

Notes on COSÌ FAN TUTTE

Dramma giocoso—sounds like “hot ice,” or “cruel kindness.” This oxymoronic term, coined by the 18th-century Venetian playwright Carlo Goldoni, is often applied to *Le nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan tutte*, the trio of operatic masterpieces on which Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart collaborated with librettist Lorenzo da Ponte. And perhaps no opera is more deserving of the designation than *Così*, a work as ambiguous as its title is untranslatable (let's call it “All Women Act Like That,” or, more literally, “So Do They All”). During the present century alone, critics have variously described it as “a glorious soap-bubble,” “a deep and unsettling masterpiece,” “a musical lark,” and “a profound and terrifying tragicomedy;” they have praised both its “enchanted artificiality” and its “acute realism.”

So what is *Così fan tutte*: a proto-Freudian nightmare or a sort of Enlightenment *Love Lucy*? The answer, of course, lies somewhere in between. For despite its easy laughs, its apparent neat symmetries and the tidy paean to reason with which it ends, *Così* is a web of ambiguities which will surely send you home whistling the tunes but also perhaps reaching for the Maalox.

Così fan tutte claims paradox as its birthright. Though it is a *dernier cri* of the Enlightenment, during its gestation in 1789, the Bastille was falling, and with it the clear, prosaic equilibrium of the Age of Reason. And *Così*—populated by a pair of prideful men who place a wager on their fiancées' fidelity, a pair of fiancées who fail their test, a worldly-wise philosopher who manipulates the action, and a cheeky serving maid who aids him—flew in the face of all that was dear to incipient Romanticism.

As a result, *Così* has suffered a checkered performance history. The opera as we know it all but disappeared during the 19th century. It was seen only in bowdlerizations and wholesale rearrangements designed to preserve its “heavenly melodies” while mitigating its vexing plot. The earliest known hatchet job, C.F. Bretzner's *Die Wette, oder Mädchenlist und Liebe*, presented in Hamburg in 1796, has Despina revealing the men's plot before the “Albanians” arrive, so that the sisters appear less foolish. At the end, the men abjectly beg the ladies' pardon, and a real notary is on hand to marry the couples. *Die Zauberprobe, oder So Sind Sie Alle*, devised by G.F. Treitschke in Vienna in 1814, renders Don Alfonso a sorcerer and Despina a sprite, which not only satisfied the public's appetite for magic but also absolved the lovers of any moral responsibility for their actions. In Krebel's *Mädchen sind Mädchen* (Stuttgart, 1816), the men put their sweethearts to the test after returning from a lengthy journey. In C.A. Herclots' *Die Verhängliche Wette* (Berlin, 1822), the women are tested not by Ferrando and Guglielmo but by friends of theirs, and in Bernhard Gugler's *So Sind Sie Treu?* (Stuttgart, 1858), each man tests his own fiancée. (It was not until 1896, in Munich, that *Così* was again seen more or less in its original form, and the Metropolitan Opera didn't get around to producing *Così* at all until giving its American premiere in 1922, 39 years after first presenting *Giovanni* and 28 years after *Figaro*.)

Each of the mutilations of *Così* documented above points to one of its “problems.” First of all, the Romantics, drawn onward by Goethe's *Ewig-Weibliche*, were scandalized by the opera's supposedly unflattering portrayal of women. Little more than a year after *Così*'s premiere, at Vienna's Burgtheater on January 26, 1790, the actor Friedrich Ludwig Schroeder recorded in his diary that the opera was “a miserable thing, which lowers all women, cannot possibly please female spectators and will therefore not make its fortune.” (He cannot have listened too carefully to Fiordiligi's noble Act II aria and her duet with Ferrando, both steeped in depth and humanity.) Though the loaded issue of sexual fidelity is as central to *Figaro* and *Giovanni* as it is to *Così*, the former works didn't upset people as profoundly, perhaps because in them the transgressors are men, and anyway, they get their lumps at the end.

Vying with the public's distaste for *Così*'s apparent wantonness was disdain for its seeming implausibility. In 1863, Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick fulminated over “the continuing blindness of the two heroines, who do not recognize their fiancés only a quarter hour after they have been caressing them, and who stupidly take their chambermaid to be first a doctor and then a notary just because she is wearing a wig.” Never mind that the element of disguise also figures prominently in both *Figaro* and *Giovanni* (not to mention *Fidelio*).

Così's detractors have also objected to its allegedly unrealistic time span: how could the fickle heroines change their affections in a mere day? Here, it's vital to remember that a devoted Classicist like Da Ponte would never have failed to observe the Aristotelian unities of time, place, and action, and that these unities were often meant to be taken as symbolic.



The paradox of *Così* extends to its provenance. Purportedly based on nothing more distinguished than a snippet of contemporary Viennese gossip, it lacks literary pedigrees like that of *Figaro* (Beaumarchais) or *Giovanni* (Tirso de Molina). At the same time, *Così*'s plot may boast true mythological status, tracing its heritage back to the story of Cephalus, whose fidelity is tested by his disguised wife Procris in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and on, in varied forms, through Terence, Plautus, Ariosto, Boccaccio, Cervantes, and, perhaps most notably, Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Yet it also owes much, as do all *opere buffe*, to the back-alley antics of *commedia*

dell'arte.

This gave Mozart license to go to town with one of the pet conceits of his later operas: constantly colliding the parallel universes of *opera seria* and *opera buffa*. The characters in *Così*, ostensibly a comic opera, frequently lapse into *seria*-speak, sometimes offered up in parody (Dorabella's "Smanie implacabili," Fiordiligi's "Come scoglio"), sometimes in a spirit of deep sincerity (Fiordiligi's "Per pietà," all three of Ferrando's arias, and their majestic duet). But Mozart and Da Ponte never let us wallow there too long, and they particularly enjoy pulling the rug from under us by reminding us that we're in the theater; the sublime "Soave sia il vento" trio of Act I has barely faded away when Don Alfonso congratulates himself on his acting; at the end of Act I, the sisters fulminate at their would-be suitors while the others tell us how amusing a "scene" it is. And a bit earlier in the same finale, the cast crystallizes *Così*'s duality for us: the sisters deem the situation a "tragedy," while the men call it a "farce." These are but a few of the things that give *Così* its sweet-and-sour flavor.

Those distressed by *Così* have sometimes consoled themselves with the notion that their beloved Mozart had been forced to write it against his will. This fiction was launched and perpetuated by his first biographer, Franz Xaver Niemetschek (1798), and Mozart's brother-in-law, the artist Joseph Lange (1808), who held that "Everywhere people wonder how that great mind could lower itself to waste its heavenly melodies on so feeble a concoction of text. It was not in his power to refuse the commission, and the text was expressly served on him."

True, an imperial commission was not to be turned down; the composition of *Così* was generated by Emperor Joseph II's enthusiasm for a successful Vienna revival of *Figaro*. And it is also true enough that the year 1789 found Mozart in straitened finances and that *Così* was hastily written, in the space of four months during which the composer, sadly, had little else to occupy his attention. But in that brief span, Mozart lavished his finest inspiration on *Così*. For prodigal musical richness, for clear-eyed portrayal of the human condition, the world has never seen a more "glorious"—and "profound and unsettling" — "soap-bubble."

- Cori Ellison