

Comedy in Song



8. When Farce Gets Real

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THE THREE OPERAS that **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** (1756–91) wrote to the texts of **Lorenzo Da Ponte** (1749–1838)—*The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan tutte*—set a pattern for much of the *opera buffa* that would follow with Rossini and others. Yet all three had a serious side. And even the confected plot-premise of the last of them, *Così*, merely emphasizes the painful moments where the fiction touches true human feeling.

Così fan tutte (All Women Do It) begins almost as a locker-room joke. Two young men boast to an older friend that their fiancées are chastity incarnate. They agree on a bet to prove their point: they will pretend to be called away to war, only to return in disguise and do their best to seduce the *other* man's sweetheart. Of course they ultimately succeed—that's the point of the title—but their campaign brings their own morality into question, not just that of the women. The pasteboard characters become very real as they each hurt or get hurt. And the whole thing asks some profound questions about the nature of love and commitment.

For the most part, Mozart sets up the first act as though this is to be a conventional farce, as we shall see in the first hour. In Act Two, though, the laughter takes a different hue, or stops entirely. *rb*.

A. Farce, More or Less

In the opening scene of the opera (not shown), the young men **Ferrando** and **Guglielmo** enter into the bet with **Don Alfonso** that will prepare the entire plot. In the second scene, we meet the sisters **Fiordiligi** (engaged to Guglielmo) and **Dorabella** (engaged to Ferrando). Even as they claim that their matches are ideal, we get hints that what they are looking for in a man is not what their respective fiancés can provide. The imminent departure of the men causes much melodrama,

though even here there are hints of the seriousness to come. In the third scene, Alfonso enlists the help of **Despina**, the ladies' maid. When the men enter in Middle Eastern disguise, Despina presents them to her mistresses, not recognizing who they really are. Before long, the women leave in outrage, and Alfonso moves to Plan B: that the lovesick men should pretend to have taken poison, only to be cured by Despina in disguise as a **Doctor**. Eventually, this also fails.

Mozart: *Così fan tutte*, Fiordiligi/Dorabella duet (Glyndebourne 2006, directed by Nicholas Hytner and conducted by Ivan Fischer; Miah Persson, *Fiordiligi*; Anke Vondung, *Dorabella*)

Mozart: *Così fan tutte*, Act I quintet and trio (Glyndebourne 2006, as above, with Topi Lehtipuu, *Ferrando*; Luca Pisaroni, *Guglielmo*, and Nicolas Rivenq, *Alfonso*)

Mozart: *Così fan tutte*, Act I sextet (Glyndebourne 2006, as above, with Ainhua Garmendia, *Despina*)

Mozart: *Così fan tutte*, Act I finale (Glyndebourne 2006, as above)

B. When the Laughter Stops

In the opening scene of Act Two (also not played), the women allow themselves to be persuaded by Despina that a little mild flirtation might be permissible. So they attend a twilight serenade put on by the two strangers. Both believe themselves to be in command of the situation, but Dorabella soon succumbs to Guglielmo. Fiordiligi is also backed into an emotional corner by Ferrando, but he sees her distress and withdraws. However, when they each learn what has happened with the other two, Ferrando determines to try again and comes upon Fiordiligi in a vulnerable moment when she is attempting to flee.

Mozart: *Così fan tutte*, Guglielmo/Dorabella duet (Glyndebourne 2006, as above)

Mozart: *Così fan tutte*, Guglielmo/Dorabella duet, ending (Salzburg 2020, directed by Christof Loy; André Schuen, *Guglielmo*; Marianne Crebassa, *Dorabella*)

Mozart: *Così fan tutte*, Guglielmo/Dorabella duet (London 2016, directed by Jan Philipp Gloger; Alessio Arduini; *Guglielmo*; Angela Brower, *Dorabella*)

Mozart: *Così fan tutte*, “Per pietà, bel idol mio,” excerpt (Glyndebourne 2006; Miah Persson, *Fiordiligi*)

Mozart: *Così fan tutte*, Fiordiligi/Ferrando duet (Glyndebourne 2006, as above)

The Act II finale begins with a double wedding (with Despina in another disguise as a **Notary**). But Alfonso chooses that moment to bring the men back, as though recalled from the battlefield. There are recriminations and abject apologies, but everybody has been somehow tainted. Mozart and Da Ponte simply restore the *status quo* with a chirpy little moral, but that won't work today. How is a modern director to end it?

Mozart: *Così fan tutte*, compilation of closing scenes (Glyndebourne 2006, Nicholas Hytner; London 1995, Jonathan Miller; Florence 2024, Sven-Eric Bechtolf)

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