

INTRODUCTION

OK, let's face it. When people speak of ridiculous opera plots, *Così fan tutte* has to be near the top of the list, alongside *Il trovatore* and *La Gioconda*. After all, to accept the story at face value, we have to believe that two young women are so distraught at their fiancés' departure for military service that they contemplate suicide, fall in love with two new suitors within a matter of hours, and furthermore fail to recognize that the new suitors are actually their own fiancés in disguise. We would also need to accept the idea that the men would successfully pursue each other's intended with such persuasiveness knowing it is against their best interest to do so.

Why, then, has this opera consistently held a solid place in the standard repertoire? The obvious answer—"It's the music, stupid!"—cannot tell the whole story, despite the fact that it contains the most beautiful ensembles Mozart ever composed. Operas are not concerts, and while librettists have rarely been as famous as the composers with whom they collaborate, any composer who has

worked in this medium has recognized that a good libretto is the first requisite for a great opera.

The magic of *Così fan tutte*, I would assert, comes not from the music alone but from the fact that Mozart approached the subject with dead seriousness despite the surface absurdities. Contrast this approach with that taken by Gilbert and Sullivan in their equally absurd light operas. In works such as *H.M.S. Pinafore* and *The Pirates of Penzance* the actors always seem to be presenting the story with a proverbial wink at the audience, and their acting is usually over the top, similar to way that melodrama is normally performed today. Not for a single moment are we expected to share Frederic's agony (in *Pirates*) over his dilemma of whether he is required to keep his oath to serve as a pirate until age 84. In *Così*, on the other hand, we are expected to share Fiordiligi's pain as she agonizes over the question of whether she should remain faithful to her fiancé or follow her heart and choose her new suitor. Moreover, the opera will fail if the performers do not approach their roles fully committed to the emotions their characters are feeling.

Despite the exaggeration, the opera asks us how we would feel if between the time of our engagement and the wedding date we met our true soul mates. How would we resolve the conflict between our duty and the feeling that true happiness would lead us in another direction? How would a man feel when he realized that his fiancée's love was so tenuous that she would consider the advances of another man? These are real questions that transcend the details of Da Ponte's libretto. Like few other operas, *Così fan tutte* probes the depths of what it means to be human and live in relationship with others, and it displays a profound psychological understanding of human nature matched by few other works for the stage, operatic or other.

CHARACTERS

Ferrando (fer-AHN-do/tenor)—a military officer in love with Dorabella

Guglielmo (gool-YELL-moh/baritone)—a military officer in love with

Fiordiligi

Don Alfonso (dohn-ahl-FOHN-so/bass)—an old philosopher

Fiordiligi (fyor-dee-LEE-jee/soprano)—a young woman engaged to

Guglielmo

Dorabella (doh-ra-BEL-la/mezzo-soprano)—her sister, engaged to

Ferrando

Despina (des-PEE-na/soprano)—the sisters' maid

Chorus of soldiers, peasants, and servants

THE STORY

OVERTURE

After a few introductory chords, Mozart introduces a series of two five-note phrases to which the words “Così fan tutte” (all women are like that) will later be articulated by Don Alfonso and repeated by the two other male characters. A sprightly melody then lets us know that the opera is indeed going to be a comedy, following which the title phrase is repeated before the overture comes to a close.

ACT I: Scene 1.

The curtain opens on a conversation which is already in progress among the three male characters. The scene consists of three trios, separated by some passages of recitative (sung speech). Apparently in response to Don Alfonso's unheard remarks, the two young men assure him that their fiancées are models of fidelity. When Don Alfonso expresses his doubts, the men challenge him to a duel, an invitation which he politely refuses. He asks if Firodiligi and Dorabella are goddesses or women. In their second trio, the men reiterate their positions.

In the dialogue which follows this brief ensemble, Don Alfonso tells his friends that he will devise a test to prove his point, and the three agree to a wager on the result. In the trio which follows, the young men plan how they will spend their winnings. Ferrando, being a tenor, is the more romantic one, planning a serenade, while his baritone companion plans a dinner. The three toast the god of love, bringing the scene to a rousing conclusion.

Act I: Scene 2:

Fiordiligi and Dorabella are on stage, gazing at the portraits of their fiancés. They sing a languid duet praising the men's good looks. Whereas in the previous scene the two young men echo each other's melodies, the two women each have a unique melody at the beginning, though they join their voices at the end to swear eternal fidelity to their beloveds. Their reverie is interrupted by Don Alfonso, who, out of breath, sings an aria hinting that something bad is going to happen. In a recitative passage he informs the women that the two men have been called to active military duty. (Since Austria was at war at the time of original production, this idea might have hit home for some members of the audience). Of course, this is all a ruse, part of Don Alfonso's experiment with human nature, but the women have no reason to doubt him.

Ferrando and Guglielmo enter in uniform, and the women express their grief in exaggerated fashion, begging the men not to go (ignoring the fact that they supposedly have orders they cannot disobey) and asking the men to kill them to put an end to their

misery. Rather than laugh at the women's foolish behavior, the men take their reaction as proof of their devotion, though Don Alfonso reminds them that the game has just begun.

An offstage chorus is heard, praising the excitement of military life (Da Ponte makes no effort to explain how Don Alfonso arranged that), and the two couples bid a fond farewell. The men board a small boat (apparently arranged by Don Alfonso, who explains that they missed the actual transport and have to catch up—thereby covering for the lack of a real military transport), and Don Alfonso and the two women sing a plaintive farewell. This trio—"Soave sia il vento"—is among the most beautiful melodies Mozart ever wrote, backed up by an orchestral accompaniment which suggests the gentle waves of the sea. Given the situation, one might wonder why Don Alfonso seems so sincere in wishing the men farewell; one commentator has suggested that he has essentially stepped out of character to add to the beauty of the music.

In a recitative and aria, Don Alfonso expresses his confidence that his ruse will work, and he exits. Enter Despina, the maid, who will

soon play a major role in the drama. The sisters explain the cause of their grief in a brief recitative passage, followed by Dorabella's aria, "Smanie implacabili." With its references to classical mythology—"I'll frighten the Furies themselves"—the aria appears to be in the style of *opera seria*—a form of "serious opera" popular in Mozart's time—and given the context, it could be seen as a parody of the *seria* genre. Nevertheless, while parody of that genre was a frequent theme of *opera buffa*—"comic opera"—Mozart still loved the *seria* format and took it seriously (he was to write one more such opera before his untimely death), so while Dorabella's emotions may be exaggerated, it is not clear that Mozart meant to ridicule the genre itself.

Despina listens to the young women and then chimes in with her own advice. In a virtual parallel to Don Alfonso's words about women's lack of fidelity, her aria asks sarcastically, "Do you expect fidelity in men? In soldiers?" She advises the women to take on new lovers, ending with a carefree "la-la-la," though opera critic Jane Glover argues, "There is a sense of real pain beneath her carapace."

Despina is in some ways the most interesting character in *Così fan tutte*. She is representative of a long line of upstart female servants, from Serpina, in Pergolesi's *La serva padrona* (1773), who intimidates her master into marrying her, to Laetitia in Menotti's *The Old Maid and the Thief* (1939), who runs off with her mistress's possessions and intended boyfriend. She also represents a particular voice type—a light soprano. In fact, so many such characters have names ending in *-ina* and *-etta* that sopranos often speak of “-ina” and “-etta” roles. (On a couple of occasions, Don Alfonso addresses her as Despinetta).

Recognizing Despina's intelligence, Don Alfonso realizes that she could see through his charade, so he instead chooses to pay her to act as his accomplice. He tells her at least part of his plan—that two young Albanian friends have come to visit, and he wishes to introduce them to the two sisters. Ferrando and Guglielmo enter in disguise and woo the young women, but the women reject them angrily. In the aria “Come scoglio,” Fiordiligi angrily claims that she is as unshakable as a rock. As with Dorabella's aria, some people view

“Come scoglio” as a parody of the *seria* form, with its exaggerated imagery.

Several members of the opera’s original audience would have recognized the allusions to the Renaissance epic *Orlando Furioso*, which also featured a heroine named Fiordiligi, and might have understood the aria to be a mock epic. It has even been suggested that Mozart made the aria particularly difficult, with numerous vocal leaps, to make the soprano who played the character in the original production, Adriana Ferrarese, look bad, as he felt that she had been cast only because she was Da Ponte’s mistress at the time; it is highly unlikely, however, that Mozart would have sabotaged his own work in this way. In any event, the aria has become a favorite recital piece for sopranos down to the present day.

Guglielmo counters with an aria of his own, in which he praises his and Ferrando’s good looks and asks how the women could possibly reject them. When the women again turn them down, the men claim victory again, but Don Alfonso reminds them that there is still time. Ferrando, in his aria “Un’aura amorosa,” expresses the joy

he has found in his relationship with Dorabella. If there might be an element of parody in the women's arias, this aria, arguably the most beautiful music Mozart ever wrote for the tenor voice, must be taken at face value.

We then move to the first-act finale. Whereas to this point *Così fan tutte* has consisted of alternating set pieces—ensembles and arias—separated by recitative, Mozart considered his finales to be units in themselves, and the finale of each act consists of over fifteen minutes of continuous melody. The two men stagger in, claiming that they are so despondent about being rejected that they have taken poison. Alarmed, the women call for a doctor, and immediately one appears, though it is actually Despina in disguise. In a spoof of the medical profession, she first tries to impress the young people with her knowledge of Latin and other languages, but then she reaches the conclusion that the remedy can be found with the use of a giant magnet, as practiced by Dr. Mesmer.

Mozart's audience would have recognized the allusion immediately. Dr. Mesmer had championed a theory called “animal

magnetism," arguing that many diseases could be cured by careful placement of the physician's hands on the patient to properly organize the magnetic forces within the body. Though Mesmer had not literally used magnets, some of his followers did, and in the popular imagination Mesmer was associated with their use. A commission in France, which included Ben Franklin among its participants, had declared Mesmer to be a fraud, and by the time *Così fan tutte* was written Mesmer had become a popular subject for satire, including in several comic operas. Note, incidentally, how Despina's voice trembles to imitate the pulsations of the magnetic forces.

In any event, the two men are momentarily revived by the fake cure and ask the women for a kiss. Though they are rebuffed, they fear that they have detected some affection in the women's voices. The concluding section of the finale is an up-tempo ensemble for the six principal characters, which in style looks forward to the mass-confusion ensembles at which Rossini was so adept, as the curtain falls on the confused lovers and the exuberant masterminds of the plot.

ACT II:

The second act begins quietly, with a conversation in recitative among the three women. Echoing Don Alfonso, Despina asks, "Are you women?" She tells the two sisters that they should behave like women and flirt with the Albanians, whose disguise she has apparently not yet seen through. In the light-hearted aria "Una donna a quindici anni," Despina catalogues the various tricks that a young woman should master by the age of fifteen. After she exits, the two sisters, while initially commenting on Despina's cynicism, decide that it would not hurt to play along for a while, not realizing that they are playing with fire. In a duet in which they echo each other's melodies, each, apparently inadvertently, chooses the other's fiancé.

The other four principal characters enter. Following a slow, lyrical passage in the orchestra, indicating the apparent seriousness of what is to follow, Ferrando and Guglielmo express their affection for the two women. To further advance their cause, in a quartet with the two men, Don Alfonso and Despina instruct the men how to woo

the women, and they leave to let matters take their true course. Following some comically awkward small talk among the four, the two couples (in their new pairings) go their separate ways. First we see the dialogue between Guglielmo and Dorabella. If we did not know the true situation, their music would sound like a real love duet, as Dorabella echoes Guglielmo's entreaties by repeating his melodies. The apparent sincerity of the music could lead us to believe that their new-found love may be genuine on both sides. They exchange lockets, and Guglielmo, in an aside, grieves for his friend.

We then get to drop in on Ferrando and Fiordiligi. In a recitative dialogue, which is accompanied by the orchestra for increased dramatic effect, Fiordiligi rejects Ferrando's advances. After he leaves, however, we learn that she has begun to develop feelings for her suitor. Alone on stage, she tells us, first in an accompanied recitative and later in the aria "Per pietà, ben mio, perdona" that she is falling in love against her will, and she expresses her feelings of guilt at betraying Guglielmo's affections. Labeled a "rondo" because of its recurring "A" section followed by variant "B" sections,

this aria is in many ways the emotional center of *Così fan tutte*.

Whereas her earlier aria is deliberately exaggerated to the point of parody, "Per pietà" is clearly sincere.

We then see a dialogue between Ferrando and Guglielmo, in which Ferrando, unaware of Fiordiligi's inner turmoil, tells Guglielmo that his beloved is true, while the latter reluctantly breaks the news to his friend that his advances have succeeded. Angered on behalf of his friend, Guglielmo expresses his rage against the entire female sex in his aria, "Donne mie la fate a tanti." Don Alfonso enters, and the men tell him that he has won half of his bet.

The men exit, and the women enter. Dorabella expresses her confusion on how she could have had such a change of heart in one day. Fiordiligi, however, makes one last-ditch effort to restrain her true feelings. She calls for Guglielmo's spare military uniform, planning to follow him into battle, but when Ferrando confronts her, she is forced to reveal her true feelings.

The men are left alone on stage. Don Alfonso sings a brief aria telling his friends that he does not blame women for being so

changeable. He tells the men, reiterating the phrase heard in the overture, “Così fan tutte”—they all do it—and he has them repeat it with him.

This leads to the finale, again over a quarter hour of continuous music without recitative. A mock wedding has been planned. The notary comes in to present the marriage contracts. In a parallel to the first-act finale, it is actually Despina in disguise, and again she has a chance to ham it up, breathlessly reading the marriage contracts in a comically nasal tone. The wedding, however, is interrupted by an offstage chorus, indicating the return of the soldiers, to the melody that accompanied their departure in Act I. After a brief exit, Ferrando and Guglielmo, no longer in disguise, re-enter and express their apparent outrage at their lovers' infidelity.

Echoing melodies heard earlier, they finally reveal the ruse to the heartbroken women. Don Alfonso encourages the couples to marry, now that they are free of delusions, though Despina, now fully aware of the plot, expresses her guilt about her part in the masquerade. The opera concludes with the six principal characters

singing in unison, "Fortunate is the person who is able to make the best of all adversity. Through all vicissitudes he can let reason be his guide...In the midst of a whirlwind of adversity, he will find a center of tranquility."

But how do the lovers pair off? Da Ponte does not really tell us if they go back to their original partners or stay with the new ones. Those who look at *Così fan tutte* from a historical perspective agree that contemporary audiences would have assumed that they go back to their original partners, if for no other reason than that a sense of duty was more highly prized than romantic fancies in that era. Nicholas Till has argued that the new pairings make no sense, because "It was not to Guglielmo that Dorabella transferred her affections, nor Ferrando that Fiordiligi fell in love with, but a pair of exotically mustachioed Albanians." However, today many directors, believing that the ardor with which the two men woo their new partners and the speed with which the women accept them suggest the two couples have found their true soul-mates in their new pairings.

Just as W. C. Fields wanted to show off his juggling in *David Copperfield* because Dickens never said his character *couldn't* juggle, directors take the lack of a clear statement about the reunion of the couples as license to create an ending more in keeping with modern ideas about romance. Some go as far as to suggest a romantic liaison between Despina and Don Alfonso, ignoring the differences of class and age (upon which Despina herself comments) between them.

How will the current production resolve this dilemma? You will need to buy a ticket to find out.

MOZART AND COSÌ FAN TUTTE

Of all the great composers, perhaps none has been the subject of more romantic speculation than was Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Several years ago, in the film *Amadeus*, Hollywood presented us with a Mozart for our own age—an irreverent, uncouth young man with an innate and inexplicable gift for composing immortal music. In the Peter Schafer play upon which the film was based, it was clear that

what we were seeing was a caricature of the composer as filtered through the deranged mind of his rival, Antonio Salieri (also a caricature). But film audiences, accustomed to television biopics, have often missed that distinction.

When we look at the historical record, much of which can be derived from the large amount of Mozart's correspondence which has been preserved, we find a quite different picture. For one thing, he was a keen student of music theory. As for the vulgarity, much of which can be confirmed from his letters, we need to remember that in the eighteenth century scatological humor and sexual frankness were much more acceptable than they were to become later. Rumors of Mozart's sexual affairs are unsubstantiated, and the erotic letters we do have are addressed to his wife.

But if we strip away the myths, one indisputable fact remains: Mozart was clearly one of the greatest creative artists—if not the greatest—the world has ever known. In a lifetime just short of thirty-six years, he revolutionized Western music.

Mozart was born in Salzburg (which was not yet part of Austria) on January 27, 1756, the son of a professional musician, Leopold Mozart. Both he and his sister were child prodigies, and they quickly attracted attention throughout Europe.

After struggling for some time to make a living, in 1781 he made the most important decision of his life, relocating to Vienna, which at that time was the cultural capital of the German-speaking world. Here he was able to find a wider audience for his works, eventually landing a post in the court of Emperor Joseph II, one of history's great enlightened monarchs. During his travels, he came in contact with a copyist named Fridolin Weber, whose daughter Constanze became his wife, after he had been rejected by her older sister. (Director Peter Sellers sees in this a key to the plot of *Così fan tutte*, the wooing of one sister and marrying the other). Leopold was furious about the match, having hoped that Wolfgang, like his sister, would find someone who could provide him with some financial stability. But the young Mozart knew best, and by all accounts it was an excellent marriage, despite the couple's perennial financial difficulties.

Though he had written a number of operas in his teen years, it was in 1781 that the young composer first began to write the works which would bring him immortality in the annals of opera, beginning with *Idomeneo*, followed by *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, which led to the legendary exchange between the composer and the Emperor: “Too beautiful for our ears, and too many notes, my dear Mozart,” to which the young composer replied, “Exactly as many as necessary, Your Majesty.” Whether or not this dialogue actually took place, it does illustrate the fact that the young Mozart was writing with a complexity that was new to the Viennese audiences.

In 1783, realizing that Vienna’s German opera company had produced only one work of lasting value—the aforementioned *Abduction*—Emperor Joseph disbanded it in favor of a new company to be devoted to the production of Italian opera. Salieri, the official court composer, invited a promising young Italian poet, Lorenzo Da Ponte, to court so the two men could collaborate on Italian operas. However, in one of those great ironic twists that makes music history so fascinating, when their opera *Il Ricco d’un giorno* flopped, Salieri blamed his librettist and swore that he would

never work with him again. This left the field open for Da Ponte to work with Mozart instead. All that was needed was an appropriate subject, and when the composer suggested an adaptation of what was then the hottest play in Europe—Beaumarchais' *The Marriage of Figaro*—he jumped at the chance.

Premiered May 1, 1786, the opera was an instantaneous sensation, but not a lasting one. Unaccustomed to the complexity of Mozart's ensembles, the Viennese audiences soon turned their attention to Soler's *Una cosa rara*, another opera for which Da Ponte had provided the libretto.

The following year, Mozart's popularity in Prague led to a commission for a new opera, and again he collaborated with Da Ponte to create *Don Giovanni*. (This opera contains an inside joke, with Leporello expressing preference for *Una cosa rara* over *The Marriage of Figaro*.)

Not much is known about the creation of the pair's third and final collaboration, *Così fan tutte*, which Da Ponte always referred by its subtitle, "A School for Lovers." It is said that the Emperor himself

had suggested the subject. According to Mozart's wife, the project had first been offered to Salieri, but when he refused it, perhaps because he considered the subject too immoral for his taste, the task fell to Mozart, whose popularity at court had risen with a revival of *The Marriage of Figaro*. The opera had its premier January 26, 1790, and was fairly successful, but the death of the Emperor a few months later caused the theaters to be closed for period of time.

Mozart went on to write two more operas: an *opera seria*, *La clemenzia di Tito*, and a German Singspiel, *The Magic Flute*, for a public theater.

At the height of his creative powers, however, the young composer was stricken by a disease which biographers have been unable to identify, though few take seriously the rumor that he was poisoned. He died December 5, 1791, just weeks short of what would have been his thirty-sixth birthday, leaving his *Requiem* unfinished. In accord with funeral practices of the time (part of Joseph II's reforms), he was buried in an unmarked grave. Mozart does not

need a stone monument, however. His music is certainly enough of a monument for any man.

LORENZO DA PONTE

Though he is best known as a writer of opera libretti (lyrics), Lorenzo Da Ponte's life itself could well provide the subject of an opera for some enterprising composer and librettist. Born March 10, 1749 in the Jewish ghetto of Ceneda, Italy under the name Emanuel Conegliano, Da Ponte lost his mother at age five, and when his father chose a Catholic woman for his second wife, the entire family converted to her religion. While Da Ponte failed to mention his Jewish origins in his memoirs and therefore does not comment on his feelings about this change, it appears that he welcomed it not so much out of religious fervor but rather because it opened for him the world of Western culture and education, which was closed to non-Christians at that time. To express his gratitude for these opportunities, he changed his name to that of the bishop who baptized him.

Recognized early as a gifted student, Da Ponte realized that the best way to obtain a liberal education in his day was to study for the priesthood (he apparently went as far as ordination), though he had no intention of serving in that capacity (or, for that matter, adopting a celibate lifestyle). In fact, prior to his move to Vienna in 1781, his addictive gambling and affairs with married women were well known.

Vienna at that time was a true cultural center. Moreover, the Emperor was known for his tolerance of Jews and would not have held Da Ponte's origins against him. Da Ponte soon achieved the role of poet to the Italian theater and had the opportunity collaborate with several of the most prominent composers of the era, though today he is principally remembered for his three collaborations with Mozart, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan tutte*.

In 1792, Da Ponte met a young Englishwoman named Nancy Grahl, and it appears that the two entered into what in effect was a common-law marriage. Under chaotic circumstances, he moved to

London to work with an Italian opera company there, and in 1805, one step ahead of his creditors, he and Nancy departed for the United States, where he spent his remaining years as a merchant, bookseller, and professor of Italian at Columbia University. He devoted much of his time to promoting Italian opera in the United States. He was greatly encouraged in his endeavors by scholar and poet Clement Moore, best known today as the writer of *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*.

Da Ponte eloquently expressed his theory of opera as follows: "The success of an opera depends, first of all, on the poet...I think that poetry is the door to music, which can be very handsome, and much admired for its exterior, but nobody can see its internal beauties, if the door is wanting." Some critics have sought to denigrate the importance of Da Ponte in the creation of these operas, dismissing him as a mere versifier, pointing out how flat the libretti appear on the page without Mozart's music, but it would be more accurate to say that he undoubtedly recognized what the rest of the world was soon to discover: that Mozart was an incomparable genius who could turn seemingly ordinary prose into great music. Da

Ponte clearly understood that his words were not what would bring people to the opera house. It is best to say that the two men brought out the best in each other. None of Da Ponte's other works have stood the test of time; yet no other works of Mozart have the same depth of characterization as these three. Their collaborations represent the integration of text and music at its finest.

THE COSÌ PROBLEM

While on the surface *Così fan tutte* would appear to be a light comedy, many audiences have found it to be a disturbing one. In the nineteenth century it was attacked for its questioning the virtue of the female sex, and many productions altered the story to place the women in a more favorable light, as in the German translation in which Despina tips the women off early on so they can play along with the deception. In our own time, many have considered it to be misogynistic and anti-feminist. On the surface, this would seem to be the case. But closer examination could reveal quite a different result.

To begin with, we should consider the role of Don Alfonso, the old philosopher. In many comedies of the time, the term

“philosopher” suggested a scholar whose love of theories had caused him to lose touch with reality—in short, an object of ridicule. Such is the case for Dr. Pangloss in Voltaire's *Candide*, who was not to make his way into opera for another century and a half but whose character was well known in Mozart's day. Don Alfonso, on the other hand, is a source of wisdom, whose understanding of human nature is justified in the end. In a sense, he could be seen as Mozart and Da Ponte's spokesman. Nicholas Till has pointed out the similarities between *Così fan tutte* and *The Magic Flute*, in that both describe two pairs of lovers who are guided by a wise old man and are put through trials in preparation for their lives together.

Till, along with Edmund Goehring, interprets the opera in terms of its critique of Enlightenment thought, with its emphasis on reason and denial of the irrational in human behavior. Don Alfonso, in his view, is not anti-woman, but rather a realist who opposes the idealization of women and the denial of their complex emotions. Fiordiligi, in Goehring's view, represents a side of human nature denied by the rationalists of Mozart's day: “The heart has regions where reason cannot penetrate.” He argues that Enlightenment

thinkers often had an overly materialistic view of the world, of which Mesmer's theories about the human body were an extreme example.

Mozart scholar Jessica Waldoff focuses more on Mozart and Da Ponte's critique of sentimental fiction and drama, which was based on the premise that virtue and sentiment go hand in hand: "One of the opera's most disturbing ironies is its depiction of how Fiordiligi, in the very process of falling short of moral constancy, proves herself to be everything else the sentimental heroine should be: highly susceptible to emotional entreaties, acutely sensitive to the feelings of others, and easily victimized." She continues, "While Fiordiligi and Dorabella exaggerate their feelings in keeping with fashionable notions of sensibility, these same fashionable notions allow their hearts to lead them away from the constancy deep feeling was supposed to engender."

Jane Glover, in *Mozart's Women*, sees Fiordiligi and Dorabella as almost tragic figures: "Their passage from carefree society girls to

distraught neurotics is all the more merciless because they have had no active part in the collapse of their world.”

Beyond the historical context, there are other points which could be made to defend the writers of *Così fan tutte* from charges of misogyny. The two sisters are always true to their feelings, whereas the men behave like jerks. What decent person would torment his beloved with a test of this nature? And let us not forget Despina's words about men—especially soldiers—being no models of constancy themselves. Furthermore, the women are not really unfaithful. They were not married, only engaged, and they both insist on marriage to the supposed Albanians as a condition of intimacy.

In fact, one could give the entire opera a feminist reading, as a critique of the objectification of women. Ferrando and Guglielmo put the two women on virtual pedestals, and see them only in the abstract, to the point where Don Alfonso asks if they are goddesses or women. In praising the women for their physical beauty and their constancy, the men effectively turn the women into objects whose primary purpose in life is to serve men.

Throughout the opera, Dorabella and Fiordiligi react in accord with the way women are expected to behave. Their threats of suicide upon hearing that their fiancés are leaving are hardly meant to be taken seriously but represent rather the adorable feminine helplessness that men expect. Rather than console them, the two men simply gloat over their exaggerated behavior.

This, in a sense, could be seen as the key to the entire opera. The men pay no attention to their future brides, treating them as mere objects, to be wagered on like greyhounds or horses. Only in disguise, when motivated by their wager to show some real effort, do they learn how to make a woman feel loved.

Perhaps the real reason behind the women's behavior is that they live in a society in which women's lives are trivialized. With few responsibilities and little education, they suffer from having too much time on their hands. The idea that women need to be educated in order to reach their full potential is not necessarily a reflection of 21st-century values. At least half a century before the opera was written, British essayist Joseph Addison had complained that "women's

amusements seem contrived for them, rather that they are women, than as they are reasonable creatures.”

The most interesting character in *Così fan tutte* is Despina, the servant girl who has to rely on her wits, supplementing her meager earnings with tips such as that which Don Alfonso offers in exchange for her assistance. Once having been thus engaged, however, Despina goes far beyond the role that he had envisioned. She is clearly the mastermind behind the entire masquerade and as such comes across as the most intelligent character in the opera. She represents a feminist ideal, what Fiordiligi and Dorabella might have been had their society permitted them to exercise their imagination.

Kelli O'Hara, who recently moved from Broadway to the Met in order to portray Despina, calls her character “the saddest person I've ever been asked to play: She has obviously been hurt, so she wants to sabotage things and take other people down.” She continues, “There's much comedy in sadness—we laugh at sadness, because we're uncomfortable with it. But in today's climate, for a woman to sing, ‘By the time she's fifteen, a girl has to know how to

deal with a man. She has to learn how to lie. She has to know how to play with him, toy with him, smile for him, basically bend over for him' ...Despina has obviously covered her life in humor and protective mechanisms, and she's very quick to play with the emotions of women who seem to be happy, because misery loves company. There is dark comedy in that."

Thus, Despina emerges as the most fully developed character in *Così fan tutte*. It may not be too extreme a leap of the imagination to suggest that in composing Despina's music, Mozart may well have been thinking of Constanze—the woman who served as his soul mate throughout his tragically short adult lifetime.

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