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Vocal Performance in the Classic Period

Concerning the Performance of Mozart's Concert Arias K. 294 and K. 528

Nicole Baker

Although their virtuosic demands, length, and dramatic content often preclude them from today's concert programs, the concert arias of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart provide excellent opportunities to explore the practice of performing his vocal music. Unhampered by plots and the normal mechanics of an opera production, they are the closest he ever came to vocal concerti. Due to the removal of many of the variables involved in an operatic aria, they provide an ideal performance practice laboratory.

Aloysia Weber and K. 294

"Alcandro, lo confesso . . . Non sò d'onde viene" (K. 294) was composed in February, 1778 in Mannheim for the young soprano Aloysia Weber, the sister of Constanze Weber, who eventually became Mozart's wife. K. 294 was the first of eight concert arias Mozart wrote for Aloysia, an exceptionally gifted singer who first appeared in the electoral courts of Mannheim and Munich at the age of fifteen. Her soprano voice captivated Mozart immediately, and he was so impressed that before leaving Mannheim, he wrote his father that he wanted to tour Italy with

Aloysia and use his music to show her off as a *prima donna*. Mozart's family promptly vetoed the idea. Numerous letters from the young composer refer to "Mlle Weber," boasting of her talents.

Accounts of the time, both by Mozart and by more objective observers, indicate that Weber indeed possessed a remarkable vocal instrument. Michael Kelly wrote in his 1826 "Remembrances," "She had a greater extent of high notes than any other singer I ever heard. Her execution was most brilliant."¹ Alfred Einstein speaks of a "cold virtuosity."² Publisher Christian Schubart wrote,

She has height and depth and accents her notes accurately. She sings *piena voce* and *mezza voce* equally well. Her portamento, the accuracy of reading, delicacy of delivery, her *mezzo tinto*, her wonderful cadenzas and her dignified bearing, are in great measure due to her great master (Abt Georg Joseph Vogler).³

Erich Schenk describes her "expressive powers of recitative, with modulations of extraordinary freedom, and agility and range of allegro, two times going higher than even the Queen of the Night."⁴ Eric Blom notes, "She could sustain the tone beautifully and produce the loveliest legato. She executed with ease difficult passages."⁵ Mozart wrote that her greatest merit "was her superb cantabile singing."⁶ Theodore Wyzewa and G. de St. Foix wrote, "How her song had overthrown [Mozart's] heart! He had to know that this young girl had a superior voice, one of flexibility and extraordinary virtuosity."⁷ Leopold Mozart, on the other hand, had some misgivings:

1. Otto Erich Deutsch, *Mozart: a Documentary Biography*, translated by Eric Blom, Peter Branscombe and Jeremy Noble (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1983), 530.

2. Alfred Einstein, *Mozart: His Character, His Work* (London: Cassell & Company, 1966), 369.

3. Otto Jahn, *Mozart*, translated by Pauline Townsend (New York: Edwin F. Kalmus, undated), Vol. 1, 427.

4. Erich Schenk, *Mozart and His Times* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), 316.

5. Eric Blom, *Mozart* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1974), 79.

6. Mozart to Leopold Mozart, February 7, 1778. *The Letters of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and his Family*, Emily Anderson, ed., 3rd Edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1985), 497.

7. "Que son chant devait lui bouleverser le coeur! Car il faut savoir que cette jeune fille avait une voix d'une élévation, d'une souplesse, d'une virtuosité extraordinaires." Theodore Wyzewa and G. de St. Foix, *Wolfgang Amadée Mozart* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1936), Vol. 3, 47.

I now understand why some said that she had a very weak voice and others that she had a very powerful one. Both statements are true. Her held notes and those she emphasizes are astonishingly loud, her tender phrases, passages and grace notes and high notes are very delicate, so that in my opinion there is too much discrepancy between the two renderings. In a room her loud notes offend the ear and in a theatre her delicate passages demand great silence and attention on the part of the audience.⁸

And a citation from the "Deutsches Museum" in Leipzig notes, "Mme Lange . . . has a very agreeable voice, which is however too weak for the stage . . . she acts pitifully."⁹

Mozart describes the circumstances surrounding the aria's creation in a letter to his father dated February 28, 1778 from Mannheim:

For practice I have also set to music the aria "Non sò d'onde viene." . . . When it was finished, I said to Mlle Weber: 'learn the aria yourself. Sing it as you think it ought to go; then let me hear it and afterwards I will tell you candidly what pleases and what displeases me.' After a couple of days, I went to the Webers and she sang it for me. I was obliged to confess that she has sung it exactly as I wished and as I should have taught it to her myself. This is now the best aria she has; and, it will ensure her success wherever she goes.¹⁰

Several other letters discuss Aloysia's performances of K. 294, all to lavish praise by Mozart. "It is absolutely made for her," Mozart wrote to his father. "A man like you, who really understands what portamento [legato] singing is, would certainly find complete satisfaction in her performance."¹¹ After a performance in Mannheim in mid-March, 1778, Mozart again wrote his father, this time from Paris, "My dear Mlle Weber did herself and me indescribable honor, for everyone said that no aria had ever affected them as did this one; but then she sang it as it ought to be sung . . . [with] accuracy in interpretation, piano, and forte."¹² Another letter speaks of Gluck's admiration for her performance of the aria in 1783.

8. Leopold Mozart to his son, Vienna, March 25-26, 1785, in Anderson, *Letters*, 889.

9. Deutsch, *Mozart*, 194.

10. Mozart to his father, February 28, 1778, in Anderson, *Letters*, 497.

11. Mozart to his father, March 7, 1778, in Anderson, *Letters*, 506.

12. Note the interesting references to dynamic variations. Mozart to his father, March 24, 1778, in Anderson, *Letters*, 517.

It is significant that K. 294 is the only vocal work for which Mozart's own ornamentation exists; the autograph of these embellishments has been preserved in the Stadtarchiv Braunschweig and the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Although evidence exists in Mozart's letters that he originally wrote the embellishments as a teaching aid for his father's voice studio, musicologist and performance practice specialist Frederick Neumann contends it is more likely that the composer wrote the ornamentation for Aloysia alone.¹³ Several letters by Mozart mention variations on the aria. The first, dated July 30, 1778 from Paris, finds Mozart asking Aloysia, "Please forgive me for not sending you this time the variations I have composed on the aria which you sent me."¹⁴ In a letter to his father nearly five years later, Mozart wrote, "But you shall also have the voice part with variations of the aria 'Non sò d'onde viene'."¹⁵ Kunze, Neumann, and other scholars believe that these original variations were written not too long after the aria was first composed, and were generally included in most performances.

Josefa Duschek and K. 528

A singer of decidedly less exceptional, though still considerable, talents was Josefa (Hambacher) Duschek, born in 1754. Mozart and the Duscheks became close friends after meeting in Salzburg, and they spent time together at the Duscheks' summer home, Betramka, outside Prague. It was during their friendship that Mozart witnessed Josefa's achievement of artistic maturity.¹⁶

Accounts of her voice are varied. A concert and oratorio singer, Josefa is not known to have performed any operas publicly. Her voice was described by Joachim Schiedenhofen as "uncommonly clear and agreeable."¹⁷ The great Mozart biographer Otto Jahn notes that she was an animated spirit at Franz Duschek's house salons. She could play piano at a virtuosic level as well as compose. But, Jahn continues, her forte was singing.¹⁸ Jahn writes that she was known for a beautiful, full, round voice and was admired for her delivery, especially in recitative. She accomplished the most difficult bravura passages with perfect ease, without neglecting the effect of a portamento. He continues that she

13. Frederick Neumann, *Ornamentation and Improvisation in Mozart* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 234.

14. Mozart to Aloysia Weber, July 30, 1778, in Anderson, *Letters*, 581.

15. Mozart to his father, April 12, 1783, in Anderson, *Letters*, 845.

16. Schenk, *Mozart*, 362.

17. Deutsch, *Mozart*, 161.

18. Jahn, *Mozart*, Vol. 3, 120.

united fire and energy with grace and expression.¹⁹ The *Praeger Neue Zeitung* of February 9, 1794 noted that Josefa was very popular and that her artistry was known everywhere.

"Bella mia fiamma ... Resta, oh cara" (K. 528) was composed for Josefa on November 3, 1787, within days of the premiere of *Don Giovanni*. The text, by D. Michele Sarcone, is taken from the opera *Cerere placata*, Act II, scene 5, by Niccolò Jommelli. The autograph, dedicated to Josefa, is located in the Berlin-Dahlem.

Mozart had apparently promised Josefa that he would write a concert aria for her. Impatient, she locked the composer into a room at Betramka, refusing to let him out until he had produced the aria. He relented on the condition that whatever he wrote would have to be sung perfectly at sight. Legend has it that Josefa indeed sang the aria perfectly. Unfortunately, unlike K. 294, little is mentioned in either primary or secondary sources about the aria and any subsequent performances.

Einstein labels K. 528 a "studio piece," in which Mozart employs extreme means to represent the drastic emotions and situation.²⁰ Despite little historical record of the piece, K. 528 has become one of Mozart's most beloved concert arias. Unlike K. 294, at least two piano-vocal versions exist, as well as several recordings. This is easily explained by the more normal tessitura demands as well as the fact that K. 294 is technically much more difficult, even though it sounds relatively easy.

Having examined the basic characteristics of each aria, we can envision the kinds of voices Mozart had to work with. Vocally, they represent two very different styles — and two different types of ability:

K. 294: Agile, high, expressive, at the expense of volume or strength if necessary.

K. 528: Round, with expert intonation and good declamatory abilities, at the expense of agility if necessary.

Late Eighteenth-Century Vocal Performance

Before launching into a discussion of the specifics of performance practice, I think it wise to attempt to establish an image of the ideal

19. Jahn, *Mozart*, Vol. 3, 121.

20. Einstein, *Mozart*, 372.

sound of the time, shifting from what is known about the singers involved, to Mozart's own words and those of the theorists.

Mozart's letters repeatedly stress abstract concepts of musicianship, expression, and taste as the final arbiters in matters of execution.²¹ Further evidence shows that Mozart was never contented with virtuosity as an end in itself.²² Legato, dynamics, and expression are the words he most uses.

The theorists concur: every major treatise devotes pages to the image and training of a perfect singer. Pier Francesco Tosi, whose landmark 1723 treatise influenced vocal pedagogists for many generations, puts musical knowledge before an excellent voice.²³ The important German vocal theorist and Singspiel composer Johann Adam Hiller points to four principal elements of good singing: good voice, proper intonation, a sense of rhythm, and the proper emphasis and elegance in the song, which combines the critical areas of declamation and ornamentation.²⁴ Hiller further stresses the ability to shape a legato line out of both stepwise motion and leaps, as well as the idea of pure intonation.²⁵ Tosi, Quantz, and Mancini²⁶ point to several desirable attributes: flexibility, perfect intonation, sweetness, roundness, smoothness, clarity, the strict observance of time, perfectly executed trills and other embellishments, expression, and invention.²⁷ Dynamic variation, strength, and the overall emphasis on flexibility and intonation seem to outweigh sheer volume.²⁸

Theorists wrote much about the various kinds of arias, and how their classification might affect their performance. Hiller wrote that the church, the chamber, and the theatre are the places where a singer appears, and that each place requires special considerations.²⁹ Though concert arias were occasionally performed on stage, there is little evidence to indicate that either K. 294 or K. 528 was ever performed in a theatrical situation. The genre was generally limited to the chamber or

21. Neumann, *Ornamentation*, 5.

22. Ivor Keys, *Mozart* (New York: Holms & Meier Publishers, 1980), 107.

23. According to Sally Allis Sanford, "Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Vocal Style and Technique" (D.M.A. dissertation, Stanford University, 1979), 3.

24. *ibid.*

25. Johann Adam Hiller, *Anweisung zum Musikalisch Zierlichen Gesange, 1780*, trans. Suzanne Beicken (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1980), 27.

26. Johann Joachim Quantz (1697-1773) was a German flautist, composer, and writer, whose treatise on flute performance practice influenced all instrumentilists and singers. In 1774 Giambattista Mancini (1714-1800) wrote an Italian vocal treatise second in influence only to Tosi's.

27. Sanford, "Vocal Style," 14.

28. Sanford, "Vocal Style," 22.

29. Hiller, *Anweisung*, 110.

court. Hiller observes that chamber singing is refined, learned, and as ornamented as taste and the room allow.³⁰ He notes further that the chamber singer has the greatest freedom, and is primarily concerned with showing her skill in performing technically difficult music. Theorists paid particular attention to chamber recitative. Tosi noted that recitative *di camera* moves the most violent passions of the soul, and that emphasis should be on the words, with no help from ornaments.³¹ Hiller concurs, saying that while the aria is heavily ornamented, the recitative should be "embellished" only by the singer's intense participation in key words.³²

Later theorists abandoned the classification by place, and elaborated instead long lists of aria types. Distinguished vocal teacher and theorist Manuel Garcia formed three inclusive categories: *canto spianato*, which was a broad style; *canto fiorito*, which was florid; and *canto declamato*, which was more dramatic. The fiorito styles subdivided into *canto d'agilità*, *di maniera*, *di grazia*, *di portamento*, *di bravura*, *di forza*, *di slancio*, etc.³³ Of particular interest here are the *canto di maniera* (a good choice for K. 294), a more powerful, emotional version of the light, flexible *canto di agilità*. The bravura type required a singer (like Aloysia) capable of brilliance, full voice, agility, boldness, and warmth. All emotions were displayed, and therefore many different ornaments were used.³⁴

In 1789, writer John Brown outlined several other aria types, two of which are relevant here. The *aria cantabile* (K. 294), with its "sentiments of tenderness," generally moved in a slow tempo and demonstrated pathos and elegance. This ornamented type of aria was best for a sweet, plaintive voice. The *aria parlante* (K. 528) displays violent emotions of all kinds, and often features rapid declamation. Lacking were ornaments and long, held notes.³⁵

Mentioned briefly earlier is the critical issue of vibrato. Vocal performance practice specialist Sally Sanford writes:

The insistence on exact intonation so prevalent in the 17th and 18th century treatises would seem to imply that any pitch fluctuation or

30. Hiller, *Anweisung*, 115.

31. Pier Francesco Tosi, *Observations on the Florid Song*, trans. by Mr. Galliard (London: J. Wilcox, 1743), pp. 67-69.

32. Hiller, *Anweisung*, 117.

33. Manuel Garcia, *A Complete Treatise on the Art of Singing (1841 and 1872)*, translated, collated by Donald V. Paschke (New York: Da Capo Press, 1984), Vol. 2, 176.

34. Garcia, *Art of Singing*, Vol. 2, 197.

35. Sanford, "Vocal Style," 136-38.

vibrato in the tone would have been kept to a minimum. In fact, there is a great deal of evidence from the treatises that vibrato was regarded as a vocal ornament, a device which added great beauty to the voice when used discreetly, and at appropriate places.³⁶

Vibrato was principally used for long notes, often being delayed until the end of the note; "there is also evidence," Sanford states, "that the speed of the vibrato was variable, depending on the musical context and the emotion expressed."³⁷ While historical evidence might indicate that heavy vibrato was to be avoided in performing a work by Mozart, the composer's words themselves seem to prohibit any kind of unnatural forcing of a straight tone: "The human voice already vibrates of itself, but in such a degree that it is beautiful, that is the nature of the voice."³⁸ William Vennard in his landmark treatise notes, "Apparently the old authorities took much the same view as those today. A normal vibrato is inherent in a good voice, and excessive vibrato should be avoided."³⁹

Throat articulation — not a particularly common singing method today — was very common in the 18th century, not dying out until the romantic period. Tosi's remarks confirm that throat articulation was used, noting that the "marked" or articulated style was more frequently used than the slurred.⁴⁰ Aspiration — turning "ah" into "ha" — was particularly frowned upon. Garcia, nearly a century later, wrote of different kinds of articulation, saying that "articulation, by its various degrees of energy and alternations, marks the shades of the different emotions and strengthens expression of the feelings."⁴¹ He instructed the singer to use energetic articulation in vigorous, animated movements, while softening in tender, gracious movements.⁴² Little opportunity exists in K. 528 for throat articulation, but the two different contrasting movements of K. 294 allow for each of Garcia's methods of throat articulation. The device is particularly useful in the rapid scales up to D and then E^b in the closing measures of the piece.

Declamation was a particularly important issue in the 18th century, as recitative styles were changing dramatically. Mozart was greatly concerned, as in this piece of advice he included in a letter to Aloysia

36. Sanford, "Vocal Style," 71.

37. Sanford, "Vocal Style," 75.

38. Mozart to Leopold Mozart, June 12, 1775, in William Vennard, *Singing: the Mechanism and the Technic*, revised edition (New York: Carl Fischer, Inc., 1967), 207.

39. *ibid*, 208.

40. Sanford, "Vocal Style," 52.

41. Garcia, *Art of Singing*, Vol. 2, 163.

42. Garcia, *Art of Singing*, Vol. 2, 164.

Weber regarding her performance of the concert aria "Ah, lo provedi" (K. 272): "Be attentive to expression. Think carefully about the meaning and the power of words. Put yourself into Andromeda's mood and situation."⁴³ Hiller calls clear, distinct pronunciation vital; he emphasizes making sense of the punctuation.⁴⁴ He advises singers to perform in accordance with word accents and emotion.⁴⁵

Concerning Ornaments in Mozart's Concert Arias

The concept of improvised ornamentation in Mozart's vocal works is a relatively new one. Little recorded evidence exists that would confirm that Mozart's arias should include improvisation by the singer. Indeed, two recently-released collections of concert arias by some of today's most-noted singers include few or no vocal embellishments, even at fermatas.⁴⁶ However, the prevalence of literature regarding ornamentation during the 18th century would indicate that Mozart's music was not immune from embellishment, although it is likely that his earlier music was more subject to it than his later works.

Mozart composed largely after *passaggi* had begun to decline. Singers' demands and the remnants of late-Baroque taste, however, forced him to continue to allow singers some freedom of improvisation. Hiller wrote, "A reasonable composer will generally refrain from employing them in arias that show a great deal of sadness or rage. They can most often be found in tender, gay, and sententious arias."⁴⁷ This alone would seem to bar much passage work in either K. 294 or K. 528. Hiller further warns that variations are only good if the aria has a repeated section. His rules call for the strict observation of tempo. Words and expression are important, chromaticism works well in arias of pathos, and *passaggi*, if anything, should clarify composers' ideas, not cloud them.⁴⁸ Hiller warns against overusing *passaggi*, and he defines a beautiful passage as one sung in pitch, roundly and clearly, evenly, and with rapid articulation. Legato *passaggi* are also possible.⁴⁹ Tosi defines five qualifications for good *passaggi*: judgement, invention, time, art, and taste, and they

43. Schenk, *Mozart*, 252.

44. Hiller, *Anweisung*, 49.

45. Hiller, *Anweisung*, 51.

46. An assortment of artists is featured on the two recordings. With Leopold Hager conducting the Mozarteum-Orchester Salzburg, Lucia Popp sings K. 294, while Lillian Sukis sings K. 528. This is a Deutsche-Grammophon recording. Krisztina Laki sings K. 294, and Kiri Te Kanawa K. 528, on a Decca recording with Gyorgy Fischer conducting the Wiener Kammerorchester.

47. Hiller, *Anweisung*, 107.

48. Hiller, *Anweisung*, 145-46.

49. Hiller, *Anweisung*, 99.

should be performed with word expression and beauty.⁵⁰ He also asks that they not be too long, and that the "sole and entire beauty of the division consists in its being perfectly in tune, equal, distinct, and quick."⁵¹

Neumann considers Mozart's attitude toward *passaggi* to have been one that began as acceptance of the practice, and that gradually curbed it as time went on. He states, "Arbitrary ornamentation should not be added to arias of Mozart's maturity other than appoggiaturas and fermata embellishments."⁵² With Mozart's essential embellishments provided for in K. 294, questions of divisions in this reasonably early piece are answered. K. 528, a late piece, shows few places for *passaggi* that would not interfere with the emotions being portrayed. It seems to exemplify Neumann's advice against embellishment in Mozart's late work.

Examining K. 294's ornaments and embellishments, one sees largely standard forms of appoggiaturas, turns, and notes that fill in between leaps. A remarkable aspect of the ornamentation is its restraint. Few *passaggi* exist, with the most elaborate, in m. 53, taking the voice up to a B^b and providing some harmonic color. Dynamic variation of an already florid passage occurs in m. 58 and in mm. 68-9, showing that dynamics was seen as an ornament in itself. In short, while Mozart does choose to ornament a great deal, the ornaments themselves are fairly simple and brief, functioning within the basic melodic structure.

As for K. 528, no cadenzas are indicated. Not only would an inserted cadenza go against the wishes of Mozart; it would also destroy what is often an angular line accentuated by the stark silence following the fermatas (the others are short fermatas followed by rests, which, as Neumann indicates, should not be given a cadenza).

In sum, vocal treatises of Mozart's time and recent scholarship suggest restraint when ornamenting the body of Mozart's concert arias. Frequent embellishments are allowed if – and only if – brief, standard ornaments are used. Short cadenzas should be included at elongated fermatas. Appoggiaturas can be employed, with care, in recitatives.

In an attempt to create an authentic performance, we can combine our knowledge of the singers for whom Mozart wrote these arias with dictates from the era's theorists and Mozart himself. It is difficult to

50. Tosi, *Observations*, 174-75.

51. Tosi, *Observations*, 58.

52. Neumann, *Ornamentation*, 239.

predict how an audience might react to a light-voiced rendition, ornamented with *messe di voce*, trills, and cadenzas. With recordings still being released without these considerations, it may be some time before more authentic presentations are accepted. Audiences have greeted with enthusiasm the idea of authentic instruments; the time has come to regard the voice in the same light.