



[Così fan tutte](#) by [Welsh National Opera](#)

Reviewed by [Denis Joe](#) November 2012

Conductor: Mark Wigglesworth

Director: Benjamin Davis

Designer: Max Jones

Over the years I have seen around five different productions of ***Così fan tutte***, and however beautiful the music, I always come away feeling unsettled by what is a morally repugnant libretto; and perhaps the fact that the music is so wonderful seems to make the experience all the more distasteful.

Beethoven found the story to be unworthy of the genius of Mozart. The treatment of the central female roles, Fiordiligi and Dorabella, and particularly their forced humiliation at the end of the opera, were seen as overly cynical and misogynist. A century after its first performance, the controversy surrounding the opera had not abated (and indeed can be said to have intensified). This led to the music impresario and publisher Eduard Hanslick to declare: "The boundless triviality of the libretto everywhere deals a deathblow to Mozart's lovely music... The civilization of our time cannot come to terms with it even with the best of intentions. I deem ***Cosi van tutte*** (sic) to be no longer stageworthy."

Thankfully **Così fan tutte** continued to be performed in opera houses throughout the world, though less so in the 19th century. It was not until 1934, with a production by Glyndebourne Opera, that the work was revived and acclaimed, and has remained as a staple for many opera companies since. Yet the conflict between the music and the drama remains. The question of how a genius such as Mozart could write some of the most glorious and moving music to such a debased piece of comedy, written by the author Lorenzo Da Ponte who had already provided the composer with two triumphant works in the shape of

Le nozze di Figaro and *Don Giovanni*,

is a question that still dogs the opera today (a Google search threw up hundreds of references). And yet there may well be a simple answer: the genius Mozart may well have found Da Ponte's libretto appealing and worthy of the music he put to it. There is no rule that says those we think of as genii should also meet our moral standards just because they can create profound and beautiful work.

Yet my unease remained as I took my seat. The curtain rose to a British seaside resort with pier entertainers and fairground workers busying themselves, while policemen and passers-by wandered across the stage, and the orchestra struck up the overture.

The composer and musicologist, Donald Francis Tovey, was on the mark when he said of the overture that it was "one of the funniest things Mozart ever wrote" - funny both in its humour and in its strangeness. The opening *forte* chord gives way to a beautiful and delicate phrase for the oboe that is softly supported by the bassoon. Yet chords battle, in short phrases, as if to tell us not to get too relaxed, and we are introduced to a theme that will later be taken up by Don Alfonso in his aria on the nature of women (

Tutti accusan le donne).

The overture prefaces the opera's themes brilliantly; there are basically three aspects: the purely beautiful aspect of love, its sorrowful aspect, and the cynical.

Once the overture ends and the stage clears, we are introduced to two young sailors, Ferrando and Guglielmo, who are arguing with a pier entertainer, Don Alfonso, over the fidelity of their respective fiancés, Fiordiligi and Dorabella (sisters), who will be arriving in town the next morning. Alfonso wagers that if they cooperate with his plan he can prove that their idealisation of their lovers, of whom he asks if they are in fact 'goddesses or women' (*Alfin, se Dee, se donne son*), is false, and he mocks them for their simple-mindedness (*E in donne pretendete/Di trovar fedeltà?/Quanto mi piaci mai, semplicità!*). The two men agree to Alfonso's wager, and to follow the older man's orders. So sure are they of their respective loved ones' fidelity that they raise the amount wagered tenfold, and boast that they will feast at Alfonso's expense (*A spese vostre or ci divertiremo*).

The next morning the sisters arrive and are excited about being reunited with their fiancés (*Io sono felice!/Se questo mio core/Mai cangia desio,/Amore mi faccia/Vivendo penar*). But later they are approached by Alfonso who tells them that Ferrando and Guglielmo have been called away to military service and are to leave immediately. The men (going along with Alfonso's deceit) quickly come to bid farewell, leaving the women distraught and Alfonso to commiserate with them. Once the women have taken leave of the old man, he reiterates his scorn for the men who have put their faith in these women ("Nel mare solca/E nell'arena semina/E il vago vento/Spera in rete accogliere/Chi fonda sue speranze/In cor di femmina.").

