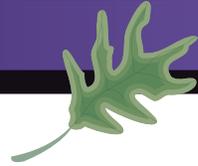


Off The Couch



PSYCHOANALYSIS AND CULTURE

V4N2

Così Fan Tutte by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

The Met: Live in HD series April 26, 2014

Conducted by James Levine
Stage Director Robin Guarino
Ferrando Matthew Polenzani
Guglielmo Rodion Pogossov
Don Alfonso Maurizio Muraro
Fiordiligi Susanna Phillips
Dorabella Isabel Leonard
Despina Danielle de Niese



Levine's conducting his first Met opera in over 2 years after a series of illnesses. The setting is traditional, the music gorgeous as usual.

Così fan tutte, ossia La scuola degli amanti (Thus Do They All, or The School for Lovers) K. 588, is an Italian-language opera buffa in two acts by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. The libretto was written by Lorenzo Da Ponte, who also wrote *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*. The title, *Così fan tutte*, literally means "Thus do all [women]" and is popularly used to mean "Women are like that". The words are sung by the three men in act 2, scene 13, just before the finale.

The first performance of Mozart's setting took place at the Burgtheater in Vienna on January 26, 1790. It was given only five times before the run was stopped by the death of the Emperor Joseph II. This opera has always had a mixed reception. Even critics of the day thought the libretto was misogynist, debasing to women. This view has only deepened in the twentieth century and the opera is often played to its comic elements. Yet Mozart's music is divine and contains some of his most beautiful ensemble singing, duets, trios, up to sextets. The music is serious and gives great depth to the story. I would understand the opera like one of Shakespeare's plays, where comic elements are mixed in with the serious and sublime.

Some modern directors have attempted to alter the action. Peter Sellars, in a performance I saw years ago set the action in Despina's Diner (available on YouTube). He had the two women see through the men's joke and play along, only to get caught up in real emotion. At the end, all the participants are shattered and uncoupled. Another idea explored by modern directors is to see the two couples as mismatched and each belongs with the new pairing. For example, Bernard Williams has said:

“If one feels that Mozart in this work agreed that it was better so, then one may be able to hear the ambivalent end of the second act as a convinced, if rather wry, celebration of a return from danger. If on the other hand one finds, as I do, that the end makes a rather stunned and hollow sound, one may feel that this work is more concerned to display the demands of the world against feeling than it is to justify them.”

The premise of the opera is as follows. It takes place in Naples. Two young soldiers, Ferrando and Guglielmo, boast about the beauty and virtue of their girlfriends, the sisters Fiordiligi and Dorabella. An older man, the cynical Don Alfonso, declares that a woman’s constancy is like the phoenix—everyone talks about it but no one has actually seen it. He is annoyed at the idealization of the young men and proposes to show them the real nature of love. If they will do what he says for one day, he will prove that the women are not constant, like all other women. Alfonso’s plot begins when the young soldiers have been “called away” to war. Ferrando and Guglielmo appear, apparently heartbroken, and the four make tearful farewells. At home, Dorabella vents her despair. Despina, their maid, refuses to take them seriously: they should simply find new lovers, since men are unworthy of a woman’s fidelity. Alfonso arrives and enlists Despina as his assistant. Ferrando and Guglielmo return, disguised as “Albanians,” and declare their admiration for the ladies, each addressing the other’s girlfriend. The sisters firmly reject their advances, Fiordiligi comparing her constancy to a rock in a storm. Left alone, the men are confident of winning the bet. As the sisters continue to lament the absence of their lovers, the “foreigners” return, pretending to have poisoned themselves with cyanide in despair over their rejection. Despina and Alfonso go off to fetch help, leaving the two girls to care for the strangers. Despina reappears disguised as a doctor and pretends to draw out the poison with a magnet. When Ferrando and Guglielmo request kisses in order to fully recover, the sisters again reject them, but it is clear they’re beginning to show interest in the strangers. This act is played broadly for comic effect with joking and slapstick. It sets the stage for the far more serious Act II.

The second act is a broad and profound exploration of the power of eros in people’s lives. I believe we could better understand the title *Così fan tutte* as *All do the same*. This removes the misogyny and puts both men and women equally under the power of eros. In this act, we have oedipal triangles, loyalty and betrayal, demonic possession, attachment and loss, misalliance, even the wish to



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be the other sex. We have three views of eros. Don Alfonso believes that love does not exist. It is a war between men and women and only the powerful survive. We know nothing of Don Alfonso but he is much darker than is usually portrayed. In Peter Sellar's production, he is portrayed as in love with Despina. Despina represents the 'hook-up generation'. Love the one you're with, live for today, avoid commitments. Fiordiligi represents love as long-term commitment, wanting a secure attachment and mutual caring.

Scene 1 (the two sisters with Despina)

Despina sings an aria with her philosophy of love:

Treat love lightly.

Never neglect an opportunity;

Change at the right moment,

Sometimes be constant,

Flirt with charm,

Foresee the misfortune so common

To those who trust in men,

Have your cake and eat it too.

Her philosophy is to have fun, be in charge, never trust men, and avoid commitments.

Scene 2 (the two sisters)

Dorabella starts to come around:

She's not saying

We should do any harm.

But Fiordiligi wonders:

Your conscience

Is too elastic!

What will our menfolk say?

Then Fiordiligi asks the important question:

But our hearts?

Dorabella answers:

Will stay as they are;

To amuse ourselves a little

And not to die of boredom

Is not to be false,

My dear sister.

We are now starting to see the difference between the two sisters. Dorabella wants to play and amuse herself. She thinks she can keep her heart intact. She is persuaded by Despina. Fiordiligi thinks her heart must stay true to her commitment. Then they sing a duet in which they actively choose which man they are attracted to. Dorabella again takes the lead and chooses "the dark one" (Guglielmo), the one she is not engaged to. But the men do not differentiate; neither emerges as a distinct personality, the women are more active; they grow and change.

Scene 5 (The two couples are together)

The men are distinctly uncomfortable and have little to say. Of course this is in their best interest, to not tempt the girls into betrayals. But the men are the passive ones throughout. Dorabella asks:



Say frankly what it is you want.

Is she in fact starting to humiliate the men as she senses the women are being humiliated? This is a direct challenge and the men are tongue tied. The women take the lead and suggest a stroll. Each of the couples goes off on their own. Here is a pivotal moment. First Ferrando to Guglielmo, as he passes:

This is the big moment!

He may mean consciously that this is the time for seduction but I think there is more fear about the women actually falling for them and the fear of betrayal and competition. Up to this point, the men could be united that both women were faithful. What if that breaks down? Is there a fear of women's sexuality? Guglielmo says to Dorabella:

I feel so bad,
My dearest one,
That I think I'm going to die.

He goes onto compare himself with "a volcano of love" but there is the pain of loss: the loss of his own beloved to his rival and the betrayal he is about to initiate. He, I think, is now aware of this dangerous game. He thinks:

They've vanished;
Where the devil have they got to?

Now we start to see the rage. Guglielmo offers Dorabella a locket of a heart and to his surprise without much resistance she accepts. Is he now trapped in his own deceit?

They sing a duet of love:

It is my own dear heart
That is no longer mine;
It's come to lodge with you,
And that's what's beating so.

Guglielmo, however is thinking of Ferrando:

Poor Ferrando!
It doesn't seem possible.

Rivalry and betrayal is very much in the air. The men are energized by the seduction but they are aware of the pain of their male friend as well.

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Scene 6 (Fiordiligi and Ferrando)

Now we turn to the other pair. Fiordiligi is much more ambivalent. She says that Ferrando “will rob me of my peace”. She sees his aggression and rejects him.

Scene 7 (Fiordiligi)

Fiordiligi is alone. In her recitative, she feels herself mad with love:

You condemn this heart, o just love!
I burn, and my ardour is no longer
The outcome of a virtuous love:
It is madness,
Anguish, remorse, repentance
Fickleness, deceit and betrayal!

She feels weak under the demonic power of eros and condemned. She is both the betrayer and expects to be betrayed. She tries to “drive away this dishonourable desire” and is filled “with shame and horror”. The shame is giving into a power that contradicts all that she believes in. She intuits but does not know consciously that the men will betray her, as they are actively doing.

Scene 8 (Guglielmo and Ferrando)

Ferrando tells Guglielmo that he tried to seduce Fiordiligi but failed. Guglielmo then reveals to Ferrando that Dorabella has fallen for him.

Scene 9 (Ferrando, with Don Alfonso and Guglielmo in the background)

Ferrando considers his feelings. Fantasies of revenge come up:

But I'll be revenged, I'll banish
The traitress from my mind ...

Yet:

Betrayed and scorned
By her faithless heart,
I still know
That my soul adores her,
I still hear
The voice of love for her.

Guglielmo can't stop himself from a bit of boasting:

Do you imagine a woman could
Fail a Guglielmo?
Speaking in all modesty,
Make a small comparison
Between us ... you see, my friend,
There's a little extra something ...



Now we are getting some of the male competition and the pleasure of stealing another's woman.

Scene 10 (Dorabella and Despina, later Fiordiligi)

Fiordiligi reveals to her sister that she too is in love:

Worse, much worse.

Recoil from me: I'm in love,

And my love isn't just for Guglielmo.

This is torment for her; she is guilty about her betrayal:

Don't you spare a thought for the unfortunates

Who left us this morning?

For their grief?

Have you forgotten their faithfulness?

Where, where did you learn

Such barbarous feelings?

How have you so changed your nature?

Dorabella points out possible loss:

Listen: are you sure

That our former lovers won't be killed

In the war? What then?

We'll both be left high and dry.

There's always a big difference

Between one in the hand and one in the bush.

Fiordiligi is tormented by the awareness of her own needs for love and the hurt that can result from betraying another who trusts you. She comes up with another solution; she will dress up as a man and try to find Guglielmo.

Scene 12 (Fiordiligi, then Ferrando)

Ferrando appears and offers to let Fiordiligi kill him for love. She cannot resist him and yields.

Scene 13 (Guglielmo and Don Alfonso, then Ferrando and Despina)

Now it is Guglielmo's turn to feel betrayed and rageful. Ferrando cannot resist a bit of taunting himself. Don Alfonso suggests that marriage is the only solution in this imperfect world:

Well then, take them as they are:

Nature can't make exceptions

And create two women of a different stuff

Just to suit your tastes: in such matters

You must be philosophical.

Come along then;

Let's find a way

Of putting things together.



Everyone blames women, but I forgive them
If they change their love
A thousand times a day;
Some call it a sin, others a habit,
But I say it's a necessity of their heart.
The lover who finds that he's been deceived
Should blame not others
But his own mistake;
Whether they're young or old, fair or plain –
Repeat with me: Women are all the same!

In the finale, Don Alfonso arranges for a fake marriage for the two couples. The couples want to banish memory through drink. Only Guglielmo cannot forget:

Would that they were drinking poison,
The dishonourable jades!

But the joke is revealed, the true lovers return and are married to their original betrothed. Despina has grown:

I don't know if I'm awake or dreaming,
I'm confused, I feel ashamed;
I'm slipping badly if they can do to me
What I have done to many others.

As Peter Sellars points out, this is much too neat and untrue. All of the participants are shattered; Don Alfonso has won more than his bet, he has shattered love and its possibilities. In Sellar's version, the men and women cannot decide whom to be with; they go from one to the other. It ends with a mad circle dance of death. Constancy and care are not possible in this world, take what you can get by force and that is it.

Robert S. White

