenor
Barbarina	Antonio's daughter & Susanna's cousin	Soprano
Don Curzio	A judge	Tenor

SYNOPSIS

ACT I

In a storeroom that they have been allocated, Figaro and Susanna, servants to the Count and Countess Almaviva, are preparing for their wedding. Figaro is furious when he learns from his bride that the Count has tried to seduce her. He's determined to have revenge on his master. Dr. Bartolo appears with his former housekeeper, Marcellina, who is equally determined to marry Figaro. She has a contract: Figaro must marry her or repay the money he borrowed from her. When Marcellina runs into Susanna, the two rivals exchange insults. Susanna returns to her room, and the Cherubino rushes in. Finding Susanna alone, he speaks of his love for all the women in the house, particularly the Countess. When the Count appears, again trying to seduce Susanna, Cherubino hides. The Count then conceals himself when Basilio approaches. Basilio tells Susanna that everyone knows Cherubino has a crush on the Countess. Outraged, the Count steps forward, but he becomes even more enraged when he discovers Cherubino and realizes that the boy has overheard his attempts to seduce Susanna. He chases Cherubino into the great hall, encountering Figaro, who has assembled the entire household to sing the praises of their master. Put on the spot, the Count is forced to bless the marriage of Figaro and Susanna. To spite them and to silence Cherubino, he orders the boy to join the army without delay. Figaro sarcastically sends Cherubino off into battle.

ACT II

In her bedroom, the Countess mourns the loss of love in her life. Encouraged by Figaro and Susanna, she agrees to set a trap for her husband: they will send Cherubino, disguised as Susanna, to a rendezvous with the Count that night. At the same time, Figaro will send the Count an anonymous note suggesting that the Countess is having an affair with another man. Cherubino arrives, and the two women dress him in women's clothes. When Susanna steps into an adjoining room, the Count knocks and is annoyed to find the door locked. Cherubino hides himself in the dressing room, and the Countess lets her husband in. When there's a sudden noise from behind the door, the Count is skeptical of his wife's story that Susanna is in there. Taking his wife with him, he leaves to get tools to force the door. Meanwhile, Susanna helps Cherubino escape through the window. When the Count and Countess return, both are astonished when Susanna emerges from the room. Figaro arrives to begin the wedding festivities, but the Count questions him about the note he received. Figaro successfully eludes questioning until the Antonio bursts in, complaining that someone has jumped from the window. Figaro feigns a limp and pretends that it was he who jumped. As soon as Antonio leaves, Bartolo, Marcellina, and Basilio appear, putting their case to the Count and holding a contract that obliges Figaro to marry Marcellina. Delighted, the Count declares that Figaro must honor his agreement and that his wedding to Susanna will be postponed.

ACT III

The Count reflects on the current situation when Susanna enters. She says she's prepared to meet him later that evening in the garden if he will give her the dowry he had promised. With the dowry, Susanna will be able to pay off Marcellina and marry Figaro. Susanna leaves and meets Figaro and assures him they will win their case. The Count overhears and becomes infuriated that his servants enjoy a happiness that he does not. Marcellina, accompanied by Don Curzio, demands that Figaro pay his debt or marry her at once. Figaro replies that he can't marry without the consent of his parents for whom he's been searching for years. When he reveals a birthmark on his arm, Marcellina realizes that he is her long-lost son, fathered by Bartolo. The Countess is determined to go through with the conspiracy against her husband, and she and Susanna compose a letter to him confirming the meeting with Susanna that evening in the garden. Cherubino, now dressed as a girl, appears with his sweetheart, Barbarina, the daughter of Antonio. Antonio has found Cherubino's cap, and reveals the young man. The Count is furious to discover that Cherubino has disobeyed him and is still in the house. Barbarina insists that she wants to marry Cherubino, and the Count reluctantly agrees. The household assembles for Figaro and Susanna's wedding. While dancing with the

Count, Susanna hands him the note, sealed with a pin, confirming their tryst that evening.

ACT IV

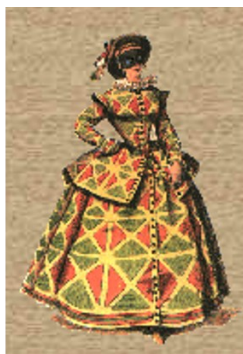
At night in the garden, Barbarina despairs that she has lost the pin the Count has asked her to take back to Susanna as a sign that he's received her letter. When Figaro and Marcellina appear, Barbarina tells them about the planned rendezvous between the Count and Susanna. Thinking that his bride is unfaithful, Figaro curses all women. He hides when Susanna and the Countess arrive, dressed in each other's clothes. Alone, Susanna sings of love. She knows that Figaro is listening and enjoys making him think that she's about to betray him with the Count. She then conceals herself, in time to see Cherubino try to seduce the disguised Countess. When the Count arrives looking for Susanna, he chases the boy away. Figaro, by now realizing what is going on, joins in the joke and declares his passion for Susanna in her Countess disguise. The Count returns to discover Figaro with his wife, or so he thinks, and explodes with rage. At that moment, the real Countess steps forward and reveals her identity. Ashamed, the Count asks her pardon. Ultimately, she forgives him, and the entire household celebrates the day's happy ending.

What is Opera Buffa?

Opera buffa is an Italian term meaning "comic opera" which describes the Italian comic operas of the early 1700s to mid 1800s, such as Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* and Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*. Opera buffa originated in Naples, Italy and developed from the intermezzi (short comic operas that were performed between the acts of more serious, opera seria). Opera seria dealt mainly with subjects of interest to its audience of kings and nobility, like gods, wars, and royal life. Opera buffa, in contrast, usually involved relatable situations and comic characters derived from commedia dell'arte. Commedia dell'arte ("comedy of professional artists"), is a type of comedy developed in 16th and 17th century Italy, characterized by improvised text based on plot outlines (scenarios), physical comedy, and various stock characters.

Characteristics of Opera Buffa:

- Comic stock characters influenced by commedia dell'arte. **(See the images below)**
- Everyday settings and relatable situations.
- Simple vocal writing.
- Patter song: A comic song which is sung at a high speed with a rapid succession of rhythmic patterns in which each syllable of text corresponds to one note. The text is often filled with difficult, tongue-twisting lyrics. **(Listen to Bartolo's "La vendetta" on the Spotify playlist)**
- Set numbers are linked by recitativo secco: a dialogue that, rather than sung as an aria, is sung with the rhythms of ordinary speech, by using only a few pitches. Accompaniment is by continuo, which is usually a harpsichord.
- Ensemble finale: A long, formally organized conclusion to an opera act which includes all principal characters. **(Listen to "Esci, omai, garzon malnato" on the Spotify playlist)**



LISTENING GUIDE

Overture

- The overture is an introductory piece of music that gets the audience's attention and sets up the energy of the story you are about to see and hear.
- Often, overtures contain music and melodies from the opera. But overtures from the 1700's don't do it. Instead, they often contain music inspired the story of the opera that gets the audience ready for what they will see onstage.
- Listen for the fast strings alternating with the full orchestra sounds including festival trumpets. These two sounds contrast each other throughout the whole piece.

“Non più andrai farfollone amoroso” (“You are no longer an amorous butterfly”)

- In this aria, Figaro sings about Cherubino going off to the army, teasing him about how different things will be from his current life when he's off fighting.
- Listening to the rhythms in the orchestra and the voice as the emulate military drums.

“Giunse alfin il momento...Deh, vieni, non tardar” (“At last comes the moment...Oh, come, don't be late”)

- In this recitative and aria, Susanna is in the garden, dressed as the Countess. She knows Figaro is hiding in the bushes and she sings this beautiful song bidding her lover to come to her. Figaro hears but wrongly assumes she is singing to the Count.
- Listen for the differences between the aria and the recitative. Which one sounds like a conversation and which one sounds more like a song?

Spotify Playlist for all Listening Examples (make sure to turn off the “shuffle” feature):

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4LL67Z8jngmGoIVp7yg62P?si=7fc7edf594434a6e>

ACTIVITIES

Activity #1: The Five C's

CHARACTERS: Were they interesting? Believable? Are their actions, words, and thoughts consistent?

CONFLICT: What conflicts were established? How were they resolved?

CLIMAX: How did the conflict lead to the climax of the opera?

CONCLUSION: What is the conclusion of the opera? Was it consistent? Satisfying? Believable?

CONTEXT: What are the historical, physical, and emotional settings? What about the sets and costumes?

Using the Five C's, have your students respond to the following:

- Re-tell the story of *The Marriage of Figaro*.
- What were some of the recurring themes in the opera?
- If you were the stage director, would you have done something differently? Why?
- What were you expecting? Did it live up to your expectations?
- What did you think of the singers' portrayal of their characters?

Activity #2: Writing a Letter

Just like Susanna and the Countess write a letter in Act Three, have your students choose a moment in the story and practicing writing a letter from one character to another. Explore how that character would be feeling about the events of the wedding day.

Activity #3: Design the Set

Imagine you are the set designer for *The Marriage of Figaro*. Create your vision of what the Count's house looks like, both on the inside and the outside.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

This study guide was compiled from the following sources:

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New Grove Dictionary of Music, North Carolina Symphony, Opera Omaha, Pittsburgh Opera, *Schmopera*, and Wikipedia.