

How does the musical writing in *una voce poco fa* enhance the text and drama of the aria?

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August 5, 2024

The cavatina *una voce poco fa* is Rosina's entry aria in the opera *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (The Barber of Seville) by Gioachino Rossini, written in 1816. It's the first time we see Rosina, and after hearing from Count Almaviva and Figaro it is now that we hear Rosina's own feelings for Lindoro (Almaviva). Therefore, the text is joyful and romantic but with hints of resent for her guardian Dr. Bartolo. This excitement mixed with anger is conveyed throughout the aria using a variety of musical techniques.

Una voce poco fa follows a structure closely related to the typical scene structure Rossini used around the time. It begins with a short orchestral introduction, from bars 1 to 13, in which the orchestra sets the mood of the scene and outlines some key musical ideas. Then, Rosina enters for the *cantabile* section in bb. 14–42, followed by a brief orchestral interlude in bb. 43–54 and finally the lengthy *cabaletta* section which continues to the end of the scene (bb. 55–120). Here I'm going to look at the different musical aspects of each section of the aria in turn, followed by commenting on some overall traits.

The orchestral introduction creates a suitable atmosphere for the opening of this scene in a number of ways. Most striking at first is the dynamic contrast; the music alternates between *ff* and *pp* in the first 5 bars and similarly in bb. 9–13. Coupled with sudden changes in instrumentation (from full unison to just the strings in bar 1 and 2), this represents Rosina's bold character and conflicting emotions, especially in relation to Lindoro and Bartolo. Although predominantly melody-and-accompaniment, there is some imitation between the flutes and violins in bars 10–11, which creates tension. The aria also starts in the bright key of E major, and the frequent perfect cadences (e.g. bb. 9–13) in the introduction reinforce the key and so the joyful mood of the aria to come.

Ornamentation is used in the introduction to create excitement: for example, the turns in the first violin part in bars 6 and 8 create movement and suspense—and then the upwards semiquaver run in the wind section in bar 9 conveys pure joy. The double-dotted rhythm, used throughout the aria to represent playfulness and excitement, is also introduced at the very beginning of the introduction. This is combined with the constant 'pulsing' detached quaver movement in the accompaniment from bar 5 onwards to create a strong sense of forward motion and build anticipation for what is to come. Additionally, the tempo marking of 'Andante' suggests a somewhat stately feel, suitable for the $\frac{3}{4}$ dance meter used conveying the romantic nature of the aria.

The *cantabile* section starts in bar 14 when Rosina enters with the words ‘una voce poco fa’. The orchestral accompaniment is very sparse, with pizzicato in the strings up until bar 22, and syllabic word-setting. This lends a quasi-recitative feel to the first part of the *cantabile*. Because recitatives are usually quite declamatory in nature, this creates a slight sense of drama as Rosina tells us what is happening—along with determination to overcome Bartolo. Even here, there is already significant use of word-painting; for example, the upwards leap on ‘Lindoro’ in bar 26, along with the sudden *ff* in the orchestra, shows her passion for him. The occasional triplet (e.g. bar 15, 19, 23) adds to the flow of the music, moving it forwards—although it is still performed in relatively free time.

In bar 30, the orchestra assumes a more prominent role, with the melody in the first violins and a pulsating quaver accompaniment just as in bb. 5-8 of the introduction. This means the music flows forwards a lot more now, representing the growing anticipation of Rosina—which is emphasised by the alternating dominant and tonic pedals in the wind and string sections. Rosina’s excitement is made apparent by her patter-song—repeated single-note semiquavers—that she sings underneath this melody, creating an impression of fast speech. During this part, she outlines her plan to defeat Bartolo, and so the fast rhythmic movement reinforces her determination to succeed with the plan.

Finally before the *cabaletta*, the music returns to a brief restatement of the quasi-recitative section, from bar 35 to 42. However, here the orchestral accompaniment is even sparser than before (with only one note every bar), allowing the singer to embellish much more and only providing minimal harmonic support. In performance, this would be sung in a very virtuosic and impressive way, typical to *bel canto* style, emphasising the contrast in Rosina’s emotions.

The *cabaletta* section then begins in bar 43, marked ‘Moderato’—a step up in tempo from the previous ‘Andante’. This reflects the fact that now all tentativeness and confusion has been left behind and the remainder of the aria is much more determined and playful. The meter has also changed from $\frac{3}{4}$ to a more determined and forward-moving $\frac{4}{4}$. Beginning again with a short orchestral interlude to set the mood, the extensive ornamentation in the melody line creates a playful atmosphere—for example, the acciacaturas in bar 43 and the trill in bar 51. This is contrasted against the descending triplets in bar 45 which imitate sighs and move the music onward, as well as creating interesting cross-rhythms with the duplet string accompaniment. The frequent use of staccato articulation in the melody line here (e.g. the semiquavers in bar 50) create a feeling of lightness and joy.

In bar 55, Rosina enters with the same melody that the woodwind outlined previously. The lower strings drop down to pizzicato, thinning the texture to draw attention to the melody line. The very melismatic word setting here along with the abundance of semiquaver scales (e.g. bars 62, 65) makes the vocals sound very acrobatic and excited, fitting with the fact that she’s singing about her qualities (‘I’m gentle, respectful, I’m obedient, sweet, loving...’). Dialogue is created between her and the flutes as they occasionally interject with a semiquaver run (bars 56, 60). In bar 66, there is a pause followed by repeated accented notes as Rosina mentions how volatile and determined

she is in fact. The accented descending scale on ‘vipera’ in bar 69 shows the ferocity of her feelings here.

As the section progresses, the rapid forward motion is lost and gives way to much freer tempo, alongside florid coloratura on the part of the singer. This corresponds to Rosina exploring her emotions still further, and eventually she finishes on the tonic E (sung higher than printed by some performers), a determined resolution to the words ‘before giving up I’ll make them fall’.

Overall, Rossini enhances the drama of the aria through the use of contrast in dynamics, texture and tempo, but he still creates continuity throughout the aria by the use of the same key and melodic ideas, notable the double-dotted idea first heard at the start of the introduction and heard throughout the rest of the aria, as well as by maintaining the importance of the melody line throughout. As the aria moves from a recitative-like beginning through rhythmic and flowing melodies to virtuosic vocals in free-time, so Rosina starts tentatively, gradually becoming more determined before finally showing her passion for Lindoro. By combining this structure with interesting variety of texture and melody, Rossini uses the typical *bel canto* style to make the aria dramatic and exciting.