

5 Mozart as Epideictic Rhetorician: The Representation of Vice and Virtue in *La clemenza di Tito*

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The following article presents a rhetorical reading of *La clemenza di Tito*, drawing attention to the epideictic elements that we may recognise in the opera and its historical context.¹ According to Aristotle, epideictic or 'occasional' rhetoric is a genre focused on the present, though it also reminds the audience of the past and points towards the future;² it centres on the praising of virtues and the condemning of vices, and in this way serves to concretise, evoke, and maintain *doxai*, i.e. the shared opinions and values of a specific culture.³ Epideictic rhetoric is traditionally associated with ceremonial situations, such as weddings, coronations, and funerals. It requires the rhetorician to create consubstantial space and identification with the audience,⁴ frequently by presenting a poetic vision, narrative or allegory to communicate the abstract more clearly with the audience.⁵

Mozart's *La clemenza di Tito* was neglected through much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, partly because it is so coloured by its ceremonial circumstances. Its first performance, at the National Theatre in Prague on 6 September 1791, celebrated the coronation of Emperor Leopold II as king of Bohemia. It was the third of Leopold's three coronations in 1790–91, which represented an ideological offensive within the Holy Roman Empire at a time when the social outlook of the French Revolution threatened European monarchies and their underlying foundations of absolutism.⁶ Opera and other

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forms of theatre, including courtly celebrations and ceremonies, functioned both as an empowerment of the absolutist monarchies during this period, and as a means of ‘rebranding’ integrated civic and enlightened values into the representation of monarchy, thus adapting the institution to the new political situation.⁷ While on the one hand *La clemenza di Tito* celebrates the orthodoxies of court culture by employing the ritualistic symbolism of the Baroque, on the other it promotes the more recent social structure of enlightened absolutism. A study of the opera in its historical and rhetorical context therefore calls for two pairs of theoretical lenses: firstly, an approach focused on a ‘closed’ or ‘conservative’ form of epideictic rhetoric that celebrates existing values;⁸ and secondly, an approach focused on an ‘open’ or ‘radical’ epideictic rhetoric that introduces new and visionary values.⁹ The latter may potentially change the *doxai* and thus generate action on a par with deliberative, or ‘legislative’, rhetoric.¹⁰ We can see this in *La clemenza di Tito* through obvious changes in the depiction of the relationship between the ruler and the people; and through this we may recognise an underlying attempt to make the receivers favourably disposed to absolutism while reducing the power of possible counterarguments inspired by the Revolution.

Theatrum mundi and fraternité

Let us look at Image 5.1, a print by I. C. Berndt, ‘Vivat Leopoldus Secundus’. This was made for Leopold’s Frankfurt coronation, as Holy Roman emperor, and shares some features with the Mozart/Mazzolà *La clemenza di Tito*, which was created for one of his later coronations.

Seventeenth-century scholars will recognise in the engraving a series of allegories and *topoi* linked to the old emblematic language of the courtly arts. Observe Leopold II—his central placement and majestic appearance, his crown, robe and sceptre, and his imperious



*Vorüber ist dein Waisenstand,
Ein neuer Vater wird uns leiten –
Durch den dunklen Raum der Zeiten –
Dich geliebtes TEUTSCHES VATERLAND!*

*LEOPOLD, dein neuer KAISER –
Heil, dir ward ein schönes Loos! –
Ist ein grader Fürst, ein Weiser,
Und durch Herzensadel gros.*

*Segnend blickt der Weltgeist nieder;
Hüte dich, verwaistes Reich!
Jauchzet, meine teutschen Brüder,
Goldne tage winken euch! –*

Image 5.1. 'Vivat Leopoldus Secundus', coronation of Emperor Leopold II. Engraving by I. C. Berndt, 1790. Reproduced with kind permission from the copyright owner/holder, the Historisches Museum Frankfurt, N42672. On permanent loan from the Städel Museum Frankfurt. Photo: Horst Ziegenfusz. Licence: CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 International use.

and dignified body language—as he receives the hearts of the German people. Germany is represented allegorically as a beautiful young woman. The emperor is placed four steps above the other figures on the print, in front of a heavily ornamented portal framed by columns. This visual divide enhances the political symbolism, as the sovereign appears to be standing on his own platform or stage. The magnificent tableau is an example of the *theatrum mundi* (the world as a stage), understood here as the allegorical staging of a ceremonial event in the manner of a theatrical spectacle. Note also the winged figure of Fame, glorifying the emperor with her trumpet. She is surrounded by clouds, as if the *dea ex machina* of a courtly stage, and turned towards the sun as a metaphor for the absolute ruler.

Some features, however, are not consistent with Baroque *decorum*, unsurprisingly as the print was made shortly after the French Revolution. Observe the people. On the one hand, the populace resembles an audience watching a theatrical performance. On the other hand, in contradiction to the expected *theatrum mundi topos*, the two men in the lower right corner are more focused on each other than on the emperor. They shake hands, which is a gestural expression implying fellowship, and may refer to one of the ideals of the French Revolution, *fraternité*. This important ethical comment, pointing towards enlightened absolutism, depicts the experience of the receivers within the picture itself.¹¹ It is possible to interpret the populace as a visual expression of the *second persona*, or *implied audience* of the discourse, which, according to Edwin Black, is a synecdochic sign of the rhetorician's own point of view.¹² In other words, the crowd shows us how Berndt intends the viewers of the print to relate specifically to the coronation of Leopold as Holy Roman emperor, and more broadly to absolutism as a social structure. Berndt is suggesting that the Revolution does not have the exclusive rights to the moral and educational ideals of the Enlightenment: if the absolute monarch is enlightened and virtuous, his subjects will be met with kindness and

hence thrive as free citizens within his monarchy. In other words, they have no need for a revolution.

The Coronation Opera

Mozart's opera *La clemenza di Tito* represents a dialogue between the old and the new. Not unlike the print, it contains several ritualistic elements that are typical of the emblematic aesthetic of the Baroque. These are indicative of a conservative epideictic rhetoric and continue a long tradition within courtly culture of celebrating and preserving the established order. For example, the overture, in C major, which has the form of a sonata, contains both conservative and radical epideictic features. It opens with a majestic fanfare based on a rising triad with a characteristic dotted rhythm, played by wind and timpani, which is a musical *topos* linking the opera directly to the ceremonial context and that of the surrounding court culture. It is pompous. By contrast, the secondary theme in G major has a lyrical character that seems to evoke the virtue of clemency (*clemenza*), in the sense of compassion.¹³ As such it can be seen to represent modern civic culture, hence to function as a radical epideictic element of the overture.

In the recapitulation Mozart ignores the conventional use of repeating the exposition themes, instead reversing the order and beginning the recapitulation with the secondary theme ('civic culture'), and ending with the pompous repeated fanfare ('court culture'). Since such a thematic reversal is rare in Mozart's recapitulations, scholars have suggested that it was due to compositional haste,¹⁴ supported by sources that show that Mozart was under time pressure, and that the overture was one of the last things he wrote (see Chapter I Chronology and II Documents 12, 17, 21 and 22). The case is argued further that by switching the two themes Mozart kept new, transitional material to a minimum, and this may have saved him time and energy. However, I prefer to think that Mozart deliberately composed the overture this way to enhance its emblematic character. By

positioning the ‘civic’ theme at the beginning of the recapitulation, it thus occupies a central position in the overall structure of the overture, which now displays a more traditional Baroque symmetry, with the ‘courtly’ fanfare serving as a frame repetition or *symploce*. In other words, Mozart chose to adapt the customary and anticipated musical form to its ceremonial context.

The *symploce* frame is used several times in *La clemenza di Tito*, as a means of creating *amplification* to intensify and expand emblematic effects, for example, in other ceremonial numbers, such as the marches and choral eulogies. Mozart also uses *symploce* to characterise allegorical figures in the opera, while other dramatic and musical features reflect enlightened ideals, such as simplicity, naturalness and sensibility, corresponding to the gestural indicator of *fraternité* on Berndt’s print.

Rhetoric and Aesthetics

My approach to *La clemenza di Tito* is inspired by the interpretations of intentionality and the dialogic developed within New Rhetoric. I regard Mozart’s *opere serie* as sites of transition in which rhetorical and performative musical factors on the one hand, and aesthetic and autonomous factors on the other affect each other reciprocally. They colour each other while enhancing characteristic features of each other’s respective ontologies. Though the following concepts have been juxtaposed visually, I do not conceive of them as antitheses, but rather as dynamic and changeable relationships engaging in a dialogue.

Rhetoric	Aesthetics
<i>Mimesis</i> /Imitation	Musical autonomy
Performance	Work
Allegory	Individuality
Affect	<i>Empfindsamkeit</i>
Court culture	Civic culture

The aesthetic discourse in the second half of the eighteenth century is often presented as an antithesis, or absolute contrast, to rhetoric, and for good historical reasons. Art is perceived as an end itself and as an independent form of expression. It apparently disengages itself from any rhetorical context, and from one of the central concepts within rhetorical theory, i.e. *persuasion*, which points to the participatory aspects of communication. Many aestheticians at the time therefore rejected rhetoric as a matter of course. Immanuel Kant set a trend when he compared rhetoric unfavourably to poetry in his *Critik der Urtheilskraft* [*Critique of Judgement*] (1790). Defining poetry as the ‘free play of the imagination’, in which everything is honest and sincere, he associated rhetoric with the weaker sides of humanity, and hence there was no reason to concern oneself with it.¹⁵ The nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries became dark ages in the history of rhetoric: a period when it almost disappeared as an academic discipline and as a normative theory among artists and scholars.

Although aestheticians of the period rejected rhetoric, however, there are multiple proofs that rhetoric remained very much alive, albeit *incognito*. There are numerous examples in Mozart’s operas, where rhetoric has many faces, and is used in very different ways, frequently in conjunction with factors that represent the new aesthetic ideals.

***Opera seria* and the *da capo* aria**

In *Idomeneo* (1781) and *La clemenza di Tito* the emblematic aesthetic of early eighteenth-century *opera seria* interacts with the new Rousseauesque aesthetic, musically as well as dramatically. As a result, the notation in Mozart’s score acquires an authority over the performing singers and musicians, which the musical ‘work’ did not have earlier in the century.¹⁶ We see this most clearly in the contrast between the older *da capo* aria form, which is so characteristic of

traditional *opera seria*, and in which the focus was on the performers' vocal improvisation, and the newer aria forms developed by Mozart for purposes of characterisation. With these forms he distinguishes between characters with an allegorical function and characters that reflect the modern ideals of simplicity, sensibility and naturalness.

In the traditional *da capo* aria, the singers were co-creators on an equal standing with the composer, not merely interpreters of his intentions. It was through the performers' vocal and gestural dialogue with the listeners that the character acquired ethos, intentionality and dramatic allure on stage. The demands on the voice were therefore considerable. Apart from possessing vocal beauty, timbre, range, stability, evenness and mobility, which allowed the voice to perform fast runs and improvised cadenzas easily, the singer was required to characterise very different emotions vocally.

The dramatic justification of the *da capo* aria lay specifically in its ability to encapsulate and enhance an affect through repetition. This works because the exterior dramatic narrative is interrupted while the aria is heard, and we experience a shift to an interior lyrical level as the singing character discloses his or her inner affect to the listeners.

A hymn from 1765 by the Danish poet-bishop Hans Adolph Brorson exemplifies this. [The first stanza is given as the dedication to this volume. Eds.] Written in ABA form similar to the *da capo* aria, in translation it reads:

Here be silent, here be patient,
 Here be patient, O fragile heart!
 Sure of obtaining, just by remaining,
 Just by remaining, our spring thou art.
 Here be silent, here be patient,
 Here be patient, O fragile heart!

Notice how the two opening verses frame the stanza. This repetitive structure (*symploce*) invites the person singing or listening to the hymn to concentrate less on the semantic content when the first lines

are repeated. The words here tend to become affective music, transferring the listener's focus to the perception of the sound material. In addition, the fervour, melancholy and slow and slightly restrained rhythm of the poem are underscored by other repetitive structures within the stanza itself: *anaphora* ('here be, here be') and *epanastrophe* ('here be patient, here be patient').

Framed by the conventional repetition, the *da capo* aria acquires its own musical time, its effect depending on the performative dialogue with the listeners, which unfolds here and now in the temporal and oral space of the theatre.¹⁷ In the eighteenth century, the *da capo* section and its vocal improvisations were regarded as the culmination of the aria, which the listeners awaited eagerly, and it was on the basis of the vocal performance that the operatic character finally took shape in their perception,¹⁸ the complete character emerging from the interplay of the affects of the various arias.¹⁹

We know that Mozart appreciated the Italian vocal tradition, and that he normally only wrote his arias after hearing the voices of the selected singers, which enabled him to shape the music to their advantage (compare with Chapter 1, II Document 24). However, it is also characteristic that the harmonic progression and thematic development inscribed in the score is more important in Mozart's *opere serie* than in earlier traditional *opere serie*. In Mozart harmonic progression and thematic development form the basis of his sophisticated musical characterisation. Mozart uses the external form of the arias to create contrasts between his characters. Hence his choice of a conventional frame repetition (*symploce*, as in the traditional *da capo* aria) for all of Tito's arias, in contrast to the arias for Sesto and Vitellia, which tend to be more integrated into the dramatic action. In this way, Mozart differentiates between the allegorical (Tito) and the non-allegorical (Sesto and Vitellia). Tito's character revolves, musically as well as poetically, around moral values, or virtues, to use terminology made famous by Aristotle:

We will next speak of virtue and vice, of the noble and the disgraceful, since they constitute the aim of one who praises and of one who blames; for, when speaking of these, we shall incidentally bring to light the means of making us appear of such and such a character, which, as we have said, is a second method of proof; for it is by the same means that we shall be able to inspire confidence in ourselves or others in regard to virtue.²⁰

From an epideictic perspective, the main purpose of *La clemenza di Tito* is the creation of an aesthetic vision that introduces an enlightened interpretation of the virtue of clemency into the absolutistic context. Clemency, in the sense of compassion, is embodied in the title role above all, the opera's construction of Tito's ethos emerging as its most open epideictic feature. Indeed, as Gerard Hauser and Cynthia Sheard have both pointed out, epideictic rhetoric may not only celebrate orthodoxy, but may also anticipate political rhetoric by reshaping our values.²¹ By integrating the modern ideals of the late eighteenth century, the radical representation of the emperor potentially changes the *doxai* of court culture and attracts broad support for enlightened absolutism as a social structure. 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. His enlightened virtue is particularly apparent from his interaction with his people on stage, their musical and theatrical representation emerging as an implied audience, similar to the audience in Berndt's print. By forgiving and preserving his subjects, the enlightened ruler allows them to become enlightened themselves.

The Representation of Clemency

The virtue of clemency is represented on many levels in *La clemenza di Tito*, allowing the audience to consider the moral dilemma of the drama on an intellectual level while at the same time perceiving the clemency, or compassion, itself with eyes and ears. In the opera, it

is portrayed as a dramatic character, as a pattern of action and as a musical idiom. We see the emperor declining the proposal to have a temple built in his honour, suggesting rather that the gold is used to support the victims of Vesuvius's eruption. And, even though he has offered to marry Servilia, he accepts that she prefers to marry his subject Annio. Furthermore, Mozart supports the emblematic dimensions of the drama by providing Tito with three arias that are all of *mezzo carattere*, i.e. in an intermediate style in terms of melody, harmony and tempo, which can be interpreted as 'clement' or 'benevolent'.²² All three are given a regular form with a relatively simple tonal structure. Both arias 6. 'Del più sublime soglio' and 20. 'Se all'impero, amici Dei' follow an ABA structure, while aria 8. 'Ah, se fosse intorno al trono' has a bipartite form, the second part clearly functioning as a recapitulation. The reliance on repetition, which encapsulates the emotion, bestows on all three arias a distinctly emblematic quality, and explains why their character seems so similar—they enhance each other as a kind of *amplification*. This is especially the case with Tito's last aria 20. 'Se all'impero, amici Dei', in which he announces that he wants to rule on the basis of love, not fear. In some ways, this aria resembles an old-fashioned *da capo* aria with three sections (allegro–andantino–allegro), the central section providing affective contrast with its slow tempo and by approaching several minor keys, while the repetition of the A section has a hint of *bravura* with its demanding coloraturas and runs. However, the aria's thematic and tonal development points towards the modern sonata form, the central section recalling the development section, and the *da capo* section, featuring a tonal equalisation of the primary and secondary themes, recalling the recapitulation. Here, too, in other words, we can observe the interaction between Baroque and Enlightenment.

My reading of *La clemenza di Tito* continues in the tradition of opera scholars such as Reinhard Strohm, Ellen Rosand and Martha Feldman, all of whom have contributed to the re-evaluation of the long-reviled

genre of *opera seria*. As I have tried to show, epideictic rhetoric may help us understand the peculiar ontology of court opera, which is so closely connected to its emblematic function, and political and cultural framework. In the late eighteenth century rhetoric was still an essential part of the *doxai* and cultural preconceptions, and hence epideictic rhetoric enables us to engage with the complex aesthetic, moral and philosophical layers of meaning contained within a work such as *La clemenza di Tito*, with its subtle interplay of the old and the new.

Translated and revised by Magnus Tessing Schneider.

Notes

1. Earlier versions of this article have been published in Danish, both under the title ‘Mozart som epideiktisk retor: Dydens og lastens repræsentation i *Titus*’. The first was published in *Musikteater: Opførelse, praksis, publikum: Papers fra kollokvium, december 2003*, ed. Michael Eigved (Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, 2004), 8–23; and the second in *Rhetorica Scandinavica*, 36 (2005), 25–37.
2. Aristotle, *Aristotle on Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, ed. and trans. George Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), Book 1, IV–V. See also Jette Barnholdt Hansen, ‘Values on Stage: Epideictic Rhetoric as a Theoretical Approach to Music Theatre’, in *Stage / Page / Play: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Theatre and Theatricality*, eds. Ulla Kallenbach and Anna Lawaetz (Copenhagen: Multivers, 2016), 211–21.
3. I use the Greek concept *doxa* (‘opinion’) as a general expression of a person’s entire conscious worldview and code of opinion, which s/he professes and shares with other people within a particular culture. See Lawrence W. Rosenfield, ‘An Autopsy of the Rhetorical Tradition’, *The Prospect of Rhetoric*, ed. Lloyd F. Bitzer and Edwin Black (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 64–77, esp. 65; and also Mats Rosengren, *Doxologi: En essä om kunskap* (Åstorp: Rhetor förlag, 2003).
4. Sullivan associates the concept ‘consubstantial space’ with the ethos of the epideictic rhetorician: ‘It is the experience that occurs during true

epideictic discourse when rhetor and audience enter the timeless, consubstantial space carved out by their mutual contemplation of reality.' See Dale L. Sullivan, 'The Ethos of Epideictic Encounter', *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, XXVI/2 (1993), 113–33, esp. 128.

5. Cf. Sullivan, 'Ethos of Epideictic Encounter'.

6. See also the chapter by John A. Rice in this volume.

7. See John A. Rice, W. A. *Mozart: La clemenza di Tito* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1–5; see also his chapter in this volume, Chapter 2, 'Operatic culture at the Court of Leopold II and Mozart's *La clemenza di Tito*'.

8. See e.g. Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrecht-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric* [1969], trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971), 50, in which the aim of epideictic rhetoric is described as the preservation of the values of a particular culture, and Sullivan, 'Ethos of Epideictic Encounter' (1993), 117: 'epideictic rhetoric is the rhetoric of orthodoxies [...], its purpose being the creation and maintenance of orthodox opinions within a culture or subculture'.

9. See Cynthia Miecznikowski Sheard, 'The Public Value of Epideictic Rhetoric', *College English*, LVIII/7 (1996), 784–91.

10. See e.g. Sheard, 'The Public Value' (1996), 784: 'The Deliberative and Imaginative Functions of Epideictic'.

11. Here I rely on the definition of ethos in James C. McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication* [1968] (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1997), 87: 'Ethos is the attitude toward a source of communication held at a given time by a receiver'.

12. Edwin Black, 'The Second Persona', *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, LVI/2 (1970), 109–48.

13. On the relation between clemency and pity, see Magnus Tessing Schneider's chapter in this volume, Chapter 3 'From Metastasio to Mazzola: Clemency and Pity in *La clemenza di Tito*'.

14. See Rice, *La clemenza* (1991), 69.

15. *Critik der Urtheilskraft* (Berlin, Libau: Lagarde und Friederich, 1790). See Paul Guyer, *Values of Beauty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

16. Cf. Jette Barnholdt Hansen, 'Dramma per musica eller musica per dramma? Mozarts *Idomeneo* – en *seria* som musikalsk opus', *Dansk årbog for musikforskning*, XXX (2002), 51–73.

17. See Jette Barnholdt Hansen, 'From Invention to Interpretation: The Prologues of the First Court Operas Where Oral and Written Cultures Meet', *The Journal of Musicology*, XX/4 (2003), 556–596, for an analysis of the relation between orality and literacy in the early court operas.

18. Here I am inspired by the emphasis on the receivers' perception of ethos in McCroskey, *An Introduction* ([1968] 1997).

19. Carl Dahlhaus, 'What is Musical Drama?', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, I/2 (1989), 95–111.

20. Aristotle, *The 'Art' of Rhetoric*, trans. John Henry Freese (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1926), Book 1, Chapter IX, 1.

21. Gerard A. Hauser, 'Aristotle on Epideictic: The Formation of Public Morality', *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, XXIX/1 (1999), 5–23; and Sheard, 'The Public Value' (1996).

22. In his description of Italian aria types, John Brown describes the *aria di mezzo carattere* as 'serious' and 'pleasing'. John Brown, *Letters upon the Poetry and Music of the Italian Opera Addressed to a Friend* (Edinburgh: Belle and Bradfute, 1789), 40.