

The A-B-A' structure as a social 'return' in opera buffa

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In this short paper, I briefly explore the plots of three milestones of the *opera buffa* genre: *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786), *Don Giovanni* (1787), and *Così fan tutte* (1790). They share an extremely interesting dramaturgical aspect that, in my view, suggests a sociologically 'circular' reading of the stories that seem to ignore any internal running of time. This effect is related to the fact that all the characters of these operas consider a possible change in their lives, that however, does not really happen. Even if their emotions have been shaken for a certain time, all the characters will instead come back to their initial condition, ignoring every previous diversion. Events swirl like a spiral: at the end of the three stories, despite the time flowing, and although the characters move a step further gaining new awareness, each situation returns to its starting point. This is why I consider all three stories as 'tripartite', **A-B-A'**. Moreover, their 'happy ending' seems a true paradox.

The three plots have a similar structure to the tripartite *aria*, where the musical return (**A'**) is identical in text to the beginning **A**, although varied by the presence of musical ornaments. The dramaturgical sense of a Metastasian *aria* refers, in fact, to the characters' frequent hiding of emotions: feelings are rationally explained, and divided into sections **A** and **B**. The structure **A-B-A'** states the organization of a systematic thought rather than a sentimental impulse, and thanks to the return of **A** with variations, the emotional stability of the beginning is restored after the **B** diversion: feelings always reappear as they were at the beginning. In sum:

The *da capo* aria [...] provides a formal, orderly, and balanced framework even for the most turbulent passages [...]: the character states his/her sentiment through logical concepts and thus reveals rationality, that is man's greatest quality.²

It seems to me that the overall dramaturgical construction of the three *opere buffe* by Da Ponte and Mozart refers to a tripartite division that exactly matches the musical one just described, despite the fast running of time of events: the upheavals (**B**) due to the action working in the life of the characters (**A**) will be re-established at the end of the story thanks to the recreation of the initial social situation (**A'**). But this restoration will be only practical and social, not emotional! The action ends with the re-appearance of the initial social environment, and, finally, the original order comes back perfectly intact after a lively game of misunderstandings. The result will show a picture of a vibrant and sparkling, but essentially static society, directed by aristocrats and avoiding any permanent social mixing. Even in comic operas, the nobles describe themselves by often using the typical *aria* structure **A-B-A'**, which is emotionally self-representative. The aristocrats confirm themselves as the ruling class by using a circular narrative scheme, and their adventures end with the recreation of the initial situation despite any intermediate adventures. In other words, the tripartite device **A-B-A'** works as a clear metaphor for reassuring a firm social stability:

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² BIANCONI 1993: 58–59: "L'aria col daccapo [...] assicura una cornice formale ordinata ed equilibrata anche agli affetti più tumultuosi [...]: il personaggio vi inquadra il proprio sentimento organizzandolo in concetti logici e rivelando dunque quella capacità di raziocinio ch'è, dell'uomo, la qualità precipua".

1. **A** describes the starting situation, inevitably expressing a socially accepted view: Figaro is about to marry Susanna, the Count is married to the Countess; Don Giovanni lives alone with his servant, Donna Anna seems happy with Don Ottavio, Zerlina and Masetto are almost married; Fiordiligi is engaged to Guglielmo, Dorabella to Ferrando.

2. **B** is the emotional upheaval of the characters happening during the plot: the Count interferes with the marriage plans of Figaro and Susanna; Don Giovanni kills a nobleman, acts fully as a libertine, and upsets everyone; the two couples in *Così fan tutte* understand that they are both mismatched.

3. **A'** restores the initial order, but only outwardly: again, Figaro and Susanna are to be married, the Count and Countess seem reconciled; Don Giovanni disappears and everything appears as if he had never existed (he leaves no known children, Leporello seeks another master, Donna Elvira enters a convent, Zerlina and Masetto make peace, Don Ottavio shows his closeness to Donna Anna); the infidelity of Fiordiligi and Dorabella will be 'punished' by marriage with their original *fiancés*, Despina and Don Alfonso confirm their practical view of life. But almost all the characters will carry with them the burden of experiences that have upset them deeply during the 'disordered' part of the opera. In fact, the Count's basic instincts have been forever shaken by the powerful fascination that Susanna's youth has exerted on him, the Countess understands that her marriage has become emotionally empty, Susanna realises that she is much smarter than her future husband; Donna Elvira and Donna Anna experienced with Don Giovanni pure sensuality for the first time in their lives, Zerlina has briefly felt like a noblewoman, Leporello lived in symbiosis with his master; Fiordiligi and Dorabella discovered love at first sight, and the same can be said for Guglielmo and Ferrando, because their mutual bet did *not* foresee that one should court the betrothed girl of the other.

As a logical consequence of the structure **A-B-A'**, the sensual emotion conveyed by **B** should disappear mercilessly in the recomposition of **A'**. The stable social statement reproduced in part **A** should confirm its validity by re-establishing the happy ending that restores the initial situation. The emotional charge of **B** should be nullified: nothing different should replace the ordered path of life already stated at the beginning of the opera, and the divergent emotional experiences should survive only as distant memories. In fact, inside our three operas, both emotion and instinct succumb, reduced to mere dreams that leave a bitter taste in the mouth. Dreams very often allow people to experience what is not morally permissible in real life: the effect of a dreamed-of fulfilled desire can be cathartic, but on other occasions, it could be rather destabilising.

In the three masterpieces by Da Ponte and Mozart, laughter greatly contributes to the achievement of the cathartic effect. The society defined by situation **A** comes out stronger because it 'overcomes' the emotional shakings of **B**, making them ridiculous, and returns to prevail in **A'** as the only efficient reorganization of lives. As a consequence, we get quite a clear picture:

A is real life, where everyone lives in a 'correct' place (which means that nobles love nobles, and peasants love peasants, without any social mixing).

B is the disruption of real life, where instinct prevails over rationality (this implies, as a consequence, a useless disorder, a sense of ridiculousness, and a possible social change). Members of the different social classes cut across each other through disguises, plotting together, and courtship, but this mixed social environment inevitably will stop.

A' leads all the story back to its starting point. The characters have not accepted the formal disorders derived from the emotional turmoils that happened in **B**. A full rationality comes back over their social landscape, which seems, at first sight, happily re-confirmed.

At this point, an interesting question arises: is the emotional 'happy ending' something real for the characters of these three *opere buffe*? Do they truly desire to re-establish their pre-turmoil situation? Are they able to forget their traumas or strong experiences, and start living again as if these diversions never happened? What happens with their emotions? It seems to me that the 'happy ending' of *opere buffe* marks a pure game of roles, a play within the play where characters *pretend* their final satisfaction. At the end of the stories, their feelings cannot be like the initial ones, because after **B** their previous relationships and emotions have been seriously challenged.

In conclusion, I think that, at least in the three *opere buffe* by Da Ponte and Mozart, the censorship of instinct shown in **B** for a long time is deliberate and consistent, reflecting the values of their conservative society. Instinct could not be considered as a value, undermining the perfect aristocratic social machine which relied on matrimonial arrangements without caring about real feelings. “The nobility is almost a bright lamp that [...] lights up and incites to virtue”, wrote Baldassarre Castiglione in his *Cortegiano* five centuries ago.³ And, in fact, love, physical attraction, and emotional relationships between people of different social classes: all these matters would have been considered highly subversive, as they would have seriously challenged the foundations of the institution and privileges of the aristocratic families.⁴

In these three *opere buffe*, the attitude of the characters is very different from that implied in the Settecento *opera seria*, where they often act as spectators of themselves⁵ and live in a condition of permanent dissatisfaction.⁶ Nevertheless, the happy ending (**A'**) settles events ‘back’, pushing to ignore any previous emotional upheaval (**B**). Frankly, at the end of the three Da Ponte and Mozart masterpieces, it is really hard to imagine that all the characters will live happily ever after without any regrets... Would it be perhaps possible to extend the same dramaturgical **A-B-A'** model to other contemporary *opere buffe*?

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3 CASTIGLIONE 2002: 31 [l.4.7]: “La nobiltà è quasi una chiara lampa che [...] accende e sprona alla virtù”.

4 TAROZZI 2003: 152. A similar social threat was felt in the second half of the twentieth century, when domestic devices were introduced into European middle-class homes: this equipment has been considered “a dangerous attack on the unity and strength of the family”.

5 JOLY 1983: LVII.

6 JOLY 1983: xxx–xxxi: “They compensate their inertia with an over-fertile imagination”, and they temper “the recklessness of their affections with the light of reason”.

