The way the music proceeds, in fact, is by building up tensions and immediately releasing them, those releases themselves becoming a source for new tensions. The music is, literally, progressive – not in the sense that it is modern for its time; but in that it is built so that it never relaxes, because each phrase is always pressing forward into the next.

But doesn't all music work like that? Am I merely imagining this particular source of tension? Look at another Mozart overture, superficially built on the same lines – that to *Così fan tutte*. It begins quite differently; here, indeed, we have the conventional loud opening in the easiest of harmonic styles, merely alternating between tonic and dominant. But even when it starts sounding a bit like *Figaro* – in the following fast section – the likeness is only superficial. The actual musical phrases, to be sure, are not at all unlike those of *Figaro* – a soft rapid movement round a note followed by loud passages with trumpets and drums. But the tension of the *Figaro* harmony is not in the *Così* overture at all – in *Così*, the strings frankly settle down to an easy um-cha-cha-cha rhythm, and the woodwind merely chuckle above them.

Or for an even clearer example of the way tension is built into the music of *Figaro*, compare its opening scene with that of *Così*. *Così* actually begins with a quarrel; and here, at any rate, you might expect the music to be tense and energetic. Not at all: the opening tune blandly outlines the common chord:



Turn in contrast to *Figaro*. The curtain goes up. A domestic scene: a man measuring a room, a girl trying on a hat. Nothing like a quarrel or even an argument. But listen to the music. Every phrase has a discord built into it – this sort of thing:



and later this:



And by such means a sense of tension is continually kept up throughout the whole duet.

You will have seen for some time what I'm driving at. I believe *Figaro* to be so satisfying an experience not just because of the tunes or the jokes, agreeable as they are. Rather it is because the texture of the music is so highly wrought – works at so high a level of tension – that the energy thus generated presses us through the opera's considerable length with an unremitting sense of expectation and delight. The opera remains exciting because of the tensions generated by the music.

Why, after all, did the audience at the first dress rehearsal of Act One, in 1786, go so wild at the end of 'Non più andrai, farfallone amoroso' ('No more, you amorous butterfly') [16], its final number? Of course, it's something of an applause-catcher in itself, with its trumpets and drums and shouts of 'Cherubino alla vittoria!' ('Cherubino, on to victory'). But in its context it carries a more formidable effect.

Every number in the first act has been pitched at a high level of excitement. To start with, over half of them are dramatic ensembles of one sort or another, in which the action sweeps forward. But even the solo songs are highly energized. The elegant measured rhythm of the minuet becomes explosive in Figaro's 'Se vuol ballare, signor Contino' ('If, my dear Count, / You feel like dancing') [7]. Horns and plucked strings combine to paint a remarkable picture of suppressed resentment. The off-beat clarinets and chromatically rising strings of 'Non so più cosa son, cosa faccio' ('I no longer know what I am or what I'm doing') [12] vividly convey Cherubino's constant state of sensual arousal. And the trumpets and drums of Bartolo's old-fashioned peroration build up the tension of the moment when