

# *Così fan tutte*

An Opera in Two Acts

Music by W.A. Mozart

Libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte

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# *Così fan tutte*

## Premiere

First performance on January 26, 1790 at the Burgtheater in Vienna, Austria.

## Cast of Characters

Fiordiligi, Guglielmo's fiancée  
Dorabella, Ferrando's fiancée  
Guglielmo, an officer  
Ferrando, an officer  
Despina, a maid  
Don Alfonso, a philosopher

Keely Futterer  
Kristen Choi  
Ethan Vincent  
Terrence Chin-Loy  
Ashley Fabian  
Wm. Clay Thompson



## 2024-2025 Season Brief Summary

Officers **Ferrando** and **Guglielmo** discuss their certainty that their fiancées, **Dorabella** and **Fiordiligi**, will always be faithful. **Don Alfonso** disagrees, saying that all women are fickle. He helps Ferrando and Guglielmo devise a plan to test the fidelity of Dorabella and Fiordiligi – Ferrando and Guglielmo will pretend to go off to war. With the women believing that they are away, Ferrando and Guglielmo will disguise themselves as vaudeville stars and attempt to seduce the other’s fiancée.

Dorabella’s and Fiordiligi’s maid, **Despina**, is also in on Don Alfonso’s bet and wants to cash in. She convinces Dorabella and Fiordiligi that a bit of flirtation will do no harm. Though they resist at first, the women do commit minor acts of infidelity against their fiancés. Don Alfonso has won the bet.

To punish their fiancées for their indiscretion, Ferrando and Guglielmo stage a fake wedding – Dorabella and Fiordiligi think they are going to marry their new lovers. Before the ceremony can start, the women’s “new lovers” rush off and change out of their disguises. They return to the wedding professing their love to their fiancées. They reveal their plot to Dorabella and Fiordiligi, testing the boundaries of love and forgiveness.

## Detailed Synopsis

Original setting: 18<sup>th</sup>-century Naples, Italy  
Virginia Opera setting: 1920s Washington, D.C.

### ACT I

In a grand hotel in 1920s Washington, D.C., two young officers, **Ferrando** and **Guglielmo**, are having a heated discussion with their old friend, **Don Alfonso**, about whether women can be faithful. Using their own fiancées as examples, they dispute Don Alfonso's contention that no woman will stay faithful long in the absence of her lover. After much arguing Don Alfonso proposes a wager to prove his theory. The men should announce that they must "leave" for military service, then return dressed as vaudeville stars to woo each other's betrothed. The young men take the bet, insisting their partners will remain eternally faithful no matter the temptation.

Meanwhile, **Dorabella** (Ferrando's fiancée) and **Fiordiligi** (Guglielmo's fiancée) daydream about the lovers, excited for their arrival. Don Alfonso interrupts their reverie with the news that their fiancés will be going to war. Distraught, the women and their lovers bid each other a tearful farewell.

Fiordiligi and Dorabella's maid, **Despina**, encourages the two women to take on lovers since their fiancés will be away. Alfonso arrives and describes the bet he has made with Ferrando and Guglielmo to Despina; he bribes her to play along with the bet. She accepts the bribe and agrees to participate in Don Alfonso's scheme. Ferrando and Guglielmo then arrive, disguised as vaudeville stars. They attempt to woo Fiordiligi and Dorabella but are rejected.

After Ferrando and Guglielmo fail at their first attempt to seduce Fiordiligi and Dorabella, Alfonso and Despina concoct a plan for the next attempt. The supposed vaudeville stars pretend to drink poison in lovesick desperation. Despina, disguised as a doctor, enters and "cures" them. Though the young ladies seem to be warming up to their new suitors, they still refuse to betray their fiancés.

### ACT II

Despina urges Fiordiligi and Dorabella to give in to the handsome vaudeville stars – they could be a source of entertainment while their fiancés are away. The two finally agree that there is no harm in having some flirtatious fun with their new suitors.

In a speakeasy located beneath the grand hotel, Dorabella and Fiordiligi both choose a suitor – Dorabella picks Guglielmo and Fiordiligi picks Ferrando. Guglielmo succeeds in getting Dorabella to accept a heart-shaped locket in return for the medallion she usually wears containing Ferrando’s portrait. But Fiordiligi still resists her suitor’s advances. The men meet to compare notes and Ferrando is infuriated that his beloved has given away the medallion with his portrait. Guglielmo, at first, sympathizes with Ferrando. However, his sympathy soon turns to conceit, as he gloats that, for the moment, Fiordiligi remains faithful to him.

Dorabella admits her indiscretion to Fiordiligi, who is upset by this revelation. Distraught, Fiordiligi wants to set out to find her fiancé, but she runs into Ferrando before she can leave. He wins Fiordiligi over and she falls into his arms. Now it’s Guglielmo’s turn to be jealous as Ferrando boasts about having successfully wooed Fiordiligi. Alfonso’s bet is won.

Fiordiligi and Dorabella agree to marry their new suitors – Despina, disguised this time as a notary – is poised to perform the ceremony. However, a military march signals the “return” of the real lovers. The grooms hurry off, feigning panic. They return a moment later, dressed as themselves and profess their love for Fiordiligi and Dorabella. However, when Alfonso shows them the marriage contracts, the two men become enraged. They storm off only to return moments later half in their vaudeville star disguises and half in their regular clothing to show their inconstant fiancées that it was all a trick. In light of the deceit from all directions, all must decide if they can forgive one another.

## About the composer

Generally considered one of the world's greatest musical geniuses, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's (1756-1791) adult life was filled with frustration and poverty. Although he created some of the most well-known music, he died poor and unrecognized by his peers, laid to rest in an unmarked pauper's grave.

Mozart was born in Salzburg, Austria on January 27, 1756. His father, Leopold, was a court musician for the Archbishop of Salzburg and the family grew up in an atmosphere of musical instruction, practice and rehearsals. Leopold Mozart realized that his son was a musical genius when the boy was only three years old. At that early age he would climb up on the piano bench and play, by ear, difficult pieces that he had heard his father rehearsing with other musicians. Within a year or two he picked up a violin and played that, too, expertly. By the age of six, little Wolfgang had already composed minuets and other pieces of serious music, and his skill at the piano and violin was so brilliant that his father wanted to promote him around the world. Leopold set off with Wolfgang and his younger sister Nannerl on a tour of Europe, where the children played for important noblemen. While audiences admired the young prodigy and his sister, the Mozarts made little money from the tour, and Leopold's plans for financial success came to an end.

Between the ages of 10 and 17, Mozart composed music for special occasions at his school in Salzburg. At 12, he wrote his first opera - his favorite type of composition. Even at the age of 14, he already displayed a talent for musical drama.

Leopold hoped that the Archbishop of Salzburg would give his son a permanent job, but the Archbishop offered him no such position. Mozart went to live in Munich and then in Paris with his mother, who traveled with him to help keep his house. In Paris, they suffered in dreadful conditions of poverty. Unable to get any commissions for operas, Mozart turned to composing chamber music (music for small groups of instruments) - a far more marketable commodity. He also gave music lessons, which depressed him even further than his squalid living conditions; most of his pupils were children of aristocracy and had neither talent nor interest in music, studying only because it was fashionable.

Throughout his life, a suitable position was to elude Mozart. Returning to Salzburg at the age of 23, Mozart was given a job as a court organist, but this left little time to continue working on new compositions. In 1780, he was given a commission from the Munich Opera for a full-length work. He composed *Idomeneo* (1781), a story

based on ancient Greek heroes, following the popular tradition of serious opera at that time. The modest success of the opera encouraged the composer to leave Salzburg, which he found stifling, and to take up residence in Vienna, where he lived the remainder of his life.

During the next ten years, he composed an incredible number of pieces, including his most famous piano concerti, the remarkable last symphonies (numbers 35–41), ten of his most beautiful string quartets, the clarinet concerto, and his monumental (though unfinished) Mass in C minor. In 1782, he married Constanze Weber, who was also from a musical family. Both Mozart and Constanze were extravagant and disorganized, unfortunately making their financial situation even more precarious.

In the last few years of his life, Mozart collaborated with Lorenzo Da Ponte, who wrote the libretti for three of Mozart's most well-known operas. Despite the brief success of these operas – *Le nozze di Figaro* (*The Marriage of Figaro*, 1786), *Don Giovanni* (1787), and *Così fan tutte* (*Women are like that*, 1790) – Mozart was still unable to make a decent living or secure a steady job. The pressure of this bleak economic outlook contributed to Mozart's declining health and by the time he wrote his last opera, *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*, 1791), he was near physical and emotional collapse. Despite this, he undertook the composition of his profoundly moving Requiem Mass in D minor. This piece was Mozart's final project and it was left unfinished when he died in 1791. His student, Franz Süssmayr, finished it in 1792.

In December 1791, Mozart died at the age of 35 from what is believed to have been typhus. Since his wife was also sick at the time and unable to make proper funeral arrangements, he was buried in an unmarked grave in a pauper's cemetery.

Mozart's difficulty landing a permanent position was typical of composers and other musicians in Europe at the time. In the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century in Germany and Austria, the only secure jobs for musicians were as players or composers in the courts of important people, either nobility or clergy. In addition to playing in small orchestras in such households and composing music for special events, composers also hoped to get commissions from opera houses or orchestras for larger works. If, for example, an opera company wanted to put on a new work for a special holiday, the manager would commission a composer to write the piece, paying him an appropriate sum of money. This practice still continues today.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there were—as there are now—more talented musicians than good-paying jobs, making the support of a patron essential for financial security. In



Mozart's case, his sometimes stubborn, wayward disposition and fiscal irresponsibility prevented him from finding the success he craved. Mozart was not willing to cultivate the favor of the rich, preferring to concentrate his energies on his art. His fellow musicians were only too anxious to snap up the good-paying jobs, even if it meant resorting to various political intrigues. It is both tragic and ironic that one of the most beloved composers of all time died in poverty and unhappiness, without so much as a headstone to mark his resting place.

Mozart's compositions, though masterly in construction and profound in expression, can nonetheless be appreciated by people from all walks of life. His operas are notable for their complex portrayals of fully-rounded characters. Many of Mozart's works, in their amazing depth and variety, encompass the vast extent of the human condition and confirm his place among the world's greatest composers.

## About the librettist

Lorenzo Da Ponte (1749–1838) is considered to be the greatest of Mozart’s collaborators, having written the libretti for three of the composer’s most celebrated operas: *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan tutte*. Born Emmanuele Conegliano on March 10, 1749, he was the son of a Jewish tanner and leather dealer living in a city near Venice. In 1763 his father converted to Christianity in order to remarry, and the family adopted the name of Da Ponte.

Until the age of fourteen, Lorenzo had no formal education and was known as “lo spirito ignornate” (the witty ignoramus). He grew up speaking both Hebrew and Italian. As a teenager, he found in the attic the works of Metastasio, a celebrated Italian librettist of the eighteenth century, and the author of some twenty-seven *opera seria* (serious operas). Reading these works inspired the young Da Ponte to pursue a formal education; with his brother, he entered a seminary for five years. At the age of nineteen his studies were interrupted by a long illness. His patron, a Bishop, died, leaving him and his family impoverished.

A year later Da Ponte was offered a teaching position at another nearby seminary, and in 1770 he took holy orders and was later appointed Vice Rector. A visit to Venice the following year proved intoxicating for Da Ponte. He had a series of romantic adventures and involvements, including a friendship with the famous Casanova. It is rumored that the infamous playboy may have assisted Da Ponte in retouching the libretto of *Don Giovanni*. Da Ponte began to write and publish what were considered to be “radical” ideas similar to those of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He was declared a subversive, forbidden to hold any teaching position in the Venetian Republic, and in 1779 was banished from the city for fifteen years because of his love affair with a married woman.

Leaving Venice, Da Ponte settled nearby on the Austrian border and began working as a translator and adaptor. He then traveled to Vienna on hearing a rumor that Emperor Joseph II was opening an Italian opera company. In Vienna he became associated with the court composer Antonio Salieri (1750–1825) and was soon appointed Poet to the Imperial Theaters in 1784. It was at this time that he began writing opera libretti, having his first great success in 1786. He met Mozart in 1783; their collaboration began with the adaptation of Pierre Beaumarchais’ 1784 play, *The Marriage of Figaro*. Mozart, in a 1781 letter to his father, stresses the importance of the rapport between composer and librettist: “The best thing of all is when a good composer, who understands the stage and is talented enough to make sound

suggestions, meets an able poet.”<sup>1</sup> In Da Ponte, Mozart seems to have found the perfect partner.

Like Don Giovanni himself, Da Ponte’s numerous love affairs brought about his downfall, and he was banished from Vienna in 1791 as the result of another scandal. He fled to Trieste where he met and married the daughter of an English merchant, twenty years his junior. He later moved to London and there obtained the post of Poet to the Italian Opera. Mishandling of funds caused him to go into debt, and for a brief time he tried to make money back by working in an Italian bookshop in London. He ended up fleeing his creditors in 1805, leaving for New York with his wife and children to join her relatives there. The former illustrious librettist began his life in the United States as a grocer, but eventually became a teacher of Italian, and in time was revered as the Father of Italian Studies in the United States. In 1825, he helped found what was to become Columbia University. He died on August 17, 1838, at the age of ninety. One of his last moments of glory was the New York visit of Manuel Garcia and his Spanish opera company, who presented the New York premiere of *Don Giovanni* at Da Ponte’s request.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Mitchell Cohen, *The Politics of Opera: A History from Monteverdi to Mozart* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 291.

## Historical Background

Towards the end of 1789 – two years before his death – Mozart was, as usual during this period of his career, in dire financial straits. On December 29, he wrote to his friend, Michael von Puchberg:

“Next month I am to receive (according to the present arrangement) 200 ducats from the directorate for my opera; if you can and will lend me 400 gulden until then, you will lift your friend out of the greatest embarrassment...I invite you (but only you alone) to a little opera rehearsal at my apartment on Thursday at 10 in the morning. I’m inviting only you and Haydn.”<sup>2</sup>

The obliging Puchberg, who already answered several appeals of this sort from his friend, sent 300 gulden (approximately \$30 in the late eighteenth century, which is equivalent to roughly \$1100 by today’s standards).

The opera in question was *Così fan tutte, ossia La scuola degli amanti* (*Women are like that, or The school for lovers*). Since 1787, Mozart had been the chamber composer to the imperial court of Vienna at a salary of 800 gulden a year.<sup>3</sup> This position was steady work but relatively minor; chamber composers typically wrote dances for the court’s parties and other events. In other words, the Viennese court was not typically in the business of commissioning the chamber composer to write operas. Because of this, there is some debate among musicologists regarding the commission of *Così fan tutte*. It is possible that Emperor Joseph II commissioned Mozart to compose *Così* following a successful revival of *Le nozze di Figaro* (*The Marriage of Figaro*) in Vienna in 1789. It is also possible that composer Antonio Salieri (1750-1825), who directed Italian opera for the imperial court of Vienna, was first approached to write the music for *Così* but declined the project. This is likely considering that Salieri held a position much higher than Mozart’s in the Viennese court and that he was already an established opera composer with international success. Regardless of the origin of the commission, Mozart set to work immediately and completed the music for *Così* in January 1790.

As usual, Mozart was thoroughly familiar with the capabilities of the singers for whom he wrote. Adriana Ferrarese premiered Fiordiligi, though Mozart had no high opinion of Ferrarese’s vocal prowess. However, she was the current mistress of Da

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Dexter Edge, “Mozart’s Fee for *Così fan tutte*.” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 116, no. 2 (1991), 211-212.

<sup>3</sup> Or, approximately \$80 per year.

Ponte, and Mozart, probably to oblige his friend, had composed two concert arias for her (K.577, 579) in addition to this role. Ferrarese had also sung Susanna during the successful Vienna revival of *Le nozze di Figaro*. For Louise Villeneuve, Ferrarese's sister in real life (she premiered Dorabella), Mozart had written three concert arias (K.578, 582, 583). Vincenzo Calvesi premiered Ferrando and Francesco Bussani premiered Don Alfonso; both men had also sung in the first Vienna performance of *Don Giovanni* (Leporello and The Commendatore, respectively). Dorotea Bussani, who premiered Despina, also premiered Cherubino in *Le nozze di Figaro*.

*Così fan tutte* was fairly successful at first. After five performances the theater was closed for two months because of the death of Joseph II in February 1790. When the theater reopened in June 1790, *Così fan tutte* had five more performances in Vienna. *Così* was performed intermittently in both German and Italian in Western and Central Europe, but did not enjoy the same status as *Don Giovanni* or *Le nozze di Figaro*. Its premiere in the United States at the Metropolitan Opera did not take place until 1922.

Many 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century audiences found much of *Così*'s content offensive, which is likely why it did not become a standard part of Western opera repertoire until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Many performances of *Così* in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were bowdlerized – portions considered offensive were either cut completely or edited to make the work more palatable. Audiences took issue with the way in which Da Ponte and Mozart portrayed women and the ways in which the opera, in their view, trivialized romantic love.

Though it certainly had its detractors, *Così* also had supporters. Proponents of *Così* argued that, firstly, the content of the opera should not be held to the aesthetic standard of Romantic thought. Mozart and Da Ponte were writing for a different public with different attitudes toward gender and romantic love. Secondly, many argued that the irony inherent to *Così* is often missed – in not taking the work so seriously, one may find more enjoyment in it. Because of the frequent changes (or complete substitutions, in some cases) to *Così*'s score and libretto, proponents of *Così* often disregarded the libretto in an effort to argue for the longevity, beauty, and efficacy of Mozart's music in portraying satire, irony, and allure.

In 1805, *Così* returned to Berlin after a 13-year hiatus. Johann Friedrich Reichardt penned a review in the short-lived music periodical, *Berlinische musikalische Zeitung* (*Berlin Musical Newspaper*). This performance did not use Da Ponte's libretto, but instead used Georg Friedrich Treitschke's *Mädchentreue* (*Fidelity of*

*Girls*). Treitschke largely adapted this libretto from Christoph Friedrich Bretzner's 1794 German adaptation of Da Ponte's libretto, which he titled *Weiber treue, oder Die Mädchen sind von Flandern* (*Fidelity of Women, or The Girls are from Flanders*). These were only two of several adaptations of the original *Così*.

Of the 1805 Berlin performances, Reichardt wrote a defense of why Mozart's music is lighthearted and comedic during scenes that deal with serious matters (such as the "poisoning" scene):

Only through the comic can such seriousness again be elevated to serenity. [Mozart] cannot convey his enormous contrasts in any other way. In such cases, comedy's first effect is always the elevation of the tragic impression, which yet later loses itself and reverts to its true effect of instilling calm.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, sometimes the musical portrayal of the characters in *Così* is at odds with the actions and speech of said characters. In Reichardt's view, it seems that the lighthearted music that portrays the Fiordiligi and Dorabella as flighty is really an ironic representation of their façade – the text betrays two young women who are anxious about their status and livelihood without the stability of a partner:

In this place above all Mozart had to portray the alleged nothingness as something substantive, for this reason: even though I myself fully believe that the women's hearts aren't actually the way they believe them to be, all the more faithfully must they present themselves publicly. Mozart is thereby completely justified in having them break out with this extraordinary cry of rage and pain, of anger and vengefulness.<sup>5</sup>

Regardless of Reichardt's nuanced perspective of *Così*, it continued to be performed intermittently in Europe throughout most of the nineteenth century – it was also frequently performed without Da Ponte's original libretto. Toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Così* enjoyed some revivals that emphasized the comedic irony at the core of this work.

In 1897, composer Richard Strauss (1864–1949) conducted a few influential performances of *Così* in Munich. These performances were sung in German, but with a faithful German translation of Da Ponte's Italian original. Like Reichardt,

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Edmund J. Goehring, "Much Ado About Something; or, *Così fan tutte* in the Romantic Imagination: A Commentary on and Translation of an Early Nineteenth-Century Epistolary Exchange," *Eighteenth-Century Music* 5, no. 1 (2008), 86.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

Strauss appreciated the balance of the cynical libretto and the often-comical music. *Così* received another series of positive reviews from German-American musicologist, Alfred Einstein. In his 1945 biography of Mozart entitled, *Mozart: His character, His work*, Einstein describes *Così* as: “iridescent, like a glorious soap-bubble with the colors of buffoonery, parody, and both genuine and simulated emotion. To this, moreover, is added the color of pure beauty.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Alfred Einstein, *Mozart: His Character, His Work*, translated by Arthur Mendel and Nathan Broder (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 446.

## The portrayal of women in *Così fan tutte*

Though the title of this opera certainly does imply that the plot is solely about women or critical of women (‘tutte’ is the feminine ending for ‘tutti’ meaning ‘all’), the opera’s subtitle is gender neutral. In the complete title, *Così fan tutte, ossia La scuola degli amanti* (*So do all women, or The school for lovers*) ‘amanti’ or ‘lovers’ is in the gender neutral plural. ‘Amanti’ can either refer to a group of multiple genders or a group of only men. The complete title then leaves open to interpretation who is learning at this school for lovers- are women also learning about the nature of men in this opera or are they only objects of study for the male characters?

Musicologist Jessica Waldorf argues that Don Alfonso implies that his school is intended for men only. He makes a reference to a, at the time, well-known quatrain in the opera *Demetrio* (1731) by Italian composer Pietro Metastasio (1698-1782):

È la fede degli amanti Come l’araba fenice; Che vi sa ciascun lo dice, Dove sia nessun lo sa.	Fidelity in lovers Is like the Arabian phoenix; Everyone says it exists, But where it is no one knows.
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In *Così*, Don Alfonso changes the first line to “è la fede delle femmine” or “fidelity in women.” With this slight change to the original quatrain, Don Alfonso makes clear that women are the only source of infidelity and he must teach men how to navigate relationships with inherently flighty women.

Don Alfonso’s assertion in Act 1 that all women are the same is only proven “true” by the end of the opera because of Don Alfonso’s meddling. While Dorabella and Fiordiligi do “betray” their fiancés by entertaining other “suitors,” Alfonso engineered the situation to ensure that they would do so. Alfonso does so, it seems, to teach Ferrando and Guglielmo through experience that his viewpoint of women is true.

Don Alfonso employs some of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s (1712-1778) philosophy to teach Ferrando and Guglielmo about what he perceives to be women’s nature. His strategy to teach Ferrando and Guglielmo through experience is consistent with Rousseau’s philosophy - experience is the best teacher. Ferrando and Guglielmo’s continued pursuance of Dorabella and Fiordiligi even after both women have rejected them is, as Brown-Montesano argues, also consistent with Rousseau’s outlook on the nature of women. Rousseau posits that it is natural for women to be



a bit resistant to men and it is men's responsibility to encourage them toward consent.<sup>7</sup>

Though Da Ponte's inclusion of some of Rousseau's troublesome philosophy indicates a primarily negative portrayal of women, some of Mozart's music is parodic, suggesting that the libretto should not be taken all too seriously. In these parodic moments, Mozart employs a musical style more similar to opera seria (or serious opera). By the time *Così* premiered in 1790, opera seria was considered old-fashioned and out of touch. In using the musical style of opera seria in an opera buffa (or comic opera), Mozart may have been indicating that moments in which certain characters were musically portrayed in the opera seria style, that their actions, at least in that moment, were out of touch.

Though a hands-on teacher with Ferrando and Guglielmo, Alfonso does not seem interested in extending his teachings about love and relationships to Fiordiligi and Dorabella. He is, however, interested in using the two young women as a tool to underscore his point made to Ferrando and Guglielmo. Brown-Montesano suggests the following:

Fiordiligi and Dorabella are explicitly *taught* one thing: to conform to the motto of the main title so that Ferrando and Guglielmo will acknowledge the truth [...] Their 'education' is merely a function of the men's: the women are told only what they need to believe in order to prove Don Alfonso's point.<sup>8</sup>

Rather than educating the two young women, Don Alfonso engages in behind-the-scenes manipulation of Dorabella and Fiordiligi to further his own interests. However, his manipulation was only possible because of Despina. Though Don Alfonso falls into a stock character type of the old philosopher that, by Mozart's time, would have been well-established, there is one primary deviation from that stock character. The group of young lovers, particularly the women, do not seek out advice from Don Alfonso. In fact, when Dorabella and/or Fiordiligi have a problem, they seek comfort in one of the other women. Alfonso does not have the trust of women in *Così* and, without the help of Despina, he likely would not have had his theory proven "correct."

Despina also offers a bit of a character foil to Fiordiligi and Dorabella. Both of these characters are portrayed as highly emotional. They both focus most acutely on

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<sup>7</sup> Kristi Brown-Montesano, *Understanding the Women of Mozart's Operas* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 215.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 247-248.

their own emotions regarding Ferrando and Guglielmo and how love and betrayal make them feel. As musicologist Giuseppe Gazzola points out, Despina represents a more rational viewpoint, often chastising the Fiordiligi and Dorabella for being so dramatic.<sup>9</sup> As a parallel to Don Alfonso, Despina also asserts that men are incapable of fidelity (“le fronde mobili, l’aure inconstanti han più degli uomini stabilità” or “the quivering leaves, the inconstant breezes have more stability than men”).<sup>10</sup> Throughout the opera, Despina encourages Dorabella and Fiordiligi to love and discard men according to their needs. Though Despina teams up with Don Alfonso and is ultimately duped by him in the final wedding scene, Despina also represents a possibility for women to pursue romantic relationships with men outside of the traditional confines of marriage and to exercise more autonomy in those relationships.

While Don Alfonso appears to have “won” his wager at the end of the opera because the couples reunite, there is also some ambiguity. It is not made clear at the end of the opera what lessons each character has learned and their true feelings are not revealed. Ultimately, all of the characters in *Così fan tutte* reveal the complexities of love and fidelity in the opera’s school for lovers.

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<sup>9</sup> Giuseppe Gazzola, “Betting Against Themselves: Conflicting Conceptions of Love in *Così fan tutte*, o: la scola degli amanti,” *MLN* 130, no. 1 (2015): 116.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 116–117.

## Opera buffa

Opera buffa, a comic or satiric type of opera, must be distinguished from its more serious predecessor, opera seria (serious opera). Operas seria generally dealt with historical, legendary, or mythological themes, and usually contained a happy ending with due reward for rectitude and good deed. Quintessential examples of opera seria are: Handel's *Giulio Cesare* (*Julius Caesar*, 1724), Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (*Orpheus and Eurydice*, 1762), and Mozart's *Idomeneo* (1781).

During the pre-French Revolution and pre-Romantic eras, aristocrats identified with the extremely popular opera seria genre: these operas portrayed lofty personalities whom they perceived as flattering portraits of themselves. Operas seria were massive scenes of pageantry characterized by highly complex, ornamented arias that would exploit the virtuosity of individual singers.

As the end of the eighteenth century approached, the opera buffa developed. It was a more realistic genre that portrayed a wider variety of characters in everyday situations. The lower classes preferred the satire of the opera buffa genre which was usually concerned with romantic plots involving clueless husbands, deceiving wives, and scheming servants. In certain respects, the themes of opera buffa provided a democratization in the performing arts which enabled the lower classes to satirize their masters and vent their frustrations with social injustices.

In contrast to opera seria, opera buffa preferred simplicity in design. Generally, a few characters would be portrayed against an uncomplicated setting with commensurate simplicity of underlying melodies and tunes. Yet musically, there would be much stylistic contrast. For example, the use of rhythmic, staccato passages emphasized coquettish moods. Opera buffa featured extended act finales with sophisticated ensembles (taboo in opera seria) that involved the participation of many characters in duets and trios.

Patter songs are another feature of opera buffa. These songs are tongue twisters delivered at a quick tempo that require an acute sense of comic timing in order for the singer to make the words intelligible. In its practical sense, patter is nothing more or less than rapid fire articulation, similar to those popular tongue-twisters: "She sells seashells at the seashore," or "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers." In most classic operas buffa, the patter usually portrayed old busybodies.

Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* (1786) is a quintessential example of opera buffa. It is a satiric portrayal of the political and social conflicts existing within his contemporary society. To achieve his objectives, Mozart used musical characterizations to distinguish among members of different classes. His heroes

became the lower classes, such as Figaro and Susanna, and his antiheroes became those contemptible aristocrats, such as Count Almaviva and Dr. Bartolo.

The essence of good comedy is not that it has necessarily happened, but that it could happen. Therefore, comedy must have a link with reality so that it does not degenerate into farce. In order to be convincing and believable, real or imagined situations must convey a sense of credibility. The essence of opera buffa is to provide farce, burlesque, satire, and irony, together with moments of seriousness and real human emotions. The blending of heartfelt comedy and humor together with sentiment and tenderness lends credibility to the comic action.

## Discussion questions

1. Compare the roles of men and women 100 years ago with today. Have gender roles and attitudes toward romance and relationships changed? How?
2. What is an opera buffa? What makes *Così fan tutte* an opera buffa?
3. After seeing Virginia Opera's production of *Così fan tutte*, discuss the stage director's interpretation of the work. What ideas were brought out? How did the sets and costumes contribute to this?
4. Consider the moods of the music and the text. Do they complement each other or do they conflict with each other? Explain your answer.
5. How clearly did Ferrando and Guglielmo portray and differentiate their characters when they were in and out of their disguises? Did the music assist in portraying them differently? How so?