

A SCHOOL FOR

Lovers *Così fan tutte* and the Philosophy of Love

BY MARINA HARSS

The period between 1789 and the end of 1791 was one of Mozart's most prolific. Before his death in December of 1791 from an unknown illness, he composed three operas, including *Così fan tutte* and *The Magic Flute*, as well as chamber music, his sublime clarinet concerto, the famous Fantasia in C minor for piano, and the Requiem (amongst other things.) And yet, at the same time, this period was one of his most difficult, as his financial situation and health worsened over time.

The year 1789 was a kind of tipping point. Mozart traveled to Germany, seeking commissions and patronage, and was even offered a position at the court of King Friedrich Wilhelm II that would likely have assured him a comfortable (and probably longer) life. But he chose to return to Vienna, a city that he loved but that did not offer him the financial stability he needed. It was there that he undertook the composition of *Così fan tutte*, his third-to-last opera and final collaboration with the librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte.

Mozart composed three operas to libretti by Da Ponte: *Le nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan tutte*. They are amongst his most beloved, particularly the first two. All three deal with questions of love and desire between men and women at different stages of life. None offers a particularly simple or rosy picture. Instead, they delve, sometimes comically, sometimes seriously, into the themes of infidelity and disillusionment. None more so than *Così*, in which Mozart and Da Ponte seem to put love under a microscope, almost as if it were a physical condition. In a way, the opera is an anatomy of the heart in musical form.

On the surface, *Così* is a comedy, even a farce, complete with silly disguises, unexpected plot twists, quack remedies, and characters that at first seem as two-dimensional as figures from the *Commedia dell'arte*. But as the plot progresses, the characters begin to reveal themselves more and more. Their human qualities—especially those

of the female characters—come into relief, thanks to Mozart's sensitive, heartfelt, and at times almost heavenly music. We feel for them; we identify with them. What would we do in their shoes, we begin to wonder?

As Maestro DeRenzi says, "underneath the surface, *Così* is one of the most emotional operas ever composed."

It is interesting that Mozart makes us care so much for the fate of the two female protagonists, given that the title of the opera is *Così fan tutte*, words that can be translated as "What all women do." It is their infidelity that the opera is concerned with. "You expect to find fidelity in two women?," one of the characters, supposedly an expert on human nature, asks at the beginning of the opera. "Your simplemindedness is touching."

These words are spoken by Don Alfonso, described as "an old philosopher." It is he who sets the opera's plot in motion. The rest of the cast list is made up of two sisters from Ferrara, Dorabella and Fiordiligi, who for some reason are living in Naples; two young men of unknown origin, Guglielmo and Ferrando, with whom the sisters are romantically linked; and Despina, the sisters' clever maid. A small ensemble, just large enough for the audience to observe closely in its natural habitat. We know very little about any of them. They do not appear to have family, friends, titles of nobility. The plot has the feel of a sociological experiment. What if you were to test your sweethearts' fidelity through a ruse of my devising, Don Alfonso asks the two men. Would they prove faithful, or would they fall off the path of righteousness? The challenge comes in the form of a wager, with the prize of 100 *zecchini*, or gold coins, going to the winner.

The two men pretend to depart for the battlefield and then return, disguised as foreigners, complete with fake mustaches. Each woos

Jennifer Townshend, Heath Huberg, Shirin Eskandani, and Corey Crider in *Così fan tutte*, Sarasota Opera (2016). Photo by Rod Millington.



the other's girlfriend. Their attempts are at first preposterous, and include a melodramatic suicide attempt with fake poison, staged by Despina, who saves them with the help of a giant magnet, in a scene worthy of the Marx Brothers. The two sisters remain stalwart. But in the second act, things become more interesting, and more serious. Led, even coached, by Don Alfonso and Despina, the men pursue the women with greater insistence. The sisters' devotion to their boyfriends begins to weaken. An undeniable physical attraction draws the new couples together like a magnet, this time real. First Dorabella falls, then, with great regret and internal conflict, Fiordiligi. The ending, which I won't spoil for you, is ambivalent, to say the least.

The whole idea of treating human beings as the subjects of an experiment about the nature of love may seem like a strange one, but it makes sense in historical context. Mozart and Da Ponte were products of the Age of Enlightenment, a period of intellectual exploration that promoted the application of rational analysis to everything from science to politics to human behavior. For Mozart and Da Ponte, Don Alfonso was a stand-in, albeit a lighthearted one, for the figure of the Enlightenment philosopher, intent on encouraging his comrades to analyze their impulses and emotions through the lens of reason. He is "a rationalist in the Enlightenment sense of one who combines common sense with pragmatic realism," as Nicholas Till describes him in his book *Mozart and the Enlightenment*.

A more interesting question is: whose behavior is really being analyzed and judged in this experiment? The title seems to give it away: it is about what women do. But there are clues throughout the opera that suggest that the title is intentionally misleading and somewhat tongue in cheek. The men are not shown in a flattering light. They are full of themselves, and boastful. They trick their

girlfriends. They are deluded. Alfonso himself argues, at the start, that the men's faith in their girlfriends is unrealistic: "What kind of animal are they? Are they made of flesh and blood as we are, do they eat, as we do?" The suggestion being, of course, was that men are just as imperfect as women, if not more.

This is made more explicit by a second, equally crucial character in the opera: Despina, Fiordiligi and Dorabella's maid. Despina is quick-witted, clever, pragmatic, and incredibly resourceful. She sees life with clear eyes. "You expect faithfulness in men? In soldiers?" she asks the sisters. "Don't make me laugh." She goes on to accuse men of trading in "lying tears, deceitful glances, deceptive words, false charms." "These," she says, "are their foremost qualities." As Despina makes clear, the bad behavior of men is not in question—it is simply assumed. And thus the title of the opera is turned on its head. It's not just women who behave badly, but everyone. Women have the right to stray because men are faithless—so why not have fun? With her popular wisdom and wit, Despina is the true philosopher of the opera, an appealing one.

What Mozart and Da Ponte created in *Così fan tutte* was a kind of parable, and a provocation. The real moral of this story is that all people are flawed, a constant work in progress. Is happiness even possible? This is the question behind *Le nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and, especially, *Così*. Mozart makes us care by composing music so beautiful, so touching, and so human that it makes us forgive his characters even as we watch them make mistakes. They are beautiful because they are human. That is the power of Mozart's music.

Marina Harss is a freelance culture writer based in New York City.

Naples from the West (Napoli da Occidente), 18th Century, oil on canvas.
Photo by Sergio Anelli.
Mondadori Portfolio / Art Resource, NY.
Artist: Joli, Antonio (1700-1777)
Location: Private Collection



OCTOBER 31, NOVEMBER 2M, 11,13,15M

Così fan tutte

Poetry by Lorenzo Da Ponte
Music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Dramma giocoso in two acts

Sung in Italian

First performed by Sarasota Opera on February 27, 1960

2002 Production created by Sarasota Opera

Conductor

Stage Director

Scenic Designer

Costume Designer

Lighting Designer

Hair and Make-Up Designer

Assistant Conductors

Surtitle Supplier

Surtitle Translator

Victor DeRenzi

Stephanie Sundine

David P. Gordon

Howard Tsvi Kaplan

Ken Yunker

Sue Schaefer

Andrew Downs, Artyom Pak*, Stefano Teani

Words for Music

Victor DeRenzi

CAST

*Fiordiligi, lady from Ferrara
and sister to Dorabella*

*Dorabella, lady from Ferrara
and sister to Fiordiligi*

Guglielmo, lover of Fiordiligi

Ferrando, lover of Dorabella

Despina, a maid

Don Alfonso, an old philosopher

Hanna Brammer

Olivia Vote

Filippo Fontana

Luke Norvell*

Virginia Mims

Jake Stamatis

sarasota orchestra®

*Sarasota Opera Debut

COSÌ FAN TUTTE SYNOPSIS

Così fan tutte, Sarasota Opera (2016). Photo by Rod Millington.



ACT I

Scene I, A café

Two military officers, Guglielmo and Ferrando, extol the virtues of their fiancées, sisters Fiordiligi and Dorabella. They claim that these women could never be unfaithful. An older man, Don Alfonso, wagers he can prove all women are unfaithful. Accepting the bet, the men swear to follow Alfonso's instructions as they plan how to spend the money they are sure to win.

Scene II, A garden near the sea

Fiordiligi and Dorabella gaze into lockets containing images of their fiancés. Alfonso tells them that Ferrando and Guglielmo must leave for war, and as the men depart, the girls weep.

Scene III, A room

Dorabella and Fiordiligi's maid, Despina, prepares the sisters' morning chocolate. They ask for poison instead since their fiancés have left for battle. Alfonso bribes Despina to help in his game. Ferrando and Guglielmo enter, disguised as Albanians. The presence of the strange men terrifies the girls, but Alfonso explains that they are his friends. The men flirt, and are spurned. Claiming victory, they laugh, but Alfonso says the game is far from over.

Scene IV, Another part of the garden

As the women weep for their missing lovers, the "Albanians" stagger in, downing vials of supposed arsenic. When the ladies cry for help, Despina suggests they comfort the dying men, then leaves to fetch a doctor. The doctor (Despina in disguise) enters and revives the men who resume their wooing. Even though they are coached by Despina and Alfonso to take pity on the men, Fiordiligi and Dorabella once again reject them.

ACT II

Scene I, A room

Despina tells the sisters to start acting like women and encourages them to be worldly. They are intrigued, and each chooses one of the "Albanians." Fiordiligi chooses Dorabella's fiancé, Ferrando, and Dorabella chooses Guglielmo, Fiordiligi's fiancé.

Scene II, A garden near the sea

Alfonso has contrived a romantic setting for the two couples. Prodding the girls to encourage the men, he and Despina group the four together. Guglielmo and Dorabella quickly declare their love. Ferrando continues his threats of suicide, but Fiordiligi remains unmoved. When she is alone she admits her desire for him. The men tease each other and compare their trysts. Ferrando fumes at Dorabella's infidelity and Guglielmo decries the fickleness of women. Ferrando maintains his love for Dorabella and Guglielmo demands his winnings, but Alfonso tells them he is still not finished.

Scene III, A room

Fiordiligi admits she's in love. Dorabella consoles her but Fiordiligi decides that they must go off to find their soldiers. Ferrando comes in to make his final plea for Fiordiligi's love. She finally agrees to marry him. Guglielmo, over-hearing them, becomes furious. As wedding plans have been made, Alfonso reminds the men of the premise of his bet: "All women are like this" or "Così fan tutte." A table is set for the wedding feast. The couples drink a toast to love. Alfonso returns announcing the arrival of the notary (again Despina in disguise) who performs the pseudo-marriage as strains of the soldier's march disturb the signing of the nuptial contracts. Alfonso tells Fiordiligi and Dorabella that their sweethearts have returned from war. Panicked, the women hide the "Albanians." The soldiers return and make the appropriate fuss at the signed contracts, but the ruse is revealed and all is forgiven.

INTERMISSION

World Premiere: *Burgtheater, Vienna, January 26, 1790*

COSÌ FAN TUTTE BACKGROUND

Così fan tutte is the last of Mozart's three great operas written in collaboration with Lorenzo Da Ponte, the previous ones being *Don Giovanni* and *Le nozze di Figaro*. The opera was commissioned by Emperor Joseph II of Austria. Da Ponte crafted his original libretto, using a range of classical literature (most notably Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*) as his inspiration. From this Mozart and Da Ponte provided a score that is as gorgeous as any the composer wrote, and a text of great wit, insight and complexity. The world premiere took place at the Burgtheater in Vienna on January 26, 1790, on the eve of the composer's thirty-fourth birthday.

Despite the work's quality it did not initially achieve the success of its predecessors. Following only a handful of performances, additional repetitions of *Così fan tutte* were suspended due to the death of the emperor, and the opera virtually disappeared for a major part of the 19th century. Fifty years passed after its premiere before it was first heard in Italy.

Così also faced a rather unique problem. Although many operatic works (such as several of Verdi's) had to undergo various changes of locale and plot due to the censor's restrictions, *Così*'s evolution was more extreme: the beauty of Mozart's music was well recognized and acknowledged, but Da Ponte's text was long considered too immoral and salacious for the delicate sensibilities of the 19th century. What seemed to be the solution? To write a completely new libretto with an existing score! In fact, not just one, but several. There were a number of rewritten texts in Germany alone, and at least one in Victorian England, entitled *Tit for Tat*. (That would make fascinating reading today!) Some of the other titles the work was performed as include *The Two Aunts from Milan*, *Love and Temptation*, *The Girls from Flanders*, and even *The Guerrillas*.

This identity crisis is one of the main reasons that the opera achieved no real place in the repertoire of the 19th century. It was only in the 20th century that *Così*'s fortune changed for the better. It reached the Metropolitan Opera in 1922, though it was not heard regularly in that theater until a revival in the early 1950's.

But it is generally believed that *Così*'s emergence as a true masterpiece dates to the production at the 1934 Glyndebourne Festival in England, which can be heard in a historical recording. From that time forward, it has been performed in theaters all over the world not only as one of Mozart's major works, but as one of the glories of the entire operatic repertoire.

On the surface, the basic plot of *Così* may appear quite fragile, and those expecting the belly laughs found in opera buffa might be well disappointed (except perhaps for Despina's disguises as the Doctor and the Notary). But the audience that delves a bit deeper is sure to be rewarded, for *Così* is filled with characters of wonderful humanity and complexity who find themselves in situations all too familiar to those who have experienced the joy, pain, and confusion of being in love (in other words, all of us!).



In the world of opera where characters tend to be of extreme goodness or evil, the inhabitants of *Così*'s world reflect the ambivalence and shifting emotions that are so much a part of life. As the somewhat mock opera seria emotions of the sisters in Act I give way to deeper, more insightful, heartfelt feelings in Act II, Da Ponte shows that he is a dramatist of the human condition. The suitor's disguises are actually quite flimsy, and easy to see through. But much like the love potion in *Tristan und Isolde*, they simply serve to unlock feelings and emotions that are ready to surface.

The title *Così fan tutte* means "all women are like this." But, in fact, it could just as fairly be changed to *Così fan tutti*, or "all MEN and women are like this." Just as Mozart and Da Ponte quote their own Figaro in the banquet scene of *Don Giovanni*, the title *Così fan tutte* is actually a quote from the cynical Don Basilio, first heard in *Le nozze di Figaro*. In *Così* these masters maintain the superb high quality of their collaboration. One might be forgiven for feeling that in such moments as *Così*'s Act I trio, "Soave sia il vento," they might even have surpassed themselves. Music and words do not get more ravishing this side of heaven.

Ken Benson is an artists' manager based in New York City. For 25 years, he headed his own division as Vice-President at Columbia Artists Management. Mr. Benson is a long-time regular panelist and host of the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts.