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Così fan tutte: Brilliance or Buffoonery?

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Abstract

Hardly any opera has endured more scrutiny and self-preserving apology than Mozart's *Così fan tutte*. Flagrant opposition and a long string of "rescue" attempts shroud the receptive history of the work. Since its premiere, *Così fan tutte* has long been recognized as a problem opera. Many critics found it implausible that Mozart—the consummate composer and man that warranted their idolization—could have stooped so low as to agree to such an immoral plot. The great beauty in Mozart's musical parody is that it at once mocks and transforms the supposed superficial experiment of Lorenzo Da Ponte's libretto. The parody in *Così fan tutte* must be correctly interpreted. It is rampant, but it exists for much more than a perfunctory laugh. The beauty of Mozart's music—in both moments of wild parody and heartfelt emotion—succeeds in giving *Così fan tutte* a depth that is both challenging and transforming.

Keywords

Mozart, opera, *Così fan tutte*

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Così fan tutte: Brilliance or Buffoonery?

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Hardly any opera has endured more scrutiny and self-preserving apology than Mozart's *Così fan tutte*. Flagrant opposition and a long string of "rescue" attempts shroud the receptive history of the work. Since its premiere, *Così fan tutte* has long been recognized as a problem opera. Many critics found it implausible that Mozart—the consummate composer and man that warranted their idolization—could have stooped so low as to agree to such an immoral plot.

One often reads that the premier of *Così* was indeed a failure. The opera opened on 26 January 1790, only to be followed by the death of the Emperor in February of that year. The emperor's death closed the theaters, limiting the number of performances during the main season to five. In addition, five more were given in the summer. Historians and Mozartian critics conclude that this seemingly small number of performances is the result of disapproval by audiences. However, existing evidence shows that the opera was well received by the Viennese public. The popularity of *Così fan tutte* was rivaled only by Salieri's *La cifra*, the only other newly commissioned opera premiering that season. Despite the favorable reception, *Così* was criticized in the following years as being "morally suspect" (Waldoff, 186). A published review of a Berlin production in 1792 stated, "the present opera is the silliest rubbish in the world, and it draws an audience only because of the splendid music" (Cited in Braunbehrens, *Mozart in Vienna*, 337). Early accounts such as this one attempt to highlight the disparity between Mozart's "splendid" music from what they perceived to be a deplorable, immoral libretto (Waldoff, 186). Bernard Williams proclaims that Mozart's music seems too strong, and "puts a weight on the plot which its farcical artificiality cannot sustain" (361).

Consistent criticism of the opera can be traced back to Franz Xavier Niemetschek, author of the first eyewitness biography of Mozart, *Leben des k.k. Kapellmeisters Wolfgang Gottlieb Mozart* (1798). The crux of Niemetschek's criticism centered on the text—which he perceived as shallow—and the sublime music Mozart wrote to accompany it. The author found himself unable to reconcile Mozart's genius with the superficiality of Da Ponte's libretto. Niemetschek felt that Mozart squandered his musical genius on a libretto that was wholly frivolous. He even went so far as to claim that Mozart was coerced into setting the text; that it did not "lie in his power to refuse the commission" (Goehring, 2)—and that he only agreed because he was under duress. This verdict inaugurated a chain of

condemnation for the opera that carried into the nineteenth century and beyond (Goehring, 2).

The pervasiveness of Niemetschek's early disapproval is exemplified later in Ignaz Ferdinand Arnold's *Mozart's Geist* (1803). Arnold's dislike of the opera is limpid. He not only propagates Niemetschek's conclusions, but also supplies more overt criticism concerning the organization of the opera. In an aesthetic evaluation, he claims, "One can find neither plan nor order in this piece, and it would be difficult to try to judge this as a unified work of art" (Goehring, 2). Arnold's assessment guided later studies of great reputation, and together, the early biographies of Mozart established the relationship between the text and the music as the primary aesthetic problem of *Così fan tutte* (Goehring, 3).

By the nineteenth century, Mozart was clearly being established as a "musical divinity" (Goehring, 8), which meant that dismissing a major work like *Così fan tutte* could warrant professional criticism. In order to "rescue" *Così fan tutte*, some scholars simply ignored the text altogether. Others made significant substitutions to the text that had little to do with the original libretto. This division of the opera became so complete the *Così fan tutte* nearly ceased to be an opera at all. Thus, while the opera found acceptance in the nineteenth century, it most often came at the rejection of *Così fan tutte* as a real work of art.

Despite the somewhat receptive treatment in the nineteenth century, *Così* continued to face criticism in the twentieth century. One of the more prominent figures to revive the charge that *Così* fails as a logical work was Joseph Kerman. Kerman, widely known for one of the most thought-provoking works of operatic criticism, *Opera as Drama* (1956), boldly condemns *Così* for its incoherence. He, echoing Niemetschek, cannot reconcile the music with the text, and insists that the composer and the librettist are at odds with one another.

Despite Kerman's claims, Andrew Steptoe defends *Così fan tutte* against the relentless criticism of incoherence. In his work, *The Mozart-Da Ponte Operas* (2001), he justifies the opera by drawing attention away from the work and directing it to the original viewers. In response to the accusations that Mozart's music elicited too passionate a response for the shallow libretto, Steptoe refers to the preeminence of passion for the eighteenth century audiences. Because "the crucial element was the mode of emotional expression itself" (Steptoe, 246), the audience would prefer the entertaining display of human imperfection in *Così fan tutte* instead of a complicated plot involving social upheaval. Steptoe reasons that the success of an opera in the eighteenth century did not require consistent characterization or rational plots, but could succeed by virtue of emotional expression alone (246).

Steptoe is not the only recent scholar to defend *Così fan tutte*. Within the last decade, a number of authors have attempted to reexamine *Così fan tutte* and test the claims against it. One such author is Edmund J. Goehring. His work, *Three Modes of Perception in Mozart: The Philosophical, Pastoral, and Comic in "Così*

fan tutte” (2004) offers a new perspective on the correlation between text and tone, the tension between the comedic and the philosophical, and the subtle use of the pastoral mode in *Così fan tutte*. Within these modes of perception, Goehring uncovers a structural unity that eases the disparity between text and music. Goehring argues that the opera has a “coherent design and a generous vision” (xiii). This ‘generous vision’ highlights the mind’s “uneasy grip on the elusive heart” (xiv) and gives the ambiguity in the opera a comprehensible purpose.

In his book, *On Late Style: Music and Literature against the Grain* (2006), Edward Said acknowledges the apparent discrepancies between music and text, but insists that *Così* must be more carefully examined. Said argues that beyond the rollicking, comedic, and sublime music lies an inner system that is both profound and amoral. The depth of Mozart’s music, he claims, simply underscores the great philosophy Mozart and Da Ponte seemed to have uncovered; namely, the idea of “a universe shorn of any redemptive or palliative scheme, whose one law is motion and instability expressed as the power of libertinage and manipulation” (Said, 71). This startling, if not novel, conclusion elevates *Così fan tutte* beyond its traditional two-dimensional perception.

Perhaps the most recent defense of *Così* comes from Mary Hunter, author of *Mozart’s Operas: A Companion* (2008). Hunter strikes against the conventional objections to Da Ponte’s libretto to present a hearty defense of the opera as a unified, credible work of art. Hunter dismisses argument that Da Ponte’s libretto is trivial, claiming, “it is both a brilliant display of wit and learning on its own terms and the perfect frame for Mozart’s music” (164). In a thoughtful analysis, she peels back layer after layer of meaning in the text, revealing the depth of irony captured by the librettist and the earnest beauty presented in Mozart’s music.

Clearly, the string of criticisms set in motion by Niemetschek and Arnold wove their way through the nineteenth century and beyond. In fact, it was not until a much later era—namely, the latter part of the twentieth century—that *Così fan tutte* finally found a secure standing on the operatic stage. Since its early condemnation, *Così* has struggled to rise to the honorable rankings of *Don Giovanni* and *Le Nozze di Figaro* and be accepted as a true work of art. The prominence of works written about *Così fan tutte* in the last decade indicates that much is still being uncovered about the work.

Though *Così fan tutte* has been criticized for being foolish, lacking adequate character development, championing immorality, and manufacturing unrealistic scenarios, much of the controversy relates to a perceived discrepancy between music and text. The unification of this perplexing, seemingly paltry commentary on the fickleness of human emotion and the balanced, sparkling music of Mozart creates a tension that scholars cannot seem to reconcile. Truly, for most of *Così fan tutte*’s history, “the perceived incompatibility between the text and its music was taken as a symptom of artistic failure” (Goehring, 15). Such convictions imply that Mozart’s genius was hampered by the libretto. Scholars are thus left

with several pressing questions: Did Mozart squander his compositional genius by setting low caliber music to a frivolous text, or did he dutifully portray the text with music befitting of such a subject? Although Mozart's compositions for *Così fan tutte* appear, on a superficial level, to be trite and insubstantial, the music is skillfully composed and succeeds in creating multiple dimensions of dramatic satire.

Mozart and librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte had already combined forces on *Le Nozze di Figaro* (1786) and *Don Giovanni* (1787), both of which were masterful manifestations of Da Ponte's literary prowess and Mozart's dramatic musical idioms. It is against the backdrop of these complex, well-crafted works that *Così fan tutte* seems to wane.

Unlike *Le Nozze di Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*, *Così fan tutte* appears to feature no redemption or striving for transcendence. To many of Mozart's greatest admirers, *Così fan tutte* "seems to refuse the kind of metaphysical, or social, or cultural significance that Kierkegaard and other luminaries found readily in *Don Giovanni*, *Die Zauberflöte*, and *Figaro*" (Said, 52). For this reason, many simply dismissed it. Compared to the depth of characters in *Le Nozze di Figaro*, the sisters in *Così*, Dorabella and Fiordiligi, seem disappointingly shallow. The nobility of their initial faithfulness is squandered by their quick infidelity, but is not nearly as dramatically disappointing as the hasty return to their initial lovers.

If one can look past the surface triviality of the libretto, however, one will find a story finely crafted around one of the most evasive concepts of the human life: the nature of human feelings. Andrew Steptoe gauges the eighteenth century audience, stating, "The crucial element was the mode of emotional expression itself, and not its context, legitimacy, or relevance to the character. The self-contained expressive statement was paramount, and it did not matter that the circumstances might be incongruous" (Goehring, 15). Steptoe infers that the success of an opera did not require thoroughly consistent characterizations or even coherent plots; that a work could succeed simply through expressions of passions. Although Da Ponte's libretto has suffered much criticism, Alfred Einstein maintains that the libretto for *Così* is among Da Ponte's best works, because the action never allows a dead spot. The action is continuous, developing gaily and logically, despite the fact that the satisfaction gleaned at the end could be compared to solving the simplest of equations.

Though the libretto of *Così fan tutte* warrants much discussion, both good and bad, it is the music of the opera that is famously popular. A discussion of the musical color of *Così fan tutte* reveals great creativity in Mozart's choice of instrumentation. Indeed, *Così* displays a wide array of orchestral colors, demonstrating small developments and adaptations in Mozart's style. Both the viola and the clarinet came into greater prominence during this time, and Mozart seems to have responded to the available resources by incorporating these instruments into his palette for *Così fan tutte* (Einstein, 210). The elevation of

viola is especially clear. At the time, the viola was not known for having integral parts in orchestral works. The standard of musicianship among violists was relatively low, and as such, many composers purposefully disregarded the instrument (Einstein, 211). Mozart, however, prepared a notable place for the viola in his works, especially in *Le Nozze di Figaro*, where the viola often accompanies “pleading, sorrow, or uncertainty, sometimes dividing to enhance the melancholy atmosphere” (Einstein, 211). The use of the viola was once again extended in *Così fan tutte*. The unique sound of the viola vigorously pervades numbers like Alfonso’s aria ‘Vorrei dir’ and the trio ‘Soave sia il vento,’ and its melancholy timbre is used to heighten the drama in numbers like ‘Sento, o Dio, che questo piede,’ during which the sisters demand to be slaughtered.

The other instrument that gains unique prominence in *Così fan tutte* is the trumpet. Though typically confined to chorus numbers or military themes, Mozart uses the trumpet here as a sonority in its own right, especially in the aria “Come scoglio.” Here, the instrument assumes a role similar to the French horn, and is used to achieve precise sound and fill in the orchestral texture (Einstein, 212).

Musically, Mozart’s compositions for *Così fan tutte* are not any poorer than those of *Figaro* or *Don Giovanni*, but are simply different. The distinct sound of *Così fan tutte* is due largely to the part that recitatives play in “expressing sentiment, conveying idea, portraying character, and articulating closure” (Goehring, 31). Mozart achieves great dimension and dramatic expression through his use of recitative. In some instances, the accompanied recitatives satisfy their conventional task of conveying passions. But this category does not adequately describe several of *Così fan tutte*’s other accompanied recitatives, which are *sui generis* (one of a kind; unique).

Two examples come from Don Alfonso at the conclusion of “Soave sia il vento” and Despina, in her first-act number. Both passages fall under the category of recitative because of their declamatory style, their harmonically open form, and their textual organization of *versi sciolti*. But Mozart alters their musical style, breaking with convention. Even some of the secco recitatives are modified to have a distinctive sound. Mozart’s modifications to the recitative gave it a more formal significance than that generally found in opera of the time (Goehring, 30). The composer used the recitative as a closing gesture, inverting its typical use as an introductory device. Recitatives in *Così fan tutte*, then, sometimes do the expressive work of arias. With the exception of some of Don Alfonso’s music, however, Mozart carefully distinguishes between the recitative and the aria, and uses this distinction to underscore the dramatic parts of the opera.

Così fan tutte achieves its prominence as an ensemble opera. Mozart achieved great unity in the fabric of the work by extending methods he used in *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*—namely, the “linking of separate numbers by tonal progression and the technique of thematic reminiscence” (Einstein, 212)—which he refined in *Così fan tutte*. The opera begins with a series of individual numbers

that not only set up the story, but also establish the central key structure. The Overture in C major is succeeded by an expository Trio in the dominant, G major, which then progresses to a ‘developmental’ Trio in E major. The music then returns to C major in the last Trio, thereby effectively marking out C—G—E—C and establishing a diatonic base for the opera.

The use of thematic reminiscences is also evident in the score, and this device helps to unify *Così fan tutte* in the same way that Mozart utilized it in *Don Giovanni*. Though these reminiscences help to unify the piece musically, they also serve the subsidiary purpose of commenting on the changes of faith that are so integral to the story. Mozart frequently uses this technique in the music of Alfonso, who satirically mocks the folly of love. When his suspicions are induced by the declarations of the sisters at their first meeting with the ‘Albanians,’ Alfonso vocalizes his disbelief in a clear repeat of the second trio, with the lines doubting woman’s faithfulness (Einstein, 213). Said claims that while “the symmetries and repetitions are almost cloying...they are the substance of the opera” (2006).

Mozart’s use of counterpoint also adds depth to the music and the plot. The E-flat canon in the Act II finale portrays great rigor as well as ironic insight into the situation. The lovers have worked their way to the reversed pairing, and now, in a polyphonic setting, all three of them sing of burying all thought and memory in the wine they are about to drink—while one, Guglielmo, remains discontented—and stands outside the canon. The young man wishes that the women would drink the poison and finish the whole thing (Said, 2006). Said comments:

It is as if Mozart wanted the counterpoint to mirror the lovers’ embarrassment in a closed polyphonic system, but also to show how even though they think of themselves as shedding all ties and memories, the music, by its circulatory and echoic form reveals them to be bound to one another in a new and logically consequent embrace. (2006)

Perhaps the most recognized element of Mozart’s musical genius in *Così fan tutte* is his use of parody. The libretto may be frivolous, but Mozart was not concerned with mere buffoonery in this opera. While the score is characterized by typical buffo pieces, most of them belonging to the comic Despina, Mozart incorporates startling elements of profound and somber musical expression, if not only to create parody. When the first attempt upon the young ladies’ fidelity is made, Fiordiligi voices her faithfulness with an absurdly difficult aria, “Come scoglio,” which, with its virtuosity and extreme leaps—including a leap of a 13th from G5 down to B3 and jump up from an A3 to an E5—seems more at home in the most pitiful *opera seria*. The ludicrous intervals, sung with all the seriousness the character can muster, are undeniably comic. The aria even begins with a stately, repeated dotted motif, which implies a somberness that becomes all the more

satirical when one considers the unfaithfulness that will ensue. Such juxtaposition is not evidence of Mozart's ingenious, but rather, if anything, evidence of his superb musical genius. Though the music appears to be mere mockery, more depth can be uncovered. The title of the aria, "Come scoglio," means "like a rock" or "strongly founded," and the accuracy and skill necessary to successfully perform this aria are no less than that. Mozart's compositional talents are skillfully manifested. The aria may well have been Mozart's own little joke. Some have claimed that Mozart incorporated parody in order to mock the original singers (Steptoe, 221). It is public knowledge that Mozart was not fond of Adriana Ferrarese, the first performer of Fiordiligi in the opera's premiere, and some suggest the ridiculous range of the Fiordiligi's music was designed to tease her. Others, however, claim that the acrobatic contour of Fiordiligi's line was not so much a parodic display but rather, a reflection of her internal conflict. However, the idea that Mozart "was amusing himself at the expense of particular singers" (Steptoe, 222) is not widely supported. It seems more plausible that Mozart used the parody to underlie the irony in the drama of the libretto.

The sense of parody so thoroughly pervades *Così fan tutte* that its existence is hard to question. Dorabella's "Smanie implacabile" ("Unappeasable ravings"), sung immediately after she learns of the gentlemen's departure, can be seen as an "unambiguous parody of a seria rage aria" (Hunter, 168). Further use of opera seria convention can be seen in Fiordiligi's second act Rondo, "Per pietà ben mio." In this number, Fiordiligi begs the now absent Guglielmo's forgiveness for the infidelity she knows she will commit. Though the aria is not often interpreted as a parody, it does have ironic connotations. In both vocal exertion and instrumental prominence, Mozart takes the traditions of a serious aria with obbligato wind instruments to unprecedented extremes. The composer uses the French horn support Fiordiligi's vocal line while "punningly reminding the audience of the cuckoldry to ensue (Cuckolds—men whose wives cheat on them—were said to grow horns.)" (Hunter, 168). This somewhat ambiguous tactic is representative of the very delicate moments of musical significance throughout the opera, and the way it incorporates and references multiple traditions at once is analogous to the comic and profound allusions in Da Ponte's libretto (Hunter, 168).

While the music of *Così fan tutte* succeeds in creating parody, Mozart's great irony does not stand alone in the music. In fact, much of the dramatic satire is inevitably indebted to the libretto. Da Ponte cleverly wrote the libretto in such a way that each character "has a different impression of what is real and what is feigned, leading to an ever present and complexly textured irony that shifts subtly with every exit and entrance" (Burnham, 79). Throughout the action of the play, the curious men find themselves fiendishly tickled by the irony of their situation. While they are bound to stay true to their experimental farce as convincingly as they can, they procure no great satisfaction from their success in doing so (Burnham, 79). Da Ponte's libretto fits the model of an eighteenth-century demonstration play. These demonstration plays were designed to "expose some

aspect of human nature by engaging in an ‘experiment’ within a closed environment” (Burnham, 79). Often, the conclusion of this “experiment” was foreknown; its great interest lay in the psychological steps that lead to this conclusion. With this model, Da Ponte’s libretto not only generated many dramatically ironic situations among the characters on stage, but also for the audience as they watch the situation unfold before Alfonso.

Da Ponte’s libretto does not work against Mozart’s music or confine Mozart to trivial compositions, but rather, gives the creative composer a “delicious irony” with which to explore “the paradoxical relationship of truth and illusion as it obtains in art and human consciousness” (Burnham, 79). The libretto does not simply leave Mozart space to create beauty, but demands the excess beauty Mozart supplied (Hunter, 167). The perceived excess of Mozart’s music does not counter the libretto’s “celebration of disinterested reason and its spirit of pure experimentation” (Hunter, 167), but corresponds to the ideas of superficiality and depth that are central to the libretto. The profundity of Mozart’s music, whether in the painful dissonances in the farewell ensemble, “Di scrivermi ogni gionro,” which depict extreme (and unwarranted) grief by the women, or in the atmospheric murmuring of strings in “Soave sia il vento,” vindicates the triviality of the libretto by implying that the superficial aspects of the story are really only a small part of the action. Mozart did not simply conceive beautiful pieces because he could—he conceived them because their conspicuous beauty reveals the intermingling of irony and beauty in the libretto.

Within this great experiment of reason, beauty, and irony, Mozart uses the conventions of *opera buffa* to develop progressions of irony that transform the characters during the course of the opera. At first glance, the cosmetic structure of the opera offers a commentary on the imperfections of human love, and seems nothing more than a comic game designed to playfully mock the characters’ “puppet passions” (Cairns, 184). This interpretation embraces the artificiality of the work—the farcical structure, the cloying symmetry, the shallowness of the characters, and even the limitation of the action to one day—celebrating the work for the superficiality that nineteenth century critics detested. But interpreting the opera as an experiment in superficiality requires that one see the characters as nothing more than figures in a great (and comedic) observation of human psychology.

The real irony here is that this interpretation fails to acknowledge the true Mozart was trying to reveal. What if, as David Cairns suggests, the “false” situation (in which the lovers are disguised) was the true situation, and the unreality lie in the original pairings (184)? Cairns suggests that under the influence of their assumed personalities, the two men undergo self-realization—and during their acts of “unfaithfulness,” Dorabella and Fiordiligi also experience a transformation. Before (and perhaps even after) the great act of deception and unfaithfulness, the characters were merely puppets—“hardly differentiated, singing shoulder to shoulder in thirds and sixths” (Cairns, 184). The light, symmetrical, and gay

compositions at the beginning (i.e.—“Ah guarda sorella”) trivialize the characters and strip them of their individuality. But in the “false” situation, the characters express their true nature. The men reveal their personalities—the one “down-to-earth, quick witted, sensual, egotistical, the other romantic, idealistic a dreamer” (Cairns, 184), and find their true partner. The women, too, developed into distinct characters, no longer puppets sighing over portraits of their lovers, but women with deep feeling. Fiordiligi’s “Come scoglio,” with its pompous rhythms and acrobatic runs, stands in sharp contrast to her second-act aria, during which her extravagant vocal line is no longer merely parodistic. Dorabella’s arias also reveal a transformation: the first protested too much, and the second was a euphoric expression of one who had discovered herself.

The great beauty in Mozart’s musical parody is that it at once mocks and transforms the supposed superficial experiment of Da Ponte’s libretto. It is no mere accident that “the most heartfelt music in the opera occurred at the point where cynicism was supposedly to achieve its greatest triumph” (Cairns, 184). The parody in *Così fan tutte*, then must be correctly interpreted. It is rampant, but it exists for much more than a perfunctory laugh. The beauty of Mozart’s music—in both moments of wild parody and heartfelt emotion—succeeds in giving *Così fan tutte* a depth that is both challenging and transforming.

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