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Enlightenment and Neoclassicism in *La Clemenza di Tito* of Mozart: An Historical-Legal Perspective

Mario Riberi

Abstract

Opera seria had always chosen its settings and characters from classical antiquity drawing on Greek mythology, the histories of Livy and Suetonius, the *Aeneid*, *Plutarch's Lives*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In the second half of the eighteenth century, however, this world was given a new lease of life, separated from contemporary matters by an ever-decreasing division, across which it seemed almost possible for modern ideas to join hand with antiquity. In this context, the virtue of clemency is often represented on many levels in Mozart's operas, and in particular in *La Clemenza di Tito* (1791). The main purpose of *La Clemenza di Tito* is the creation of an esthetic and neoclassical vision that introduces an enlightened interpretation of the virtue of clemency into the absolutistic context. Demonstrating the ability to forgive, and setting his own needs aside to accommodate his subjects, Tito is an enlightened ruler, who is both morally irreproachable and sensitive. By forgiving and preserving his subjects, the enlightened ruler allows them to become enlightened themselves.

Keywords: Mozart, Titus, clemency, enlightenment, neoclassicism

1. *La Clemenza di Tito*: an introduction

In 1791, the year of his death, Mozart received three important commissions, very different from each other but each in its own way significant in the boundless catalog of the Salzburg genius.

The first proposal was made by Emanuel Schikaneder, former director of the *Theater auf der Wieden* in Vienna, who in May submitted to Mozart's attention the libretto on the *Magic Flute*, written by Schikaneder himself and based on those humanitarian and truth-seeking ideals of ancient masonry, of which Mozart himself was a believer [1].

A few months later, precisely in July, he was the butler of a certain Count Franz von Walsegg who knocked on Mozart's door, offering him to compose a requiem mass for a fee set by the composer himself. Walsegg is now known as a wealthy and amateur musician who commissioned other scores of various kinds and then pretended to be the true composer. The requiem required by Mozart was conceived for his late wife, and Walsegg himself directed his execution in the Cistercian church in Vienna, 2 years after Mozart's death on December 14, 1793 [2].

The most demanding proposal of the three, however, was presented to Mozart in August: Leopold II of Habsburg-Lorraine would have been crowned king of

Bohemia in Prague, on 6 September, shortly before the representatives of the Bohemian states had signed with the impresario Domenico Guardasoni a contract for a work celebrating the event, which would be staged on the day of the coronation. The choice of the libretto was almost obligatory and fell on a text written by Metastasio in 1734, *La Clemenza di Tito*, a solemn drama of Roman argument on the virtues of Titus, an enlightened sovereign who in the name of friendship renounces love and forgives conspiracy ordered by Sesto for the love of Vitellia. The work had indeed been commissioned to Salieri, at the time considered the greatest living composer in Austria, but he had refused it for unknown reasons. The time to complete the commission was very short, and Mozart worked hard at it, completing the score (if it is true what Niemetschek says) in just 18 days. The composer immediately went to Prague with his wife Costanza; the pupil Süßmayr, who wrote some of the *recitativi secchi* of the opera then revised by the master; and the clarinetist Anton Stadler, who would have obtained an important part in the orchestra [3].

Mozart had accepted the work with enthusiasm, and he did not spare himself at all in his writing, taking notes even in the carriage and in the brief moments of rest; but it was not enough to satisfy the Prague public, who coldly welcomed the dry and classical linearity of *La Clemenza*. The chronicles of the evening tell of the regal but unrefined comment of Empress Maria Luisa, daughter of the King of Naples, who brandished the work as a “German-style trash in Italian style” [4]. Although *La Clemenza* was increasingly appreciated in the short term, the number of her representations has been gradually diminishing until it almost disappears; moreover, musicologists and conductors (like Riccardo Muti) have given new life to this work of excruciating beauty from the last century to today. If it is true, in fact, that in his expressive stylistic forms *clemency* casts a glance back at the old world of *opera seria*, it is also true that its fluid structures already presage the future solutions of Beethoven and Weber [5]. Compared to the sublime trilogy of Mozart-Da Ponte, which in addition to providing a faithful image of the time when it was written is characterized by the dynamism of stage action, *La Clemenza di Tito* is a more static work, which describes the facts around Tito, an illuminated motor of the whole history; this is at least the criticism that came from many parts. It would surprise many readers to know that almost 60 years after its birth, the libretto of Metastasio (originally written to celebrate Leopold II's grandfather, Charles VI) was not hired *sic et simpliciter*, but it was “reduced to a real work,” and it is Mozart himself who wrote this in his personal catalog, from the court poet of the Elector of Saxony, Caterino Mazzolà. The glorious times of the *opera seria* had inevitably passed away, and a text like the Metastasian one, even if very precious, was, if we want to put it this way, “aged badly.” As the most skilled of the tailors, Mazzolà adds something and cuts here and there; in particular it is the insertion of ensembles (duets, threesomes, concertati) the most innovative element: it's indeed a modernization of a scheme that since the time of Caldara was based on the rigid alternation of recitatives and solo arias. A restoration of the kind, of course, has a price. The famous recitative of Titus (III, 7), already praised by Voltaire, is now mutilated in several parts, and the air “Se mai senti spirarti sul volto,” which had its importance in the version of Gluck of *La Clemenza*, is now transformed into a *terzetto*, certainly ensuring greater fluidity to the scene but also mitigating its dramatic potential [6].

La Clemenza di Tito is a story of friendship and forgiveness triumphing over jealousy and violence. The new emperor of Rome, Tito, is much loved by the Roman people, with the exception of Vitellia, the daughter of the previous emperor. When her attempts to return to her rightful place on the throne through marriage are unsuccessful, Vitellia plots Tito's assassination and enlists the help of her young admirer, Sesto. Sesto is close friends with Tito, but will do anything to gain the affections of Vitellia, so he agrees to her plans. He sets fire to the Capitol, intending

to trap Tito inside and kill him. Meanwhile, Servilia (who is Sesto's sister) has refused Tito's marriage proposal because she is already engaged to Annio, Sesto's close friend. Tito instead sends Publio, his captain of the guard, to take a marriage proposal to Vitellia on his behalf, but Publio arrives too late, and the assassination plot is already in motion. Fortunately, Tito is not killed in the fire, but Sesto has gone missing. Annio finds his friend, who is torturing himself with the guilt of his crime, and tells him that Tito did not die in the fire and that Sesto should be honest with Tito and trust in his reputation for clemency. Sesto admits his guilt and faces trial and execution. Tito has explained several times in the opera how important clemency is to him and he now struggles with sentencing his friend. He questions Sesto privately, and Sesto begs him to remember their friendship. Alone and unaware of Tito's trouble, Vitellia realizes that Sesto's life is too high a price to pay for her place on the throne and finally admits to Tito that she is responsible and asks him to spare Sesto's life. Tito announces a pardon for all conspirators, to high praise from the Roman people.

Alongside the style of the magniloquent and the gorgeous (which is also favored by a certain public), there is the less used *modus operandi* of sobriety and rigor. It is not coinciding with the absence of emotions but deals with the contemporary need of levity, which, like heaviness, has its honorable reasons. All this seems to us to be applied reasonably to *La Clemenza*, which is the result of the work of Mozart and Mazzolà. To try to understand more, it is appropriate to start from the difficulties encountered by the Venetian poet Mazzolà in writing the *libretto*, especially starting from the physical and dramaturgical barycenter of the work: the ending of the first act. The famous quintet with chorus "Deh, conservate o dei" is in fact the keystone of the new dress made by Mazzolà for the old eighteenth-century drama [7]. The *concertato* is constructed through the progressive entrance on stage of all the characters except Titus, whose assassination is announced at this point. The whole cast comments on the misdeed from his own personal point of view. Their lines are united with the feeble voice of the choir, which behind the scenes laments the death of the enlightened ruler; in the background, the Campidoglio burns. Mazzolà has reduced the three original acts to two and, at the end of the first act, has included the *concertato* composed of the quintet on stage and the chorus that comments the murder behind the scenes. In doing so, however, a dramaturgically crucial event lacks which could properly conclude the act I. Here then the genius of Mozart shines: at first he composed in a sublime manner the *concertato*, giving it a character of anti-climax (after the allegro the chorality of the voices emerges with the next andante, during which the news of the emperor's death arrives), which imprints a sudden braking at the dramatic rhythm, creating a flouting atmosphere that concludes the act in an aura of mystery; then he has the spectacular intuition of making visible a passage that in Metastasio is only narrated: the Campidoglio in flames. In the same theater that had baptized the final episode of *Don Giovanni*, with the protagonist thrown into hell by the stone guest (cf. Da Ponte: "foco da diverse parti" and "il foco cresce"), now the flames surrounds the Roman hill (cf. Metastasio: "Annio che fai?/ Roma tutta è in tumulto, il Campidoglio vasto incendio divora"); it's a powerful scenario for this human and musical journey, considered the dynamic (*pianissimo*) which are reduced orchestra and voices on the scene, at the fall of the curtain [8].

The second act opens with a *recitativo secco*, which reveals immediately to the audience that Tito has escaped the conspiracy and is still alive. It was a brilliant *coup de théâtre*, as well as a source of confusion for the protagonists and the public, who had concluded the previous act believing the dead of Titus. The melodic enchantment of Mozart settles, in this act, especially on the figure of Sesto, protagonist at first of the *terzetto* "Quello di Tito è il volto" with Publius and Tito himself, and immediately after with the aria-rondò "Deh, per questo istante solo," in which he caresses the thought

of dying, in order to not suffer any further for the sorrows inflicted at his friend Tito. However, if the final verses of the trio (“Chi more/non può poiù penar”) get the musical assent of the orchestra, not so can be said for those who conclude the rondo (“Tanto affanno soffre un core/Nè si more di dolor!”), which instead are presented in a musical guise contrary to their meaning. As Raffaele Mellace affirm:

The rondo melody of Sesto makes its appearance from an ‘elsewhere’ of sidereal distance, like a voice of almost metaphysical gratuitousness, estranged from all pain, which seems resolved in a play of primitive innocence. A return to the origins very close to certain atmospheres of The Magic Flute and to other melodies of the last Mozart [9].

It is worth dwelling on another significant number of the score and in particular on two significant timbre choices: one falls on the clarinet, the other on his “brother” with a deep sound, the basset horn (close relative of the alto clarinet but with a wider extension in the severe register). The first stands out, in act I, in the farewell of Sesto to Vitellia, the aria “Parto, ma tu ben mio,” where with the velvety and persuasive timber it tells of the fateful domination of affections on the human will, in a magnificent *concertato*; the basset horn instead affirms itself in one of the best known points of the score, the aria “Non più di fiori,” with which Vitellia renounces the imperial throne in order to save Sesto. After a first section with a liederistic flavor, we pass, in this aria of the final act, to a second part characterized by an intense vocal articulation, counterpointed by the dark line of the basset horn. As Giovanni Carli Ballola wrote [10], the basset horn bellows dark as the Minotaur of the labyrinth of Borges, echoing to the sound of the voice in the low register, where the melody resembles that of the air-rondo of Sesto: it’s the return of the fixed idea of death as the ultimate goal and source of redemption of all sin.

The orchestra of *Clemenza*, compared to that of the other serious Mozart masterpiece (*Idomeneo re di Creta*, 1781), is characterized by its smaller dimensions, similar, paradoxically, to the comic operas written in collaboration with Da Ponte; removing the aforementioned basset horn, they are in fact practically the same. The timbric refinement, however, now plays the irreplaceable function of “humanizing” with extreme delicacy the rigid sacredness of the drama of Metastasio. The horns, in addition to the usual harmonious reinforcement in the central register, support the voice of Publius in the only solo air of the character (“Tardi s’avvede”), in which the bass recalls, according to Machiavelli’s principles, that for a ruler, like Tito, it is more convenient to suspect than to have faith on his subjects. The trumpets are used in particular in scenes of collective joy, moments in which the authentic popular simplicity and the intense religious sentiment coincide.

La Clemenza di Tito is a work of many souls. No doubt it is a political text; above all because, in a difficult historical moment like the French Revolution, which would soon have blown up more than one head, it has the arduous task of exalting the ideal of magnanimity and wisdom, of clementia in substance, of a sovereign like Leopoldo II, who first adopted Cesare Beccaria’s ideals in the world with the promulgation of the Leopoldian code (which abolished the crime of injured majesty, the confiscation of property, the torture, and the death penalty). But the dramatization of the virtues of the princeps is itself political school, and of the best: the Machiavellian lesson that the sovereign imparts to himself by observing his qualities reflected in a mirror. But *La Clemenza*, as the director Luca Ronconi reminds us, is an inner adventure rather than a plot of a conspiracy, and it is a story of love and friendship. The conspiracy of Vitellia and Sesto against Tito, which she loves without being reciprocated, has little of the act of terrorism. It’s all in the reasons of the heart. The final quintet of the first act becomes the sung story of five friends; as if in a subtle play of invisible threads, the equilibriums

shift, and the relations of force change, because one of them becomes emperor. It is paradoxical that in the work perhaps less loved among those of the maturity of Mozart, one finds such a living and powerful humanity. It is felt, for example, in the recitative accompanied by Titus, in which Caesar envies the poor *villanello* who perfectly knows the intentions of each other, without having to rush to demonstrate their truthfulness, “mentre noi”—Tito laments “fra tante ricchezze sempre incerti viviam.” It is a difficult choice and always actual, choosing between the heart and the mind, and Publio effectively reminds in the trio with Sesto and Tito how between sense and sensibility “Mille diversi affetti guerra fanno.” It seems appropriate then to conclude with the words of a great music critic like Paolo Isotta, who, comparing the *Idomeneo* and *La Clemenza* to each other, wrote:

Between the two works the fundamental difference is this, that in the first the dramatic element is much more pushed and, while in the second the light is uniformly and softly diffused as on a marble surface. The ambition of classical perfection and the neoclassical atmosphere are united. But the tragic element, in sublime style, is so present that we would give the whole Magic flute in exchange for the Final I of Clemency [...] [11].

And we would do it because, like the rest of the work, it has something indispensable, moving, human.

2. *La Clemenza di Tito*: enlightenment and neoclassicism

As Thomas Kaminski affirm:

The eighteenth century was the age of Enlightenment, a period that we associate with social criticism, anticlericalism, and scientific discovery; and the classics often appear to have no place in this culture of reason and progress. But as demonstrated, virtually all of the important Enlightenment figures were deeply immersed in classical learning. (...) During the first half of the eighteenth century, neoclassicism actually constituted the basic esthetic theory of the Enlightenment [12].

The clemency of Tito is a good example of the union between Enlightenment and neoclassicism.

The Emperor Peter Leopold himself is an example of Enlightened ruler. The second son of Maria Theresa, during his government as Grand Duke of Tuscany from 1765 to 1790, made great relevant reforms. Intelligent and energetic, he made reforms in both economic and humanitarian affairs. He attacked monopolies and encouraged free trade, built roads and bridges, made taxes both lower and fairer, and reduced the public debt; he also made a valiant attempt to drain the Maremma's marshes. In consultation with the Milanese jurist Cesare Beccaria, he drew up a penal code that made Tuscany the first state in Europe to abolish the death penalty and burn the gallows, a measure so audacious and encouraging to the cause of enlightenment that a Spanish reformer implores his own to turn his eyes to Tuscany to reflect upon the mildness of the death penalties upon the small number of crimes committed there and to read over and over again the penal code of its prince. Among his other merits, Peter Leopold was conscientious and loyal to a state that had no connection to either of his parents' families before 1734. Although from 1770 he was heir to the imperial throne in Vienna, the Grand Duke kept his father's promise to defend the rights and maintain the autonomy of his duchy. In 1790 he became the penultimate Holy Roman Emperor after the death of his brother,

Joseph II, who was the greatest and most innovative of all enlightened monarchs, an emancipator of serfs as well as Jews [13].

During his brief reign in Vienna, Leopold II (as Peter Leopold became) retained his reforming zeal, abolishing various punishments and ordering the police to be kind to prisoners; he even gave his subjects something of the principle of habeas corpus.

The clemency represents a dramatization of the *speculum principis*. The sovereign (like Leopold II) possesses superior qualities, and their celebration confirms the virtues of the princeps, shown to him as in a mirror (“Scribere de clementia, Nero Cæsar, institui, ut quodam modo speculi vice fungerer et te tibi ostenderem perventurum ad voluptatem maximam omnium,” incipit of the *De Clementia* of Seneca) [14].

Clemency, natural and necessary virtue for the prince, saves the sovereign from the danger of anger, guaranteeing him the love of his subjects. The Titus is an uplifting work also because it is not simply an *opera seria*, genre “symbol of the culture of the ancien régime,” but of the staging of a historical fact, of a dramatization of history, and therefore of “*veritas* on stage,” a real example drawn from history and therefore more effective, because it is objective, absolutely true, and therefore very authoritative, based on *De Vitae Cæsarum* of Suetonius, not without a noble dramatic derivation from the *Cinna ou La Clémence d’Auguste* of Corneille [14–16]. In the transfiguring perspective of the libretto, perfectly aligned with the ideal of the good enlightened lord-father, the sovereign, perfect prince is an irreplaceable hero, whose regal glory resides in the incredible, superhuman exercise of virtue: justice, self-control, philanthropy, and clemency. For him the institutional experience is all-encompassing, and it sacrifices every individual need to it. Obedience to the *raison d’état*, though tiring, is binding: the eventual insubordination of the monarch, moved by private interests, would entail his decline from the supreme position that the supreme rank requires and, automatically, the ignominious slippage in tyranny. In the *Trionfo di Clelia* of Metastasio, not surprisingly, the *raison d’état* appears in the eyes of the passionate Tarquinio “barbaric,” because it brakes and limits its political and erotic appetites. Tarquinio is the opposite of Tito, knows no rational domain of affections, cannot curb impulses, and is not a good ruler but just a tyrant, an amoral sovereign, who abuses power for his own benefit.

Di stato, o cara,

la barbara ragione, il genitore

m’ha nella figlia a lusingar forzato;

ma la ragion di stato

sugli affetti non regna

In Titus, on the contrary, the undisputed priority of the public dimension, and therefore of the imperial function, dominates and wins, with supreme control of passions, of every temptation of the heart, and determines the solution of every inner conflict between obligation and desire always in favor of the first, which benefits his fellows and his subjects [17, 18].

3. Conclusions

The neoclassicism of the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries is one that valued ancient Greek, Roman, and Etruscan artistic ideals. These ideals, including

order, symmetry, and balance, were considered by many European generations to be the highest point of artistic excellence. Although many movements in European art were largely devoid of classical characteristics, they were always looked to as sources of inspiration and were revived as significant movements at least three times throughout European history, in the twelfth century, during the Renaissance, and during the age of the present topic, the enlightenment, with its development of neoclassicism.

There are several events and movements within the Enlightenment that contributed to the rise of neoclassicism. The expansion, evolution, and redefinition of the European standard classical education were one of the greatest causes, as well as the recent archeological discoveries of Pompeii and Herculaneum. The rise in commissioned art and architecture and the refinement of art scholarship also gave rise to this movement. Finally, the general reaction to the exorbitant styles of Baroque and Rococo necessitated a return to the more orderly ideals of antiquity.

Opera seria had always chosen its settings and characters from classical antiquity drawing on Greek mythology, the histories of Livy and Suetonius, the *Aeneid*, *Plutarch's Lives*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In the second half of the eighteenth century, however, this world was given a new lease of life, separated from contemporary matters by an ever-decreasing division, across which it seemed almost possible for modern ideas to join hand with antiquity. In this context, the virtue of clemency is often represented on many levels in Mozart's operas and in particular in *La Clemenza di Tito* (1791) [19].

The main purpose of *La Clemenza di Tito* is the creation of an esthetic and neoclassical vision that introduces an enlightened interpretation of the virtue of clemency into the absolutistic context. Demonstrating the ability to forgive, and setting his own needs aside to accommodate his subjects, Tito is an enlightened ruler, who is both morally irreproachable and sensitive. By forgiving and preserving his subjects, the enlightened ruler allows them to become enlightened themselves:

Non ha conosciuto l'antichità né migliore né più amato principe di Tito Vespasiano. Le sue virtù lo resero a tutti sì caro, che fu chiamato "la delizia del genere umano". E pure due giovani patrizi, uno de' quali era suo favorito, cospirarono contro di lui. Scoperta però la congiura, furono dal Senato condannati a morire. Ma il clementissimo Cesare, contento d'averli paternamente ammoniti, concesse loro ed. a' loro complici un generoso perdono.

Antiquity knew no prince who was better or more beloved than Tito Vespasiano. His virtue endeared him to all, and he was called the delight of humanity. But two young patricians, one of whom was his favorite, conspired against him, Once the plot was discovered, they were condemned to death by the Senate. But the most merciful Caesar, content to give them a paternal warning, granted them and their accomplices a generous pardon [20].

As we notice, the libretto's *argomento* of *La Clemenza* of Metastasio emphasizes the drama of character to the virtual exclusion of the revolutionary aspects of the story. The drama in Metastasio and in Mozart/Mazzolà is centered not on the actions of the conspirators, Sesto and Vitellia and their followers, but rather on Tito's virtue and forgiveness. Clemency is not merely a chief attribute of a title character but as the main subject of the drama and the goal of its plot.

As well noticed:

The events of the opera emphasize the way clemency and the Enlightenment values it represents are threatened by dark tendencies in human nature: like the Queen of the Night and the attack of Sarastro's realm, Vitellia and the rebellion she incites are fundamentally opposed to enlightened order. But the solution in the Italian opera is not the vanquishing of the power of darkness; it is rather the unconditional pardon of Vitellia, Sesto, Lentulo and the other conspirators. (...) The Queen of night will or cannot recognize the values of Sarastro's enlightened realm: she is irrevocably opposed to his governance. Vitellia and Sesto, however, prove themselves deserving of the pardon Tito grants them: they are, in the end, fully reconciled with the world they had wronged. The crux of the plot here is the emperor's experience of and the response of betrayal; the definitive recognition is the moment at which he reclaims his policy of clemency and recovers his identity as an enlightened ruler [21].

The reception of classical antiquity is used by Metastasio/Mozart/Mazzolà, at least, to recover and celebrate the enlightenment's values [22].

One year later the representation of Mozart's *La Clemenza*, Leopold II died suddenly in Vienna, in March 1792. Meanwhile Louis XVI, King of France, was officially arrested on August 13, 1792 and sent to the Temple, an ancient fortress in Paris that was used as a prison. On September 21, the National Assembly declared France to be a Republic and abolished the monarchy. Louis was stripped of all of his titles and honors and from this date was known as Citoyen Louis Capet. On Monday, January 21, 1793, Louis XVI, at age 38, was beheaded by guillotine on the Place de la Révolution.

A new era begins.

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