1986

Review of Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart: "Le Nozze di Figaro"and "Don Giovanni", by Wye Jamison Allanbrook (Chicago, 1983).

John Platoff
Trinity College, john.platoff@trincoll.edu

Review

Wye Jamison Allanbrook. *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart*: Le Nozze di Figaro *and* Don Giovanni. Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1983. xii, 396 pp.; 11 figures.

John Platoff

Le Nozze di Figaro and *Don Giovanni* are two of the best-loved works in the operatic repertory, and two of the most thoroughly studied. Wye Allanbrook's book is a valuable addition to the long list of writings about these operas, notable both for its fresh critical perspective and its overall intelligence. In this study she provides a detailed and insightful critical analysis of *Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*, and her fresh perspective is that of the *topoi*, or "topics," that underlie the music of the late eighteenth century.

We owe our understanding of the concept of topics largely to Leonard Ratner, who showed the importance of these characteristic figures both to eighteenth-century theoretical writers and to composers of the period.[1] Topics are well-defined musical gestures that suggest moods or images associated in some fashion with the realm outside music itself. In Allanbrook's words, they "designate 'commonplace' musical styles or figures whose expressive connotations, derived from the circumstances in which they are habitually employed, are familiar to all." (p. 329, n. 4) The gestures and pace of the minuet, for example, symbolize the elegant world of the nobility, because the dance was understood to belong to that social class. This is true not only in pieces specifically designed for dancing, but in abstract instrumental works—or operatic numbers—as well. Similarly, the "hunting fanfare" is a topic employed in any number of Classic works, in obvious imitation of actual horn-calls associated with the hunt. Mozart's use of this figure to open his String Quintet in E-flat, K. 614, enables a listener to place the work in a general expressive framework. The Quintet is not literally about a hunt, but an audience's recognition and understanding of the figure give the music a certain rustic quality and a sense of lightheartedness and cheerful energy, which derive by analogy from an actual hunting scene.

One of the advantages of examining a musical work from the perspective of topics, as Allanbrook points out, is that they are relatively objective. Once the vocabulary of topics has been understood, it

> provides a tool for analysis which can mediate between the operas and our individual responses to them, supplying independent information about the expressive content of the arias and ensembles. For in it music and words about music are united; each musical *topos* has associations both natural and historical, which can be expressed in words, and which were tacitly shared by the eighteenth-century audience. (p. 2)

Recognition of topics thus enables a writer to "articulate within certain limits the shared response a particular passage will evoke." (p. 3)

Allanbrook's study concentrates on a particular class of topics: the rhythmic gestures of dance, which because they depict human beings in motion are especially valuable topics in opera. The various uses of gavotte, minuet, and other dances communicate information about the personality and feelings of each of the characters, as well as about their social

[1] See his *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (New York, 1980), especially pp. 9–29.

positions.[2] In addition, they create a kind of subtext for the operas, since the messages contained in the dance topics can "contradict, question, interpolate, or reinterpret" the words of the libretto. (p. 9)

The book comprises three large sections. In the first, the author outlines the variety of dances known to the late eighteenth century and spells out the social and affective connotations of each. Here she draws extensively on eighteenth-century writings, both of music theorists such as Sulzer and Koch and of writers on dance, most of them less well-known to musicians, such as Bacquoy-Guédon and von Feldenstein. While some of the dance topics are considered briefly in Ratner's book, Allanbrook's discussion is far more systematic and informative. As she demonstrates, eighteenth-century musicians employed different musical meters to express a broad range of affects. Duple meters were associated with the learned, contrapuntal style of church music, and with the most exalted feelings. Meters such as 4/2 and *alla breve* indicated the slowest and most solemn musical execution, "only useful for serious, heartfelt passions,"[3] while common time (4/4) was still serious but somewhat more neutral emotionally. Triple meters connoted simpler, more human feelings, and were linked to the *galant* style. They also spanned a broad range, from the most respectable minuet in 3/4 time to the humble and sometimes frivolous dances in 3/8. In addition, Allanbrook assesses the historical and sociological significance of the contredanse and the waltz. These two dances represented the new trend in the late eighteenth century towards simpler dances for novices, in which meter was no longer strictly connected to the expression of a particular affect. In an original and thought-provoking discussion, Allanbrook relates the rise in popularity of the contredanse and waltz to important social changes and changes in aesthetic viewpoint that were occurring at the turn of the nineteenth century.

The second and third sections of the book examine in turn *Le Nozze di Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*. Here Allanbrook uses the vocabulary of rhythmic gestures presented earlier, in addition to more familiar methods of analysis, to reach several striking conclusions. She attempts to demonstrate that the central ethos of *Figaro* is pastoral, and that, far from being an operatic watering-down of Beaumarchais's political message, Da Ponte and Mozart's opera is most centrally about the friendship between the Countess and her maid Susanna. The pastoral, with its connotations of bucolic simplicity, is suggested by several dance gestures used in the opera: the 6/8 pastorale and siciliano, the 2/4 gavotte, and especially the musette-gavotte. As Allanbrook argues, the many numbers with pastoral connotations suggest a world in which Susanna and the Countess can transcend the barrier of class to meet as equals and as friends. The heart of this world is the duet "Che soave zeffiretto," whose "pastoral text and music figure the classless, timeless meadow where two women ordinarily separated by circumstance can meet and stroll quietly together." (p. 147) And it is under the aegis of the pastoral affect, at numerous other places in the opera, that the Count's schemes are defeated by Figaro and Susanna and their allies. The argument is a provocative one, though the multiple meanings of "pastoral" are never spelled out with sufficient clarity to support fully the weight of the interpretation. We may see, for instance, why it represents a refuge from the brutal and selfish world of the Count, but it is not clear why the pastoral is "classless."

[2]An important question, which Allanbrook never answers directly, is the degree to which these rhythmic gestures inform Mozart's non-operatic music, and the operas of other composers, as well as the two works under discussion. It is not clear whether these two operas were chosen because of their particular relationship to the dance (though there is a hint of this on pp. 326–28), or simply because they were the ones she wanted to write about. More generally, neither Ratner nor other writers have clarified the precise role and importance of topics in the music of the Classic era. Allanbrook characterizes this music as "pervasively mimetic" (p. 3), but that imitation by means of topics lies at the heart of Classic music in general has merely been asserted, not yet demonstrated.

[3]F.G. Drewis, *Freundschaftliche Briefe über die Theorie der Tonkunst und Composition* (Halle, 1797), p. 25, trans. by Allanbrook, p. 19. Some writers in fact complained about the trend towards the use of *alla breve* at a faster tempo in secular pieces. (pp. 20–22) It is fascinating to see just how precise writers of the period perceived the meanings of various dance meters to be. One or another of them was constantly taking a composer to task for having written a melody unsuited for a particular meter, or having used a meter of the wrong character for a particular operatic situation.

The author's view of *Don Giovanni* is notable for its revisionist view of the central character: he is neither the noble villain nor the articulate freethinker he is frequently made out to be. While Don Giovanni is the center around whom all the other characters revolve, careful analysis reveals that he is both essentially inarticulate—Kierkegaard saw him as a kind of primitive life force—and empty. Allanbrook points out that the Don is anonymous; only once, in "Fin ch'an dal vino," does he sing a solo that is not a conscious performance or disguise. Further, Don Giovanni's obsession with seduction has a coldly automatic quality, like the need of an animal for food. This obsession makes him not so much evil or immoral, as has often been argued, as simply outside human morality.

Don Giovanni is distinguished from *Figaro* by the overshadowing presence of the supernatural (in the overture and the finale to Act II). This widening of the framework complicates matters, since the human drama is now only part of the story.

> In accommodating the divine perspective the opera has somewhat to distort our view of that small part of the world where we were formerly at home: to gain the new dimension the vivid planes of *Figaro's terra firma* must be compressed into a caricature of themselves, a shadow play. (p. 199)

The richness and complexity of the world of human morality and interaction—the world of *Figaro*—are greatly reduced, so that by comparison to the characters of *Figaro* those in *Don Giovanni* (excepting the Don himself, and perhaps Donna Elvira) have the quality of stock figures, without much depth and largely without the ability to engage our sympathies. This lack of depth has been pointed out before, particularly with respect to Donna Anna and Don Ottavio; but Allanbrook's view of the whole opera provides a powerful explanation for the phenomenon.

The analytical treatment of *Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* that comprises the heart of the book has many strengths. Despite the title of the study, Allanbrook's discussion is by no means limited to matters of rhythm; she also employs more traditional methods of harmonic, motivic, formal, and linear analysis. This flexibility is complemented by the author's concern with textual and dramatic as well as musical matters, which enables her to make many subtle points about the dramaturgy of the works in addition to correcting older misconceptions. She successfully defends, for example, the often-maligned series of arias that precede the finale to Act IV of *Figaro,* by showing how they fit Da Ponte's and Mozart's view of the real subject of the opera. Similarly, she convincingly refutes the notion (of Edward Dent and others) that *Don Giovanni* was originally conceived in four acts. In its broader dramatic framework her analysis presents a needed corrective to many older studies that viewed these operas from the far narrower perspective of instrumental music.

An important key to the success of Allanbrook's approach is its creative and humanistic orientation. At its best her analysis emphasizes not technical features but revelations of character or musical ethos. She is most concerned with the ethical and moral world inhabited by the characters, and the power of her writing depends chiefly on the degree to which technical points are linked to the larger central points she is making. At times the many details of the discussion may obscure the main thread somewhat, as during the extended analysis of the Statue scene in the finale to Act II of *Don Giovanni.* At a few other moments, an analytic point seems forced or questionable. Far more often, however, the reader nods and smiles in agreement at a sensitive and insightful discussion of a passage. Allanbrook's treatments of two marvelous moments—the final reconciliation between the Count and Countess at the end of *Figaro,* and the Commendatore's death scene in Act I of *Don Giovanni*—are particularly successful. On several occasions the author shows how the actual rhythmic organization of a theme differs from a hypothetical, more "orthodox" phrasing. This technique, as in her discussion of Donna Anna's "Fuggi, crudele, fuggi," invariably leads to striking observations.

In all respects but one, the production of the volume matches the elegance of much of the writing. The layout and typography of the book are very stylish, and its abundant musical examples are carefully produced and easy to read. The virtual absence of typographical errors is equally admirable. But the lack of a bibliography is rather frustrating; its absence

compels the reader to search through the fifty-three pages of endnotes for the first reference to a given author.

The central value of Allanbrook's study rests on two interrelated accomplishments. The analysis of two of Mozart's greatest operatic masterpieces is challenging and genuinely enlightening. In its flexibility of approach and its concern for ethical and spiritual matters, the book is a model of critical analysis at its most humane. It represents, in fact, a wonderful antidote to the arid, technical analytic writing that sometimes prevails in such studies. But the other achievement of this book is ultimately more far-reaching: it serves as a demonstration of a largely new conceptual framework for studying the music of the late eighteenth century. As Allanbrook shows, a grasp of the topical vocabulary in this music can lead to a variety of new insights into its expressive message. The section on *topos* and the understanding of rhythmic gesture will be of great value not only to lovers of the Mozart operas but to all students of the music of the Classic era.

Trinity College (Hartford, Connecticut)