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MLA 102

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Disharmony in Basilio's Aria

The Marriage of Figaro is widely regarded as one of the best operas ever conceived. The heart of the story is formed by protagonists trying to find a way out of the deplorable practice of *jus primae noctis* or the *right of the first night*. The scene between Basilio and Bartolo in Act IV is presented as a justification for this so-called feudal right, and Basilio's aria is performed in all its gleeful glory. Such a comedic treatment of the subject undermines the seriousness of the issue and delivers a message to the audience to remain silent in the face of injustice. By examining this scene, we can understand how Basilio's aria supports unethical aristocratic privilege and is a disservice to an otherwise emotionally moving operatic experience.

The scene serves as a piece of morally repugnant advice to the general populace, via the example of Figaro, on how not to provoke the ire of powerful men by keeping mum even when their dignity is violated. The scene begins when Bartolo asks Basilio if Figaro should respect the feudal right of the Count and not expose him for his transgressions against Figaro's wife. The question is asked from an obvious sense of seeking validation for Figaro's anger and highlights the injustice and harassment suffered by the young couple. However, Basilio turns the whole argument on its head by saying,

Many a man has likewise suffered, so why

should he (Figaro) object? And consider what he can
 gain? In this world it was always dangerous to
 oppose the great; they give very little and
 always win. (De Ponte et al. 105)

Clearly, Basilio's words of caution are not directed towards people like the Count to refrain from abusing their power but towards the common men like Figaro to be fearful of the consequences of going against the mighty. Basilio trivializes the subject by suggesting that Figaro should not make the whole matter a big deal. Instead, he should make his peace, like many men before him, with the fact that the Count is well within his rights to bed his lawfully wedded wife on the first night. He reinforces the belief that raising a voice against the wrongdoings of the ruling class can only prove to be deleterious for an individual, and the best course of action is to be reticent in such affairs.

Immediately following Basilio's advice is a distasteful tale from his younger days on how playing the fool can save a person from many troubles. In particular, it is the treatment of this aria that makes it cringeworthy. The anecdote is metaphorical in nature and describes how

disgrace, danger,
 shame, and death,
 may be avoided
 with the skin of an ass. (106)

It is a piece of advice to the public to act nescient whenever in trouble to mitigate the situation. Applied in Figaro's case, Basilio's conceited pragmatism suggests that he bear humiliation and

agony in the guise of ignorance to prevent mortal danger. The peppy tone of this aria accompanied by cheerful music is the most troublesome part of the scene. This thematically discordant aria of Basilio vitiates the viewer's mood, who has just gone through the pain and shock of being cheated in the arias of the Countess and Figaro, respectively. The comic relief this aria is supposed to provide, belittles the trials and tribulations of Figaro and Susanna. It gives the impression that problems can be avoided if a person just learns to suppress his/her conscience and let the authority prevail! This aria's happy and loud rendition obscenely conveys the message that a person should seek refuge in ignorance and cowardice when faced with challenging circumstances.

In conclusion, the timing of this aria at one of the most crucial junctures in the story cannot be more out-of-sync with the rest of the opera. This is perhaps why many performances of *The Marriage of Figaro* completely omit Basilio's aria and maintain the atmosphere of seriousness as required by the last act. All in all, the iniquitous advice of turning a blind eye towards malpractices of aristocracy by acting like a fool is nothing but serving the malignant agenda of the establishment. *The Marriage of Figaro* beautifully stirs up human emotions towards the plight of women and commoners, and both the opera and the world would do better by the exclusion of Basilio's aria and his mentality.

Work Cited

De Ponte, Lorenzo, et al. *Mozart's The Marriage of Figaro*. Edited by Burton D. Fisher, Opera

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