

Così fan tutte

Music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart • Libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte

Study Guide to the Opera



Matthew Polenzani, Susanna Phillips, Isabel Leonard, and Rodion Pogossov in the Met's *Così fan tutte* (Marty Sohl/Metropolitan Opera)

Testing Love . . . Do You Really Want to Know?

The **willing suspension of disbelief** is a term coined in 1817 by the poet and aesthetic philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who suggested that if a writer could infuse a "human interest and a semblance of truth" into a fantastic tale, the reader would suspend judgment concerning the implausibility of the narrative. In 1790, many years before Coleridge invented the term, Mozart and Lorenzo Da Ponte played with this concept in their third and final collaboration, the opera *Così fan tutte*—a story about two couples and a test of fidelity that involves the two men disguising themselves and trying to win each other's fiancées. Today we'd ask, who does that? More importantly, we'd wonder if the lovers could really go through this test, learn what they learn about each other, and still simply forgive and forget.

The full title is *Così fan tutte, ossia La scuola degli amanti*: "Thus do they all, or The School for Lovers", which was Da Ponte's working title. Most people refer to it simply as *Così fan*

tutte, and accept its meaning as "All women behave the same." Yet, while Da Ponte and Mozart point to how unreliable women are, they also show that men are hardly faultless. Late in the opera, Ferrando boasts to Don Alfonso, "Do you think men like us will go short of women?"

The title, *Così fan tutte*, came from a line in *Le Nozze di Figaro*: Count Almaviva's discovery of Cherubino hiding in Susanna's room causes Basilio to comment: "Così fan tutte le belle/Non c'è alcuna novità" or "All the beauties do it/There's nothing new in that."

The opera premiered in Vienna on January 26, 1790, but it was performed only five times before Emperor Joseph II died and the theaters were closed for a period of court mourning. The comedy was performed only a few more times in Vienna during Mozart's lifetime. Interestingly, 19th- and early 20th-century audiences thought the subject matter was vulgar, rather than realizing the subtle ironic humor that Mozart intended. It wasn't until after World War II that *Così fan tutte* began to be performed more frequently; it has appeared as number 14 on the *Operabase* list of the most-performed operas worldwide.

Così fan tutte Synopsis

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The action takes place in Naples, where the sisters are vacationing.

ACT I. Early morning. Don Alfonso, a cynical old bachelor, debates women's constancy with Ferrando and Guglielmo, young officers who insist their sweethearts—the sisters Dorabella and Fiordiligi—are faithful. Alfonso bets that if they give him one day and do everything he asks, he will prove the sisters are like all other women—fickle.

Fiordiligi and Dorabella are comparing pictures of their boyfriends when Alfonso pays a visit, bringing news that Guglielmo and Ferrando have been ordered away with their regiment. The two men appear, and the sisters, overwhelmed with grief, bid them farewell. Alfonso, however, feels certain of winning his wager.

The chambermaid, Despina, consoles her mistresses and counsels them to forget their old lovers with the help of new ones. The girls, scandalized by Despina's advice, depart. Alfonso bribes Despina to help him introduce new suitors into the house, then brings in exotically attired "Albanians"—Ferrando and Guglielmo in disguise. Fiordiligi and Dorabella are affronted, Fiordiligi likening her constancy to a rock in a storm, and they take their leave again. The men are thrilled, and Ferrando sings amorously of his steadfast sweetheart, but Alfonso reminds him the day is not yet over.

A little later, Alfonso brings in the "Albanians," who pretend to take poison in despair over their rejection. Despina urges the sisters to care for the men while she fetches help. She returns disguised as a Doctor of Mesmerism, pretends to draw off the poison with a magnet, then watches with Alfonso as Fiordiligi and Dorabella waver under violent protestations of love.

Intermission

ACT II. Afternoon. Despina urges Fiordiligi and Dorabella to choose their favorite, and each picks the other's suitor. After the "Albanians" serenade the sisters, Despina and Alfonso leave the young people together. Guglielmo, courting Dorabella, succeeds in replacing her portrait of Ferrando with a new charm. Ferrando has no such luck with Fiordiligi, who still thinks guiltily of Guglielmo. Comparing notes later, Ferrando is furious over Dorabella's betrayal; Guglielmo is smug about Fiordiligi's steadfastness. But Alfonso is not finished yet. Under Despina's supervision, Dorabella tries to persuade Fiordiligi to give in, but Fiordiligi decides that she and Dorabella must join their lovers at the front. Ferrando appears, however, and wins her over. Now Guglielmo is furious, but the officers still owe Alfonso time. As night falls, Alfonso plans a double wedding.

The couples are married by a "notary"—Despina in disguise again. As they sign the contracts, the women hear the military march that heralds the return of their original suitors. They force the "Albanians" into hiding and try to compose themselves for Ferrando and Guglielmo, who shed their disguises and enter, dressed as soldiers. The sisters confess their unfaithfulness and beg forgiveness. Alfonso bids the lovers learn their lesson, and with a hymn to reason and enlightenment, the day comes to a close.

Characters

The Sisters

Fiordiligi *soprano*

[fyor-dee-LEE-jee]

Morally upright and authoritative older sister

Dorabella *mezzo-soprano*

[dohr-ah-BELL-ah]

Passionate and impulsive younger sister

The Soldiers

Ferrando *tenor*

[fair-AHN-doh]

Sensitive and thoughtful

Guglielmo *bass*

[gool-YELL-moh]

Comedian

The Schemers

Don Alfonso *bass*

[dohn ahl-FOHN-soh]

Self-described "old philosopher"

Despina *soprano*

[dess-PEE-nah]

Maid who can handle any situation

Others

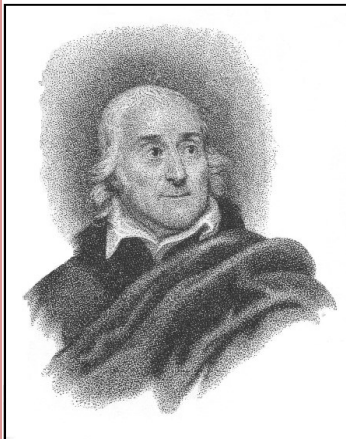
Chorus of townspeople and "soldiers"

— adapted from *Opera News*

Mozart and Da Ponte's *Così fan tutte*:

The End of an Era

1786 was the best year of Mozart's life. At age 30 he was at the height of his career and produced an astonishing 13 major works, including *The Marriage of Figaro* with his new librettist, Lorenzo Da Ponte. By 1789, however, Mozart was in trouble. Warfare depressed the Viennese economy, leading to fewer commissions and concerts. Mozart and Constanze, his wife, were deeply in debt, had lost a child, and had their own fidelity issues. Add Mozart's continuing ill health to this year of woe, and the miracle that is *Così fan tutte* becomes even more astonishing.



Lorenzo Da Ponte (1749–1838)

The rumor that Emperor Joseph II suggested the story based on court gossip and forced Mozart to compose this “immoral” and “unworthy” opera has been discredited. As true of *Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*, Da Ponte usually adapted a play, but this time he probably concocted the scenario from “wager stories”, going back to the 13th century, that were used by writers from Boccaccio (*Decameron*) to Shakespeare (*Cymbeline*). The myth of Procris, who departed and returned in disguise in order to test Aurora's fidelity, may have provided the other important ingredient.

Mozart and Da Ponte desperately needed a success. By poking fun at Mesmerism, Romantic sentimentality, and the conventions of *opera seria*, they wrote an opera calculated to please the superficial Imperial court. Emperor Joseph's death closed the theaters and put an end to their collaboration. Eighteen months later, Mozart was dead, and Da Ponte had left the court in disgrace.

The irony, cynicism, and cruelty of the story kept *Così* from the standard repertoire until well into the 1960s. What saves it for us now? Mozart's warmhearted sympathy for the young people, the delicious ambiguity of the ending, the astonishing beauty and variety of the orchestration, and Despina's hilarious impersonations. But above all, the glory of *Così* is in the ensemble writing. No opera before or since has offered us such a feast of duets, trios, quartets, quintets, and sextets. If you've never heard *Così fan tutte* before, you may wonder how you ever lived without it.



Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
(1756–1791)

Why are *opera buffas* so successful?

Mozart's comic operas are among the masterworks of Western civilization, and yet the musical environment in which Mozart and his librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte wrote these now-popular operas has received little critical attention. In a richly detailed book, *The Culture of Opera Buffa in Mozart's Vienna: A Poetics of Entertainment*, Mary Hunter offers a sweeping, synthetic view of *opera buffa* in the lively theatrical world of late 18th-century Vienna. *Opera buffa* (Italian-language comic opera) persistently entertained audiences at a time when Joseph was striving for a German national theater. Hunter attributes *opera buffa's* success to its ability to provide “sheer” pleasure, and hence explores how the genre functioned as entertainment. She argues that *opera buffa*, like mainstream film today, projects a social world both recognizable and distinct from reality. It raises important issues while containing them in the “merely entertaining” frame of the occasion, as well as presenting them as a series of easily identifiable dramatic and musical conventions.

Interesting Bits about *Così*

Compiled by Jill Leahy

Opera Buffa Some experts call *Così fan tutte* an opera buffa, but others classify it as a *dramma giocoso* (jocular drama), which has a tendency to mix characteristics of *opera seria* (serious opera) and *opera buffa* (comic opera).

Risqué Libretto Beethoven thought the libretto was immoral, Wagner hated the music, and Antonio Salieri, Mozart's contemporary, never finished setting the libretto because he was unhappy that it dealt with sexual infidelity.

Ensembles Galore *Così fan tutte* has been called an opera of ensembles, and Mozart must have enjoyed composing a first act in which 12 out of 17 numbers are ensembles.

Why Albanians? Albania was occupied by the Turkish Ottoman Empire in 1430, and by the time of *Così fan tutte*, more than half its citizens were Muslims. When the disguised fiancés are introduced as Albanians, stereotypes kick in of hyper-masculinity, flowery rhetoric, and a take-no-prisoners attitude about romantic conquest.



1806 painting by Sibly of Franz Mesmer in action

Doctor Despinà's magnet. When Mozart and Da Ponte gave Despinà a giant magnet to cure the allegedly suicidal "Albanians" in the Act I finale, they were spoofing a current fad. Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) became wildly popular in Europe for using "animal magnetism" therapy to cure patients suffering from a variety of disorders. Mozart visited Mesmer's sanitarium in his childhood, and it was the obliging Dr. Mesmer who helped the Mozart family out of a tricky situation by commissioning the 12-year-old

composer to write the comic pastoral satire *Bastien and Bastienne*. By 1784, Mesmer's work was discredited by eminent scientists, including Benjamin Franklin. Satires of Mesmer's magnetic cures and his hysterical devotees became popular on the Viennese stage.

Swapping Lovers The exchange of lovers theme is not uncommon in literature—a famous one being Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Mozart's letters reveal that he had his own intrigue with two sisters. While boarding with the Weber family, he fell in love with the daughter Aloysia. She was a singer, but she would not have him. Rumor spread that he was flirting with her sister Constanze. "If I had to marry all those with whom I have jested," he wrote somewhat ungallantly to his father, "I should have 200 wives at least." Yet in the end he married Constanze.

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Così fan tutte is one of three operas—the others are *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*—that Mozart wrote with Da Ponte. Their collaboration can rightly be considered one of the greatest in the history of opera.

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Marilyn Michalka Egan, Ph.D.
Director of Education
megan@pittsburghopera.org
412-281-0912 ext 242

Pittsburgh Opera
2425 Liberty Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15222
www.pittsburghopera.org