

MOZART AND THE MARX BROTHERS

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What can the Marx brothers have in common with the sublime musical genius of the eighteenth century, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart? Both were presented with a difficult problem of staging an opera under unusual circumstances and both rose to the occasion` by coming up with unusual solutions. There is an additional relevance to this story, another musical genius, Richard Strauss. It was he who provided the connection between the eighteenth century master of the vocal art and the great comedians of the 20th.

The story begins with the Austrian Emperor, Joseph II, who was planning a large royal reception for the Governor General of the Austrian Netherlands in 1786. He commissioned his two court composers to each write a one-act opera. Furthermore he insisted that the subject be that of producing a new opera. Both of these musical works were to be given on the same evening of the gala to be held in the great hall of the Schoenbrun Palace, the famous Orangerie. The senior court composer, Antonio Salieri, would write an opera for the royal Italian Company and Mozart was asked to compose one for the king's German Opera ensemble.

Salieri's opera, "Prima la musica, e poi le parole" ("First the music and then the words") was given first at the stage at one end of the Orangerie. Dinner followed and then, at the opposite stage, the guests turned to hear Mozart's effort, "Der Schauspieldirektor," better known by its English name "The Impresario." Little is known about Salieri's opus; it is almost never given. We are told that the emperor preferred it to Mozart's work.

Mozart's opera is a farcical backstage look at opera production written in collaboration with his friend and librettist, Gottlieb Stephanie. It concerned the difficulties that a rural stage

manager, the Impresario, is having with two rival and difficult prima donnas as they compete nastily for the coveted position as the main singer in the new opera. When things reach a crescendo, the Impresario in desperation rewrites the new work giving them each star billing and both equally large salaries. Though this was not one of Mozart's great operas, it is occasionally produced. The overture, representing some of Mozart's finest music, is often played in orchestral programs.

The great German classical composer of the late 19th and early twentieth century, Richard Strauss, idolized the work of Mozart. Strauss' great opera masterpiece, "Der Rosenkavalier," can be considered both homage to and a sequel of Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro." After this success, in 1912 he turned to Mozart's "The Impresario." Strauss asked the question "What would have happened if Salieri's more serious production and Mozart's comic opera were given on the same stage and at the same time with both casts interacting with each other?" The result was one of his more famous works: "Ariadne Auf Naxos."

Working together with his favorite librettist, Hugo Von Hofmanstahl, they turned to a 17th century comedy by Moliere, "Le Bourgeois Gentleman." This play, written in 1670, is still performed today. It pokes fun at a wealthy merchant who has aspirations of entering the nobility. They planned to combine Moliere's burlesque with a serious one-act opera based on an ancient Greek myth about Ariadne, who was abandoned by her lover, Theseus, on the island of Naxos.

In the prologue to the opera, we are in the large manor house of the richest man in Vienna who is sponsoring an evening of entertainment. To impress his guests, the works to be presented consist of a serious opera, Ariadne, and a musical comedy (really a burlesque produced by a comic group), to be followed by fireworks. To save time the well-to-do patron now insists that the two musical productions be performed simultaneously on the same stage to be followed

immediately by the fireworks. The opera composer is most distressed, but his friend and teacher, the music-master advises compromise.

Following the prologue, the curtain opens on a fairly empty stage representing the Greek Island of Naxos. The soprano, Ariadne, singing to her helpers, the three nymphs, bemoans the abandonment by her lover. She beseeches the God Hermes, the messenger of death, to put an end to her misery. The comic group headed by Zerbinetta, their female star, finds this unacceptable. She leads as they charge onto the stage to cheer up the disconsolate soprano. The comedienne insists that Ariadne only needs a new lover. The opera diva, ignoring Zerbinetta and her colleagues, continues to wail away. The stage is now crowded with the two groups; the classic cast tries desperately to overlook the burlesque comedians' antics. A visitor appears in the distance. Thinking it's Hermes, the diva prepares for her death. Instead it is the young God Bacchus who entrances Ariadne. With her new lover, she ascends to heaven. The comic group now proclaims the primacy of love, and the fireworks begin.

Before we leave Richard Strauss's opera, a bit of historical background. Moliere's play delighted King Louis XIV of France who insisted that it be turned into an opera. The monarch ordered the greatest French classical composer of the period, Jean Baptiste Lully, to supply the music. Moliere and Lully got as far as combining the two into a combination ballet and comic drama. But before they could complete the opera version, Jean Baptiste had an unfortunate accident. We remember Lully as the first conductor to use a baton, not the small hand-held wand of today, but a stout wooden pole that the French composer/conductor used to bang on the floor. One day he missed and hit his right great toe. This became infected with gangrene; within three days Lully was in the hands of Hermes. Moliere's play had to wait over 240 years until Richard Strauss and Hugo Von Hofmanstahl could make an opera of it.

To me the world is divided into two groups: those that think that the greatest Marx Brother's comedy is "Duck Soup" and the rest who consider that these great comics reached their apex in the movie, "A Night At The Opera." I'm in the latter category. For those who do not appreciate the genius of these comedians, I feel great pity. They have missed one of the great joys life has given us.

In 1935 the brothers were at a turning point in their career, they had left Paramount Studios, the home of their earlier more chaotic comedies. At the behest of producer Irving Thalberg, they signed up with MGM the home of the great 30's musicals. Thalberg correctly realized that the Marx brothers' zany comedy could use some control (as much as he could get, which was often very little). According to the biographer Ben Stephens, Irving understood that much of the humor of these renegades from the vaudeville stage was "knocking the pompous off their perches and down to size. Why not turn them loose in an opera house?" This would fit in nicely with the MGM musical expertise. He would supply them with two young singers, Allan Jones and Kitty Carlise, to provide love interest as well as to play the roles of young aspiring opera divas. The studio's main producer had at his disposal an ideal group of helpers, including two of Broadway's great comic writers, George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind. Instead of the usual five Marx brothers of their earlier comedies, only four were in the new movie: Groucho, Chico, Harpo, and Gummo. The fifth, Zeppo, who usually played a straight role in their earlier movies, was now their manager. It was he who made the connection with Thalberg at MGM. Their old stalwart and foil, Margaret Dumont, also joined them. She claimed that her roles succeeded so well because she rarely understood Groucho's humor.

The story line for "A Night At The Opera" is simple and fairly straightforward. After all the function of the plot was to serve as scaffolding for the hilarity of the brothers Marx. Two

young lovers are aspiring to be operatic stars. Kitty Carlisle has a contract, but her boy friend, the tenor Allan Jones, can not get an opportunity to show his talents. Chico and Harpo go to whatever lengths to make the lovers happy including sabotaging the Opera Company's lead tenor. Groucho, as Otis B. Driftwood, plays his usual lunatic, hilarious, and clever self while he helps his brothers dispose of the tenor. He attempts in his off-handed way to seduce Margaret Dumont, playing the wealthy patron of the opera, Mrs. Claypool, to advance both the interests of the lovers and his own pecuniary gain.

The movie starts in Europe, and then the Opera Company leaves for New York on an ocean-liner. The four brothers hide as stowaways on the ship. This affords one of the greatest scenes in the Marx brothers' canon; the frenetic packing of far too many bodies into the small matchbox sized cabin where the four brothers are hiding. In come two chambermaids, an engineer, manicurist, a washerwomen complete with mops and buckets, and multiple big stewards bringing large trays of food. Soon there are 15 people pressed tightly into the very small room. When the befuddled Margaret Dumont opens the cabin door from the outside, the whole group tumbles out.

The denouement of the movie is the great opera scene. The writers realized that the antics of the comics had to be played against a real opera and they wisely chose the well-known "II Trovatore" by Verdi. When the famous Hammer and Anvil chorus scene is being presented to the opera audience, Harpo is being chased backstage by the police. During the escape from his pursuers, he swings Tarzan-like among the ropes controlling the backdrops, knocks over the scenery, and then descends from the rafters tearing the curtain as he drops to the stage. If one closes one's eyes, the music follows Verdi quite closely and, except for the sound of the tearing curtain and falling props, one would think it was opera at the Met. On opening one's eyes the

hubbub and bedlam produced by Harpo appears to be choreographed by Verdi. True the mute Marx brother briefly engages in a duel with the conductor and at that point the leader's baton inadvertently leads the orchestra into "Take Me Out To The Ball Game." But this is an exception to the general straight operatic tenor of the music.

I do not know where the inspiration for this fantastic operatic scene came from. I suspect that Richard Strauss's *Ariadne* was seen by at least one of the writers, probably one of the New Yorkers, Kaufman or Ryskind, at the Metropolitan Opera. At least at the unconscious level it has entered into the movie. Irving Thalberg was a genius at making movies for MGM and he had at his disposal many classically trained musicians who could have suggested ideas for the operatic scene. Of the five sons of Minnie Marx, only Groucho was known to be a well-read intellectual, but his musical tastes were not developed. Credit for the success of the opera sequence must also go to the silent Harpo who stole the show in this, his greatest movie episode

Yes, it may be a stretch, but I can trace this scene back to Strauss's opera, *Ariadne Auf Naxos*, where the comic group grappled on the same stage and at the same time with *Ariadne* and her opera company. This Richard Strauss opus was in turn inspired by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's commission from the Emperor Joseph II to compose "The Impresario." Whether true or not, I like to imagine that this was the opera connection between Mozart and the Marx brothers.

If one believes Mozart's biographers, such as Marcia Davenport, and the play and subsequent movie, "Amadeus," by Peter Schaffer, Wolfgang had a fascination with coarse humor. In his magnificent opera, "The Marriage Of Figaro," we know he enjoyed poking fun at the haughty nobility. I suspect that this sublime musical genius, if he could have seen "A Night At The Opera," would be rollicking in his unknown pauper's grave located somewhere just outside the walls of his beloved Vienna.