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Pathos and Ethos in Mozart's *Idomeneo*: 'Vedrommi intorno' and 'Il padre adorato'

ABSTRACT

Background

According to Reinhard Strohm (1997, 18), eighteenth-century *opera seria* was 'a vehicle for moral edification and intellectual discourse about human nature. Its subjects comprised, in the sense of Aristotle's *Poetics*, both the passions ('pathos') and the virtues or social norms ('ethos')'. Such juxtapositions of passions and duty in *opera seria* can be associated with ideas expressed more generally in eighteenth-century aesthetics. For example, when discussing the role of sensibility (*Empfindsamkeit*) in Enlightenment aesthetics, Barbara Becker-Cantarino (2005, 11) has emphasized that emotions were seen to be interdependent with virtues and reason: "Empfindsam" denoted the penchant for both morality and emotion, a conflation of reason and an emotional impulse or feeling leading to an opinion or principle [...]. Sensibility was in alliance with true virtue, was man's moral sense'. Therefore, contemporary audiences were responsive to operatic works that juxtaposed affections with virtues and reason, because such a pairing would have been familiar to them from other artistic environments as well.

In Metastasian libretti, the pairing of pathos and ethos often leads to a dilemma, which elucidates, in one way or another, consequences of a tension between love and duty. As a result, the operas' characters frequently face a fundamentally unsolvable conflict in which obeying duty would lead to a renouncement of love. An extreme case is the genre of 'sacrifice drama', where duty requires one to kill a loved one, often a member of the family. As an *opera seria*, Mozart's *Idomeneo* (1780–81) is also preoccupied with conflicts growing out of pathos and ethos. The opera belongs to the genre of 'sacrifice drama' mentioned above, but following the conventions of the eighteenth-century *opera seria*, the threat of sacrifice is ultimately overcome by a happy ending; in *Idomeneo*, the *lieto fine* is brought forth by a *deus ex machina*.

The *argomento* preceding Gianbattista Varesco's original, published libretto gives a clear description of the plot's tensions:

Idomeneo, King of Crete, was among the most celebrated heroes who dealt the last death-blow to famous Troy. Returning by sea in glory to his own kingdom, he was overtaken, quite near the port of Sidon, by such a powerful storm that, overcome with terror, he vowed to Neptune that he would sacrifice whatever man he should meet first after reaching shore, if only he and his men were allowed to survive the imminent shipwreck. His son Idamante, wrongly informed of the death of his beloved father, ran to the coast, inconsolable, but perhaps hoping to find some happier news there; by mishap he was the first to meet his father, who, his prayer

having been answered by the Sea God, was wandering alone awaiting the promised victim. (Translation from Rushton 1993, 4.)

The long absence of Idomeneo from his native land, where he had left his son a mere child, meant that neither recognised the other until after an extended conversation. [...] The confused emotions awakened in father and son following their mutual recognition; the paternal love of Idomeneo; his duty towards Neptune; the happy condition of Idamante (unaware of his fate).

Aims and Repertoire Studied

The opera's main dilemma, which centres around the conflict between love (pathos) and duty (ethos), is introduced in three consecutive numbers at the end of the first act: 1) Idomeneo's aria 'Vedrommi intorno'; 2) the recitative 'Cieli! che veggo?', which Idomeneo and Idamante execute together; 3) Idamante's aria 'Il padre adorato', which ends the first act. A conflict between relief and lament governs both Idomeneo's and Idamante's arias. In his aria, Idomeneo shows relief that he has survived, but at the same time, laments the vow he made. However, he cannot escape his oath, so he accepts his duty to sacrifice the first person he meets, no matter how unfair it seems to him. At this point in the plot Idomeneo does not yet know who the victim will be. In the ensuing recitative Idomeneo meets Idamante, whom he does not recognize. After a brief discussion, Idomeneo and Idamante discover each others' identities, and Idomeneo learns, to his horror, that he should kill his own son. To escape the vow, he acts harshly and forbids Idamante from ever seeing him again. He leaves the stage without killing Idamante, thus not fulfilling, at least for the present, his vow. In the following aria, it is now Idamante who faces the dilemma between relief (Idomeneo is alive) and lament (his father's anger and departure). As an obedient son, Idamante's duty is to follow his father's orders and to accept his hostility without question, even though he cannot understand the reason for Idomeneo's harsh reaction.

This paper examines the emergence and consequences of these conflicts, analysing the two arias mentioned above that introduce the foundation of the opera's main tension. In both arias, duty ultimately outweighs love: in 'Vedrommi intorno' Idamante accepts that he must sacrifice the first person he sees, who turns out to be his son; in 'Il padre adorato' Idamante accepts his father's hostility even though he is oblivious to its reason.

Methods

This paper combines four music-analytical perspectives: 1) form and phrase structure (Caplin 1998; Hepokoski and Darcy 2006); 2) voice-leading

structure (Schenker 1979); 3) meter (Rothstein 1989);
4) expressive narrative (Robinson 2005).

Implications

The analysis examines how the emotional conflict between love (pathos) and duty (ethos) is introduced at the beginnings of the arias, as well as how it is resolved at their endings. Both arias start by introducing musical tensions that mirror the speaker's emotional turmoil. The analysis follows how this initial musical conflict is first elaborated and ultimately resolved at the end of the arias. The paper also argues that the final conclusion is, in both arias, somewhat qualified, as if suggesting that the speakers are not completely certain of the rightness of the conclusions. This underlying uncertainty shows that Mozart's music includes emotional subtleties not encountered in Varesco's libretto; thus, the music subtly affects the way in which the text may be interpreted. The arias' overall paths from conflict to resolution are traced through discussion of form, tonal structure, meter and expression.

Keywords

Operatic Analysis, Formal Functions, Sonata Theory, Schenkerian Analysis, Meter, Text-Music Relationships.

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