

# Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio*

BY MAGDA KRANCE

WITH DAMSELS IN DISTRESS, MENACING CAPTORS, ARDENT RESCUERS, AND A CHEERFULLY ROISTEROUS ORCHESTRA AND CHORUS, *THE ABDUCTION FROM THE SERAGLIO* IS A ROLICKING ROMANTIC ADVENTURE COMEDY. AT LEAST THAT'S HOW IT'S OFTEN PLAYED – AS A “HEROES-AND-VILLAINS” CAPER IN A FOREIGN LOCALE.

Additionally, director Chas Rader-Shieber sees it as the tale of a noble ruler's unrequited love, personal suffering, and decision to break the cycle of violent revenge.

It's also Mozart's personal proclamation of love for his fiancée Konstanze Weber *and* a declaration of independence from Leopold, his domineering stage dad. (In the opening measures, you can almost hear Wolfgang gleefully proclaiming, “Free, free, free – I'm freefreefreefreefree!!!”)

The music is in turn merry, comically melodramatic, and full of yearning. It's a magic-carpet ride of gorgeous, fiendishly difficult vocalism and evocative instrumentation that interweaves familiar and exotic 18th-century musical elements.

Talk about closing Lyric's 54<sup>th</sup> season with a bang!

Mozart had been in Vienna before, but neither as an adult nor alone. In March 1781, he arrived in the Empire's cultural capital as a court musician with higher aspirations. Mozart pursued opportunity as a celebrated pianist in noble manses, determined to make his mark as Vienna's top composer, especially of opera. He

also savored his freedom from his father (though the paternal approbation continued by mail). He soon won

Emperor Josef II's approval and was immersed happily in his newest opera.

*“The first-act set is an 18th-century theater world, a world of beautiful memory.”*

—CHAS RADER-SHIEBER

The 25-year-old Mozart in love overflowed with inspiration for *Abduction*, dashing off arias and duets, changing spoken monologues to ariettas, and fleshing out the characters (collaborating with Viennese actor-playwright-director Gottlieb Stephanie). The opera's protagonist and Mozart's betrothed shared the same name; Konstanze helped copy the score, Wolfgang composed while seeking her family's consent, and they married three weeks after the premiere – *without* his father's approval. As Jane Glover noted in *Mozart's Women*, “Both literally and figuratively, her hand is in this groundbreaking score; and his heart, his strength of feeling for her, is in every bar of it.”

The story: Konstanze, her maid Blonde, and Pedrillo (Blonde's lover and valet to Konstanze's beau, Belmonte), have been kidnapped by pirates and sold to Pasha Selim. (Listen for swashbuckling pirates and the resisting captives in the overture.)

The Pasha demands that Konstanze return his affections; she resists. His overseer, Osmin, moons over Blonde, who indignantly repels him.

Posing as an architect, Belmonte gains the Pasha's confidence. He and Pedrillo scheme to rescue their sweethearts. Individually, the lovers resolve to reunite while resisting external pressures (recurring Mozartian themes). After Pedrillo plies Osmin with drugged wine the couples reunite. The escape fails; Osmin drags them before the furious Pasha, who reveals that *his* life was ruined by Belmonte's father. Expecting torture and death, the captives are freed by Pasha Selim, who rewards “an injustice with justice” instead of “repaying evil with evil,” reflecting the emperor's Enlightenment values.

“Beginning with *Abduction*, Mozart's music is so tailored to each character,” declares Sir Andrew Davis, who will conduct Lyric's new production in March. “The arias are extraordinary – full of pyrotechnics, but also very moving. They're great virtuoso vehicles and profoundly reflective of personality. Mozart was always experimenting, and *Abduction* is part of his ongoing maturity and development,” Sir Andrew notes. “He's still ascending to the compositional virtuosity of the Da Ponte operas, which followed immediately. There's great emotional range and variety of tempi, and some of the music is so exquisitely beautiful. What Mozart does – which is what all great opera does – is elevate and transform a good story into a great one with music, which invests the text



PASHA SELIM



OSMIN



JANISSARY



KONSTANZE



GUARD

Costume drawings by designer David Zinn



ANDREA SILVESTRELLI  
*Osmin*

with so much more profundity and meaning.” *Abduction* is a *Singspiel* (like *The Magic Flute*), which includes singing and spoken dialogue in German (with projected English

translations). It has been presented only once previously at Lyric, in 1984.

Matthew Polenzani, who’s sung Belmonte previously at the Metropolitan Opera and New York City Opera, relishes his arias as “four chances to express different things over the course of the performance, not to mention the duets, the quartet, and the finale – it’s a *lot* of singing! Each aria has a completely different flavor, all centered on the theme of love.” The Ryan Opera Center alumnus looks forward to collaborating with fellow alumna Erin Wall (Konstanze),

and to reuniting with Aleksandra Kurzak (Blonde/debut, see “E&E,” p 22) and Steve Davislim (Pedrillo), with whom he starred in the Met’s *Abduction*; and with Andrea Silvestrelli (Osmin), his *Falstaff* colleague at Minnesota Opera. And, of course, Sir Andrew: “Working with him is one of my great pleasures in singing!”

Davis calls Polenzani “one of the finest Mozart tenors of our day. Matthew brings his characters to life. He’s very strong dramatically.” Davis is also “very excited that Erin is singing Konstanze. She is ideal for this role, with a wonderful gleaming voice and the ability to negotiate all the high coloratura with ease.” *Abduction* demands “a great deal of orchestral virtuosity and refinement of style,” Davis adds. “Mozart needs energy and passion, but also lightness and wit.”

Throughout the opera, every character’s music receives detailed and loving attention that also serves a specific dramatic purpose. The finale, Mozart wrote, “will make a real din, which is just

what the end of an act should do....that way the public’s applause won’t cool off.” And indeed, it didn’t: Following its July 16, 1782, premiere, *Abduction* became a runaway triumph that secured Mozart’s reputation. Over the next nine years it was staged in 30 European cities, receiving more performances in his lifetime than any other Mozart opera. It has been charming audiences ever since.

What accounts for *Abduction*’s success? “Mozart was the first to make comic opera transcend mere entertainment,” wrote Harold C. Schonberg in *The Lives of the Great Composers*. “He was able to do so because he himself liked people, because he himself had a gay, bubbling, irrepressible streak within him, and because he tried to make his music explain mood, situation, and character. He was the first psychologist of opera.”

While pirates, harems, and threatening captors may seem fanciful to contemporary audiences, they were the stuff of headlines in the 16<sup>th</sup> century,



ERIN WALL  
*Konstanze*



MATTHEW POLENZANI  
*Belmonte*



Set model for Act One, *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, designed by David Zinn

when *Abduction* is set, and in Mozart's time as well. The entire cast of the Malta Opera was captured by Algerian pirates the same year that *Abduction* premiered. The Great Turkish War began in 1683 with 140,000 troops marching on Vienna; 90 years later the city's fascination with Turkish exotica remained. Mozart incorporated instruments popular in Turkish bands, including cymbals, triangle, bass drum, and piccolo; you can hear them in the overture, choruses, Osmin's Yosemite Sam-like tirades, and the Pedrillo-Osmin drinking scene. A Turkish motif consisting of a rising triad, major or minor, occasionally inverted, crops up throughout the opera, even in the captives' music.

Mozart gave voice to his complicated relationship with his father through the Turkish captors. Osmin could hurl vile insults and threats that Mozart would never dare express, and the powerful Pasha could grant the reconciliation the composer longed for from his father.

The Pasha is a central figure, similar to Sarastro in *The Magic Flute*, but he only speaks. (The actor portraying Pasha Selim will be announced at a later date.) "You can't play the Pasha as some old moustache-twirling villain - we have Osmin to take that comic side of the abuse of power," says director Rader-Shieber. In Lyric's production, the curtain rises on the Pasha as an old man, absorbed in reminiscence. "The first-act set is an 18th-century theater world, a world of beautiful memory," he says of collaborator David Zinn's design (with

lighting by Christopher Akerlind, debut). It resembles an old-fashioned pop-up greeting card, with a ship, tents, and a formal garden coming into view.

"The physical production mimics the journey of the opera," notes Rader-Shieber. "It starts as a vaudeville, in the old physical-comedy sense" that would have been popular in Mozart's time. Indeed, at first glance Lyric's new production resembles what an 18th-century Viennese audience might have seen - except for one detail. At center stage is a door, "the entrance to the Pasha's inner world," Rader-Shieber explains. "The closer Pasha Selim gets to losing Konstanze, the more we get to the drama of the piece. It's not just a comedy and not just a drama. Like life, it's confusing - it's both of those things and sometimes simultaneously. 'If I didn't laugh I'd cry' - that's what this opera is, and it sounds like that musically. For the Pasha, the story is an intimate human tragedy. He gives away the true love of his life." The title reflects that perspective: Konstanze is being *abducted*, not rescued.

Rader-Shieber emphasizes that there must be viable erotic tension between captor and captive; even though she's faithful to Belmonte, Konstanze should be attracted to Pasha Selim, "who represents intriguing and forbidden sexuality." The subtexts of music and story have to be mined, he adds: "She's a good girl, but it doesn't make for very good drama unless there's a struggle. What do you do with Pasha Selim's desire for Konstanze, and the way he expresses profound emotion

for her? If you say no to it, why bother to write an opera? She says no in a very interesting way, the way a person with kindness and concern weighs things carefully and says no."

The Pasha must be a genuine rival to make Konstanze's struggle compelling, Rader-Shieber says. "When it's not a fair fight it bores us. She clearly comes to understand him" during her captivity; she realizes that he longs to win her heart rather than overpower her, and even allows her to wear her own elegant gown instead of the skimpiest attire of the harem women. "We'll learn a lot about the Pasha as Konstanze sings, and we'll learn about her feelings as he speaks." The Pasha is captivated by "the beauty of Konstanze's defiance, and is attracted to her resistance. The moment he lets her go is the moment she's most tempted to stay," Rader-Shieber observes. "It's like *Beauty and the Beast* - the moment in which she most understands him is the moment of his transformation, the bittersweet side of the fairytale happy ending."

There's nothing wrong with staging *Abduction* as a musical comedy, Rader-Shieber says, and "it *should* be entertaining and funny. But when the piece offers so much *more* than that, why wouldn't you want it?"

Clearly, Lyric audiences are in for a beautiful, bittersweet, Mozartian Turkish treat to end the season.

The new Lyric Opera production of *The Abduction from the Seraglio* is generously made possible by RANDY AND MELVIN BERLIN, the NEGAUNEE FOUNDATION, and BRENDA AND EARL SHAPIRO.



"The Harem," by John Frederick Lewis, from the Bridgeman Art Library Collection