

 THE ATLANTA OPERA

DENNIS HANTHORN - Zurich General Director

# *Così fan tutte*



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Opera Guide

# Synopsis: *Così fan tutte*



A scene from The Atlanta Opera's 2000 production of *Così fan tutte* by J.D. Scott

## Act I

Fiordiligi and Dorabella, two sisters from Ferrara, meet and become engaged to two officers in the local regiment: Fiordiligi to Guglielmo, and Dorabella to Ferrando. The two young soldiers are so certain of the constancy of their fiancées that they let themselves be drawn into a wager with Don Alfonso. The cynical philosopher finds the naiveté of his young protégés amusing. In his opinion, no woman is ever true to her word, especially in matters of love – they are variable and not to be trusted. To prove his point, Don Alfonso convinces the disbelieving young men to take part in a charade. After saying their good-byes, Ferrando and Guglielmo leave with the other soldiers as if they have been called to war. Then in disguise as exotic Albanians, Sempronius and Tizio, they return to woo each other's betrothed.

The young men agree to try anything to sway the loyalty of their sweethearts – romance, threats, even suicide – for the harder they test the faithfulness of Fiordiligi and Dorabella, the better proof they will have of their unswerving affections.

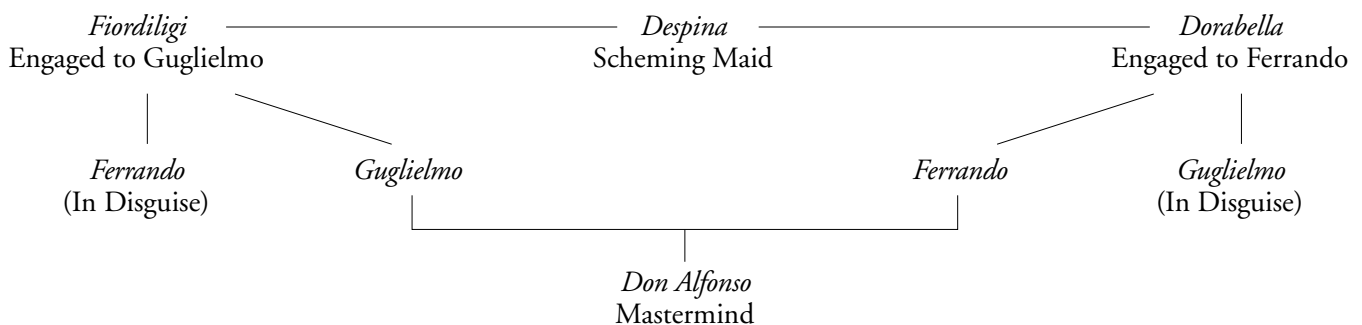
For his part in this charade, Don Alfonso enlists the help of Despina, the cleverest of ladies' maids. She is certain that the women will give in eventually.

While in the garden lamenting their loss, Dorabella and Fiordiligi are approached by their disguised suitors. In order to prove their love for the ladies they pretend to drink poison. The women are frightened and call for help. Despina enters, disguised as a doctor, and cures the men, who are still rejected by the women.

## Act II

Despina continues to soften the resolve of the sisters. They agree to allow a flirtation and accept Don Alfonso's invitation to return to the garden. Dorabella accepts a locket from Guglielmo and gives him her portrait of Ferrando in return. Ferrando has less luck. Fiordiligi admits to herself that the stranger attracts her. A distraught Ferrando tells Guglielmo of Fiordiligi's indifferent response. Guglielmo berates woman-kind. Dorabella is ready to marry her new lover and is annoyed by Fiordiligi's pangs of conscience. Fiordiligi decides to disguise herself as a soldier and search out Ferrando and Guglielmo. Having overheard her plans, Guglielmo is impressed. When Ferrando renews his pursuit, Fiordiligi's resistance crumbles. It is now Guglielmo's turn to rage at his betrayal. Don Alfonso advises them to marry their sweethearts anyway. All women are weak, he says. Despina announces the women's willingness to marry. Disguised as a notary, Despina presents the wedding contracts, which the lovers sign. Everyone panics when Don Alfonso announces the return of Ferrando and Guglielmo. The men return to discover the wedding contracts. They berate their faithless lovers. Dorabella and Fiordiligi admit their guilt but protest that Despina and Don Alfonso set them up to it. Don Alfonso reveals the plot. The women beg forgiveness, which their lovers readily grant.

# Character Map



# Meet the Composer: *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*



Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

b. Salzburg, January 27, 1756; d. Vienna, December 5, 1791

Child wonder, virtuoso performer and prolific creative artist, Mozart is the first composer whose operas have never been out of repertory. His prodigious talents were apparent very early in his life; by the age of four he could reproduce on the keyboard a melody played to him, at five he could play the violin with perfect intonation and at six he composed his first minuet.

A musician himself, Wolfgang's father, Leopold, immediately saw the potential of his son's talents. With the mixed motives of religious piety and making a tidy profit, Leopold embarked on a series of concert tours showing off the child's extraordinary talents. Often playing with his sister Maria Anna ("Nannerl"), herself an accomplished musician, young Wolfgang charmed the royal courts of Europe, from those of Austrian Empress Maria Theresa, French King Louis XV and English King George III, to the of lesser principalities of Germany and Italy.

As Mozart grew older, his concert tours turned into a search for permanent employment, but this proved exceedingly difficult for a German musician in a market dominated by Italian composers. Although many of his early operas were commissioned by Milanese and Munich nobles (*Mitridate*, *Ascanio in Alba*, *Lucio Silla*, *La finta giardiniera*), he could not rise beyond concertmaster of the Salzburg archbishopric. When

the new prince archbishop, Count Hieronymus Colloredo, was appointed in 1771, Mozart also found he was released for guest engagements with less frequency. Though his position improved and a generous salary was offered, the composer felt the Salzburg musical scene was stifling for a man of his enormous promise and creativity.

Things came to a head in 1781 immediately after the successful premiere of Mozart's first mature work, *Idomeneo*, in Munich. The archbishop, then visiting Vienna, insisted the composer join him there. Never did Mozart better understand his position in the household than during that sojourn, when he was seated at the dinner table below the prince's personal valets and just above the cooks. He requested to be permanently discharged from his duties, and after several heated discussions his petition was granted, punctuated by a parting kick in the pants.

Now completely on his own for the first time, Mozart embarked on several happy years. He married Constanze Weber, sister to his childhood sweetheart Aloysia, and premiered a new work, *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (The Abduction from the Seraglio), at the Burgtheater. Mozart also gave concerts around Vienna, presenting a number of new piano concertos and symphonies. His chief concern was to procure a position at the imperial court. A small commission came his way from the emperor for a one-act comedy, *Der Schauspieldirektor* (The Impresario), given in the same evening as Antonio Salieri's *Prima la musica e poi le parole* (First the music, then the words), to celebrate the visit of the emperor's sister, Marie Christine, and her husband, joint rulers of the Austrian Netherlands.

*The Marriage of Figaro*, Mozart's first true masterpiece for the imperial court, premiered at the Burgtheater in 1786 and went on to Prague the following year where it was a huge success. *Don Giovanni* premiered in Prague in 1787 to great acclaim, but its Vienna premiere in 1788 was coolly received. By this time, Mozart had received a minor imperial posting, *Kammermusicus*, which required him to write dances for

state functions. The position was hardly worthy of his skills and generated only a modest income, a weighty concern now that debts had begun to mount. Joseph II commissioned another opera from Mozart, *Così fan tutte*, which premiered January 26, 1790. The emperor was too ill to attend the opening and died the following month. His brother, Leopold II, assumed leadership, and Mozart hoped to be appointed *Kapellmeister* – instead he merely received a continuance of his previous position.

Crisis hit in 1791. Constanze's medical treatments at Baden and the birth of a second child pushed their finances to a critical point. Mozart's friend and fellow Freemason, the impresario Emanuel Schikaneder, suggested he try his luck with the suburban audiences at his Theater auf der Wieden. Composition of *The Magic Flute* began early that summer but had to be halted when two generous commissions came his way: a requiem for an anonymous patron (who hoped to pass it off as his own composition), and an opera seria to celebrate the new emperor's coronation as King of Bohemia. *La clemenza di Tito* premiered September 6, and *The Magic Flute* was completed in time to open September 30. *The Requiem*, however, remained incomplete, and as Mozart's health began to fail, the composer feared he was writing his own death mass. In December Mozart died at the age of 35 and was given a simple funeral by his impoverished widow, then buried in an unmarked grave on the outskirts of Vienna.

Courtesy of Minnesota Opera



# *Così fan tutte* or “Women Are Like That”

If you stopped someone on the street and rattled off the names of Mozart’s three Italian operas, you’d get smiles of recognition when you spoke the titles *The Marriage of Figaro* or *Don Giovanni*. However, upon mouthing the words *Così fan tutte*, or even its typical translation, “Women Are Like That,” you would probably encounter relatively few knowing nods. But those few, upon being told it was on an upcoming opera season, would be nodding furiously and enthusiastically in anticipation of viewing one of Mozart’s superbly written and overtly entertaining operas.

Mozart titled his last Italian opera *Così fan tutte, ossia La scuola degli amanti* (“All Women do the Same, or The School for Lovers”). Written in 1789 and premiered on January 26, 1790 at the Burgtheater in Vienna, *Così* was meant to be entertaining from the outset. Emperor Joseph II had revived Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro* in the summer of 1789. Its outstanding success prompted him to commission a new opera, in the same opera buffa style as *Figaro*, from Mozart. Calling upon the inspiration Mozart had found in working with librettist Lorenzo da Ponte, Mozart partnered with that master of words once again.

The plot of the opera is simple: two young men put the fidelity of their fiancées to the test by disguising themselves and embarking upon an elaborate seduction scheme urged on by an elder gentleman whose faith in the fickleness of women has long ago been firmly ingrained. The opera ends happily (a pleasant surprise in the opera!) but with a moral insinuation.

The origin of the plot, however, has always been the topic of discussion. Some theories say that the emperor himself proposed the subject, basing it on a current Viennese scandal. Others say (and this is probably the case) that the subject was a Da Ponte original. Still others say the plot derives certain situational elements from Shakespeare, Cervantes and Boccaccio. Whatever the source, *Così fan tutte* is pure entertainment combined with perfectly glorious music; and as the “very incarnation of opera buffa” (according to Donald Jay Grout’s *A Short History of Opera*), it should be.

In typical opera buffa style, Mozart has written tuneful arias for each character, though the arias are fewer in number than in other Mozart-Da Ponte works. Mozart combines the arias with an unprecedented number

of ensembles during which the plot is moved forward more so than is usual for ensemble numbers in opera buffa. And, Mozart uses a surprising amount of obbligato recitative, giving *Così* a flavor from the opera seria time period. Throughout the opera the pacing is unparalleled. Mozart’s musical composition, on the whole, leaves little to criticize; so, as has been mentioned, it has been the analysis of the plot that has and will continue to captivate scholars.

What are Mozart and Da Ponte really saying about women and their ways? Is their view as it outwardly seems – a dated 18th-century Viennese understanding of women? Or, can our 21st-century minds find in it a deeper understanding of the depth of one’s own weaknesses and the amazing strength of passion? You can decide for yourself at The Atlanta Opera’s production of *Così fan tutte*!



## Interesting Factoids: *Così fan tutte*

- Mozart’s full name was Johannes Chrysostomus Wolfgangus Theophilus Amadeus Gottlieb Sigismundus Mozart. Theophilus, Amadeus, Gottlieb and Sigismundus all mean “beloved of God,” just in different languages.
- Mozart was appointed concertmaster of the Archbishop of Salzburg’s court orchestra at the young age of 13. This appointment marked the beginning of Mozart’s popularity and he received multiple commissions for his work. However, Mozart did not get along with the Archbishop and quit in 1781.
- The storyline of *Così fan tutte* was considered very scandalous in the 19th century, so anytime the opera was performed it was usually altered, completely rewritten or accompanied by an apology for the frivolous plot. Although he liked Mozart’s music, composer Beethoven called the story concept “immoral.”
- In 1994 two works by Mozart’s contemporary Antonio Salieri were discovered, showing that Salieri attempted to set the libretto of *Così fan tutte* to music as well but did not complete the project.
- The full title, *Così fan tutte, ossia La scuola degli amanti* translates to “Thus do all [women]” but it is often simplified to “Women are like that.” The words are sung by the men in Act II, just before the finale. Librettist Da Ponte also used the line “*Così fan tutte le belle*” previously in *Le nozze di Figaro*.
- Actor Alfred Lunt staged the 1951 Metropolitan Opera production of *Così fan tutte* that established it as a repertory opera in the U.S.
- Librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte went bankrupt soon after the premiere of *Così fan tutte* and emigrated to New York to escape his European creditors. He ran both a grocery store and bookstore but still remained an esteemed teacher of languages and the classics. He oversaw the American premieres of *Don Giovanni* and *The Marriage of Figaro* and co-founded the school for Italian studies at Columbia University. Da Ponte died in 1838 and is buried in Queens.

# Suggestions for Further Study



## Books

Melograni, Piero. *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: A Biography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Solomon, Maynard. *Mozart: A Life*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2005.

Till, Nicholas. *Mozart and the Enlightenment*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1996.

## Recordings

Solti. Mozart: *Così fan tutte*. Decca, 1996.

Karajan. Mozart: *Così fan tutte*. EMI Classics, 1999.



Scenes from The Atlanta Opera's 2000 production of *Così fan tutte* by J.D. Scott