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*A note of introduction: Così was the last of the three operas with librettos by Da Ponte that Mozart set to music. His accomplishment has long been highly valued – “this most iridescent and many-layered of operatic scores” – but the tale that the opera has to tell has often been thought problematic, from Mozart’s time to now. All the more reason, then, to give more thought and attention to the opera in its entirety, iridescent score and all, and to enjoy Mozart’s remarkable musical achievement. Herewith a brief introduction by a true Mozart Kenner.*

### “Così fan tutte” -- An Introduction

OF ALL MOZART'S OPERAS, *COSÌ FAN TUTTE* POSES THE MOST PUZZLES. We know less about its sources and the history of its composition than we do about any of his other mature operas. When and in what circumstances was it commissioned? What is the source of its story? And why are there so many curious little textual problems in the completed work? – Such questions are easy to ask, yet to none of them are there satisfactory answers.

It is generally accepted that the commission to write *Così fan tutte* was a result of the successful revival of *Le nozze di Figaro* at the Burgtheater in Vienna on 29 August 1789, following an interval of two and a half years (the original run of performances in 1786 numbered only nine; there were no fewer than 28 performances between the late summer of 1789 and February 1791). There is however no reference to *Così* before the end of December 1789, when Mozart in a letter to his generous Masonic friend Michael Puchberg wrote: 'On Thursday I invite you (but just you alone) to come to my place at 10 o'clock in the morning to a small opera rehearsal; I'm inviting just you and *Haydn*. — I'll tell you about Salieri's cabals, all of which have however already melted away.' Even here the new opera is not named, though there is no doubt about its identity: Mozart's *Catalogue of all my works...* contains as the first of three entries for December 'An aria which was intended for the opera *Così fan tutte*. for Benucci. *Rivolgete a me lo sguardo etc.*' This is the big aria for Guglielmo in Act I which was replaced by the shorter 'Non siate ritrosi'. The completed opera was entered in the *Catalogue* 'in January. 1790', presumably at about the time of the première. And by then we have the only other reference to the work, in another letter to Puchberg written on 20 January: 'Tomorrow is the first orchestral rehearsal in the theatre — *Haydn* will accompany me — if your business affairs allow, and if you perhaps would like to attend the rehearsal too, then you need only have the kindness to come to me at 10 o'clock tomorrow morning, and we'll all go along together.'

This is all the evidence we have until the poster was printed to announce the first performance; it may be translated as follows:

New Singspiel  
In the Imperial Royal National Court Theatre  
is to be performed today,  
Tuesday, the 26<sup>th</sup> January 1790:  
(for the first time)  
COSI FAN TUTTE,  
o sia  
LA SCOLA DEGLI AMANTI.  
So machen sie's, oder: die Schule der Liebhaber.  
[That's what they all do, or: the School for Lovers]  
A comic Singspiel in two Acts.  
The poem is by Herr Abbé da Ponte, Poet to the Italian  
Singspiel at the I.-R. Court Theatre.  
The music is by Herr Wolfgang Mozart, Kapellmeister  
in actual service of His Majesty the Emperor.  
The librettos, Italian only, are to be had of  
the Box Keeper at 24 kreutzer.

The libretto, like that of *Don Giovanni*, identifies the genre as *dramma giocoso* and, again like that of the previous Italian opera, names the composer by the spelling that Da Ponte favours in his *Memoirs*, 'Signor Wolfgang Mozzart'.

We have no means of telling whether there is any truth behind the rumour that the subject-matter of *Così* was suggested by the Emperor, Joseph II, and based on a recent incident in Viennese society. Da Ponte tells us tantalizingly little in his autobiographical writings, referring merely to the 'drama that holds third place among the three Sisters born to that most celebrated Father of harmony'. Were it a truly original libretto, then he might have been expected to make more of his achievement. Even if he could assume that cultivated contemporary Viennese were familiar the subject-matter (as would have been the case if it really was based on a recent happening), he might have been expected to give more details in memoirs written nearly forty years later. It is surely most likely that he was in fact adapting a literary model which has still not been adequately identified.

There are broad similarities of plot between *Così fan tutte* and the wagers on women's fidelity that we find in older literature – there are examples in Boccaccio's *Decamerone* and Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*.<sup>1</sup> All three names of the female characters in *Così* occur in the same or variant spellings in the *Orlando furioso* – Da Ponte knew Ariosto well, referring to him several times in the *Memoirs*. It was pointed out many years ago (by Sir Ernst Gombrich) that the story of Cephalus and Procris in the Seventh Book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* contains the motif of a husband testing his wife's fidelity by appearing to her in disguise. But that story is one of the most poignantly tragic in the entire collection; the link with Da Ponte's libretto does not appear strong – though the work was certainly fashionable in the Vienna of the '80s, Dittersdorf's *Twelve Symphonies after Ovid's Metamorphoses* being a case in point.

A more profitable line of enquiry might well lead into the thickets of the Italian theatre tradition, via France. – Marivaux's plays may at the very least be a tributary of the main stream (largely underground) that leads on to *Così fan tutte*. In the famous *Le jeu de l' amour et du hasard* (1730), both parties to a prospective marriage adopt disguise so as to observe and test the suitability of the intended spouse; in the earlier and less familiar *L'île des esclaves* (1725) an Alfonso-like figure, Trivelin, proposes and stage-manages the trials of two pairs of lovers, in which the men exchange costumes and identities. The principal area for study is the conflicting attitudes and responsibilities of masters and servants rather than, as in the Mozart/Da Ponte opera, social equals. The Marivaux play is however, like *Così*, rich in emotional confusion, and the happy outcome – restoration of the status quo, now based upon deeper understanding of one's self and of the nature of love, after each has felt the attraction of the other's partner – is similar. Comparable, but different, is of course the imbroglio of the two pairs of lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

In view of the libretto's emphasis on social relationships, it is not surprising that Da Ponte himself referred to the work in his *Memoirs* and *An Extract from the Life of Lorenzo Da Ponte* under the title *La sc(u)ola degli amanti*. Playbill and libretto, however, named it *Così fan tutte*, and the reason why is not hard to guess: Mozart is surely responsible. The verbal and musical phrase that acts as motto, occurring in the Overture and again in no. 30 when the officers admit they have lost the wager, has its origin in Basilio's mocking phrase in the Act I *terzetto* of *Le nozze di Figaro*, 'così fan tutte le belle' ('all beautiful women are like that, that is no novelty'). When Basilio repeats the words (in bars 161-63 and 184-86), it is to a musical phrase that is almost identical to the running quaver (eighth-note) cadence figure that bubbles from the woodwind in the Presto of the *Così* Overture (first heard on the flute in bar 35). Basilio's words are veiled by the other voices in the *terzetto* from *Figaro* (they are no more than a counter-theme in the plot); but their import emerges ironically in *Don Giovanni* (where women are all too inclined to fall for the charms of the seducer), and it stands at the very centre of the last of the three operas of the Mozart/Da Ponte partnership.

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FOR OUR KNOWLEDGE OF THE CAST at the first performance of *Così fan tutte* we are dependent on Mozart's entry in his *Catalogue of all my works...*, where it is entered 'in January 1790: *Così fan tutte; ossia la scuola degli amanti. Opera Buffa in 2 Atti. pezzi di musica. [left blank]. Attori. Signore. Ferraresi del Bene, Villeneuve et Bussani. Signori Calvesi, Benucci e Bussani.'* It was a strong cast, all six being already experienced Mozart singers. Fiordiligi was taken by Adriana Ferraresi (Ferrarese) del Bene, for whom Mozart had written two new arias for the previous summer's revival of *Figaro*, in which she sang Susanna. Her stage sister Dorabella (there is no evidence to support the claim that the *prime donne* were sisters in real life) was sung by Louise Villeneuve, for whom Mozart had written three arias that autumn for inclusion in operas by Cimarosa and Martín y Soler. The Despina was more familiar to Mozart than either of the other women in the cast – Dorotea Bussani, who had created the role of Cherubino in 1786. Of the men, Ferrando was sung by Vincenzo Calvesi,

who had recently rejoined the Italian opera company; Mozart had composed a quartet and a trio for Bianchi's *La villanella rapita* in autumn 1785, in both of which Calvesi sang. The Guglielmo was Francesco Benucci, Mozart's original Figaro, and the first Leporello in Vienna. The cast was completed by Francesco Bussani, the oldest of the six, and the most experienced (but not the most dedicated) Mozart singer. He had been a member of the Italian Opera in Vienna for the season 1771-72, and he later became a member of its production team, being responsible for the staging of *Der Schauspieldirektor* in the Orangery at Schönbrunn Palace in February 1786. He too had sung in the Mozart quartet interpolated in Bianchi's opera the previous autumn. On 1 May 1786, he created the roles of Bartolo and Antonio in *Figaro*, and he was the first Commendatore and Masetto in *Don Giovanni* when that opera was staged in Vienna in 1788.

Although Mozart was familiar with the capabilities of all his cast, he seems to have followed his favoured working method when composing an operatic score for singers he did not know from personal experience. That is to say, the arias were with just one or two exceptions written after the ensembles. Alan Tyson's detailed study of the autograph score of Act I<sup>2</sup> (Act II, written almost entirely on a single paper type, does not yield comparable evidence) leaves no doubt that Mozart, as the first stage of his work and using his first paper type, composed all the concerted numbers of Act I apart from the finale and the chorus 'Bella vita militar!' and its adjoining *quintetto*. At this stage the only arias written were Dorabella's 'Smanie implacabili' and the original aria for Guglielmo, 'Rivolgete a lui lo sguardo' (deleted probably at a fairly late stage, to be replaced by the much shorter 'Non siate ritrosi'). The second compositional stage, marked by a mixture of the two paper types, includes the *quintetto* referred to just now, and Ferrando's aria 'Un'aura amorosa' which comes immediately before the finale. Wholly on the second paper type, and consequently the last stage of composition of Act I, are the little soldiers' chorus, the rest of the arias, and the finale. The Overture was presumably written at a very late stage, after all or most of the work on Act II had been completed.

Tyson's study further yields some hitherto unknown bars of music for *Così*, information about the cuts that Mozart seems to have made, and a number of fascinating little details – 'Guilelmo' (and before that, 'Guillelmo') was the normal spelling in the score and first edition of the libretto of the name that we always think of as Guglielmo. There are a few interesting hints as to the authors' original intentions – a crossed-out stage direction indicates that Despina was originally to have made her entrance with a cavatina rather than in recitative. And the printed libretto contains the indication where the *quartetto* 'La mano a me date' (no. 22) stands, 'There follows the aria of Don Alfonso'.

Mozart's well-known practice of tailoring the solo music according to the capabilities of his singers is clearly brought out by *Così fan tutte*. Two examples must suffice, one from each side of the distaff. As has just been stated, Alfonso lost an aria to the lesson in courtship in Act II. He does have two solo numbers in the opera, like all the other members of the cast. But both are very short (the total playing-time of the two is only some ninety seconds), and the second of them becomes a *terzetto* when Ferrando and

Guglielmo concede defeat and join him in singing the motto. Alfonso sings in no fewer than eleven ensembles, taking a dominant role in some of them. His vocal line, like his character, tends towards dryness, however. At the time of his first Viennese season Bussani was spoken of as having 'only an adequate bass voice'; there is evidence that some 18 years later he tended to rely on his experience and fine stage presence rather than any vocal distinction. The star of the opera was Adriana Ferraresi del Bene, Da Ponte's mistress, who sang Fiordiligi. She was only a girl when Burney heard her in Venice in 1770 and spoke of her 'very extraordinary compass of voice'. By the time she joined the Vienna court opera in 1788 she was internationally famous; at her debut the 'unbelievable top' and 'striking lower register' of her voice were praised – features that were to be brought out by those who wrote for her. The première that preceded that of *Così fan tutte* was of Salieri's *La cifra* (to a libretto by Da Ponte); in that opera Ferraresi was expected to negotiate not only the intervals of 11ths and 13ths such as we know from Fiordiligi's music, but a 15th too, along with series of wide leaps alternating with sustained low notes. Was Mozart in *Così* perhaps parodying Salieri's latest opera, or mocking the prima donna? We shall probably never know, just as it is not possible to assess the accuracy of the rumour that Da Ponte's text was originally intended for Salieri, who rejected it as unsuitable (one possible reason for the equally unauthenticated opinion that Mozart's success with the opera roused Salieri's jealousy).

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A CRUCIAL FEATURE OF *COSÌ FAN TUTTE* is the restricted and symmetrical range of characters: two amorous young officers, and their older friend (tenor and two basses), their fiancées who are also sisters, and their maid-servant (three sopranos). For once in an Italian opera by Mozart, the tenor's is the largest rôle (he takes part in 17 of the 31 numbers, and with three arias has one more than any other character). He is closely followed by Guglielmo, who sings in 16 numbers, and Alfonso, who takes part in 13. The sisters are treated equally – two arias each, eight shared ensembles, and one duet in which each is wooed by the other's fiancé, making 11 numbers. Despina too has a pair of arias, but it may come as a surprise – when we recall the importance of the soubrette roles in the other Da Ponte operas – that she does not appear until the recitative before no. 11, and in all sings in only six numbers (she is less the instigator of intrigue than one who responds to it – with considerable aplomb in her crucial appearances as apothecary and notary in the two finales).

Though there are only two minor-key numbers (Alfonso's little aria no. 5 is in F minor, Ferrando's last aria in C minor and C major), Mozart ranges with unusual freedom through the major keys – C major for Overture, nos. 3, 13, (27), 30 and 31; D major for nos. 8 (Guglielmo's discarded no. 15a), 18 (the Act I finale) and no. 22; E flat major for nos. 6, 11 and 21; E major for nos. 2, 10 and 25; F major for nos. 9, 12 and 23; G major for nos. 1, 15b, 16, 19 and 26; A major for nos. 4, 17 and 29 (the most sensuous numbers), and B flat major for nos. 7, 14, 20, 24 and 28. (Mozart moves through a wide range of keys in the finales, even to the contrast between contiguous A flat major (the toast) and E major (the entry of the notary) in the second finale.)

The variety in instrumentation is astonishing. Mozart uses his full orchestra – pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns, trumpets, timpani and strings – in the Overture and the two finales. Throughout, he is unerringly precise in his choice of instrumental timbres. Strings alone suffice for Alfonso's dry and agitated little aria (no. 5), as for the penultimate ensemble, in which he excuses women for their inconstancy. Strings are absent from the *duetto con coro* early in Act II in which the men serenade the ladies. Otherwise, the most common scoring is pairs of clarinets, bassoons and horns with strings (nos. 4, 6, 7, 17 and 23). No fewer than twelve numbers have an instrumentation that does not recur elsewhere in the opera. And Mozart is adept at playing with the listener's expectations – the flutes absent between nos. 2 and 8, the oboes absent between nos. 3 and 8, and between 20 and 26; the clarinets are held in reserve after the Overture until the first duet of the sisters; the horns are rested between 11 and 16, the trumpets between 3 and 8; elsewhere they are used sparingly, seldom with the horns, and not always with timpani. Further, Mozart quite often chooses to employ a single wind instrument rather than the expected two; Despina's arias are good examples, respectively calling for one flute, one oboe and one bassoon; and one flute, one bassoon and two horns.

The economy and balance of *Così fan tutte* are almost perfect – 'almost' merely because the conventional requirement of two arias for each character led to the series of five solo numbers towards the end of Act II (nos. 24-28). The masterly construction of Act I produces a probably unrivalled sequence of nine ensembles (fleeting interrupted by Alfonso's mock-tragic solo announcement) before arias (never more than two consecutively) loosen the texture. One should not look too hard for symmetry in the positioning of the arias, though the role of Alfonso as manipulator of the action is posited by his having the first aria (no. 5) and the last (no. 30 – technically a *terzetto*). Further, had Mozart not decided against giving him an aria in place of the *quartetto* no. 22, he would have had a third aria almost in the centre of the aria-sequence of the other characters. As it is, Dorabella's arias (nos. 11 and 28) straddle those of the other persons. Despina (nos. 11 and 19) is the first to complete her solo singing; Fiordiligi's arias both immediately precede those of Guglielmo. Ferrando, the last of the six to sing an aria (no. 17) has his second and third (nos. 24 and 27) immediately before the arias of the two women with whom he is involved, Fiordiligi and then (with intervening recitative) Dorabella.

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HOW SERIOUSLY ARE WE TO TAKE THE OPERA? Though Da Ponte was closely familiar with Mozart's genius before they started work on *Così*, it is likely that they viewed the new piece with different eyes. Da Ponte emerges from the pages of his *Memoirs* as an engaging rake and talented self-publicist. His composer, on the other hand, had just a few weeks before work started on the new opera written to his wife to express his tender love for her, but also his deep concern (which stands out too from the very first letter he wrote her) at a certain flirtatiousness in her character: 'It pleases me when you're merry – certainly – only I could wish that you would not sometimes make yourself so cheap ... a young lady must see to it that she maintains people's respect, or she becomes the subject of gossip.' We are not

surprised that Mozart treats profoundly a libretto that reads like a superior Carnival piece. When we listen to a performance of the score, we frequently sense the shifting emotions of the characters – the sisters are sincere as they wish their departed lovers calm seas and a prosperous voyage: but the tragic anguish of Dorabella's first aria (straight out of opera seria, we might think), and the noble protestations of Fiordiligi's, are both dangerously overstated. And when the wooing is about to start in Act II on a one-to-one basis, are the men tongue-tied because they are playing a game, or because they are already frightened of what they may learn?

That highly experienced man of the theatre F.L. Schröder wrote of the libretto in his diary in late April 1791, shortly before seeing the opera: 'It lowers all women, cannot possibly please female spectators, and will therefore not make its fortune.' Mercifully, there were other opinions, though they were then in the minority. Count Zinzendorf, inveterate opera-goer and diarist, wrote of the première: 'La musique de Mozart est charmante, et le sujet assez amusant.' And E.T.A. Hoffmann appreciated its 'most delectable irony' and general excellence. We feel a certain superiority when we perceive that Mozart has taken a detail in a way that accords with our own conception, yet it is easy to forget that we are perhaps just as guilty as previous generations of misinterpretation. Therein lies part of the continuing fascination of this most iridescent and many-layered of operatic scores.

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1. Andrew Steptoe, 'The Sources of *Così fan tutte*: a Reappraisal'. *Music and Letters* 62/3-4 (July-October 1981), 281-94.
  2. Alan Tyson. 'Notes on the Composition of Mozart's *Così fan tutte*'. *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 37 (1984), 356-401.