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0521838819 - Three Modes of Perception in Mozart: The Philosophical, Pastoral, and Comic in *Così fan tutte*

Edmund J. Goehring

Excerpt

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I | **An overture to *Così fan tutte*: the poetics of the opera over two centuries**

During the two centuries following its premiere, the news about *Così fan tutte* has generally not been good. Most of the nineteenth century and a good part of the twentieth condemned it, altered it beyond recognition, or, more frequently, simply ignored it. Today, the opera enjoys a more secure place in the repertory, yet opinion about and approaches to the work have shown remarkable stability over this span. In tracing a path back through the critical history of the opera, one spots a single perception above all others: that the opera's text seems to be incompatible with its music. This introduction will explore and assess this central issue in *Così fan tutte*'s reception with two particular historical/critical objectives in mind. First, it will show how present-day thinking about the opera comes out of critical approaches formulated in the nineteenth century. Then, it will offer a different way of conceiving the opera's handling of word and tone, one that finds agreement rather than incongruity between the two.

A HISTORY OF WORD/MUSIC RELATIONS IN *COSÌ FAN TUTTE*

Nineteenth-century roots to modern thought

Although isolated complaints dot the beginnings of *Così fan tutte*'s reception, a more consistent animus toward the opera spread with the life-and-works studies that appeared from the close of the eighteenth century. Niemetschek's *Leben* of 1798 inaugurates the tradition with this oft-cited comment: "One wonders how [Mozart] could have condescended to squander his divine melodies on such a frivolous hodge-podge of a text. It did not stand in his power to reject the commission,

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and he dutifully set the text.”¹ This unflattering verdict carried great influence into the nineteenth century and beyond. An early sign of its authority comes in Ignaz Ferdinand Arnold’s *Mozarts Geist* (1803). Arnold’s dislike of the opera shows up even in the arrangement of his study. Finding mere chronology irrelevant for matters of excellence, he surveys the operas in order of perceived merit: the *Magic Flute* heads the list, followed by *Don Giovanni*; then come *Idomeneo*, *Figaro*, *Tito*, the *Abduction from the Seraglio*, and, bringing up the rear, *Così fan tutte*.² Arnold’s dismay with the opera takes more overt forms, too. He reproduces Niemetschek’s above-cited verdict almost word for word but then appends this important aesthetic evaluation: “One can find neither plan nor order in this piece, and it would be difficult to try to judge this as a unified work of art. It is instead a collection of individual beauties, although it does indeed bear the overall stamp of a lofty, mischievous humor” [Man kann in diesem Stücke weder Plan noch Anordnung finden, und es würde schwer halten, es als *ein* Kunstwerk zu beurtheilen. Es ist eine Sammlung einzelner Schönheiten, doch tragen sie größtentheils das Gepräge froher, muthwilliger Laune].³ Arnold’s objection would guide later studies of greater reputation, especially Nissen’s biography of 1828.⁴ As a group, the early biographies set forth

¹ Franz Xaver Niemetschek, *Ich kannte Mozart: Leben des k.k. Kapellmeisters Wolfgang Gottlieb Mozart nach Originalquellen beschrieben*, ed. Jost Perfahl (Prague: In der Herrlichen Buchhandlung, 1789; reprint, Munich: Bibliothek zeitgenössischer Literatur, 1984), 29. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

² Ignaz Ferdinand Arnold, *Mozarts Geist: seine kurze Biographie und ästhetische Darstellung seiner Werke. Ein Bildungsbuch für junge Tonkünstler* (Erfurt: In der Henningsschen Buchhandlung, 1803).

³ *Ibid.*, 390. The emphasis is Arnold’s.

⁴ At least in the passages related to *Così fan tutte*, Nissen draws on Arnold more than on Niemetschek. For example, Arnold mentions having seen four different productions of *Così fan tutte* in German translation and concludes that none of them was especially edifying. Arnold, *Mozarts Geist*, 390. Nissen weaves Arnold’s personal, anecdotal observation into a general principle: “Not even the opera’s basic plot runs the same way at every theater, given that the music has been set to significantly different texts, of which, however, none is especially edifying.” Georg Nikolaus von Nissen, *Biographie W. A. Mozarts* (Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1828; reprint, New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1984), Anhang, 92. Nissen’s wording about squandering divine melodies on a wretched text also follows Arnold more closely than Niemetschek. See *ibid.*, Anhang, 92–93.

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the relationship between text and tone as the central aesthetic problem posed by *Così fan tutte*, one that would continue to dominate criticism about the opera over the next two centuries.

By midcentury, the theory, first advanced by Niemetschek, that Mozart had little choice in the commission of the text assumed the status of entrenched fact. The meticulous Otto Jahn supplemented Niemetschek with a reference to Friedrich Heine's anecdote (from 1837) that the plot owed its inspiration to Joseph II, who, in turn, had taken the idea from an actual incident between two officers and their lovers.⁵ More recent research discredits this theory: Kurt Kramer first pointed out that Joseph II was ill at the time and hardly in a position to worry about opera (except to consider shutting down the opera buffa company to save money during an expensive war with the Turks).⁶ Bruce Alan Brown and John Rice's discovery that Salieri tried his hand at *Così fan tutte* before giving up on it further discredits this genealogy.⁷ But in at least one sense the fabrication about the forced commission holds a thread of truth, or, rather, runs true to much nineteenth-century thinking about the work. The anecdote conveniently distances Mozart by three degrees of separation from involvement in the project. In identifying a pre-existent source for Da Ponte's libretto, the myth also serendipitously confirms Da Ponte's reputation as a hack. One especially irate critic, using the cover of anonymity, compared Da Ponte's handling of his sources to how gypsies treat other people's children: "they abduct them, mistreat them, and leave them crippled."⁸

⁵ Otto Jahn, *W. A. Mozart*, 2nd edn (Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1867), II:417. A translation of Heine's anecdote appears in Brown, 9.

⁶ Kurt Kramer, "Da Ponte's *Così fan tutte*," *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen I. Philologisch-historische Klasse* (1973): 4.

⁷ Bruce Alan Brown and John Arthur Rice, "Salieri's *Così fan tutte*," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 8, no. 1 (1996): 17–43.

⁸ This judgment comes from the anonymous treatise entitled *Anti-Da-Ponte . . . von einem Cosmopoliten* (Vienna: Hraschanzky, 1791). The entire philippic is reprinted in Gustav Gugitz, ed., *Denkwürdigkeiten des Venezianers Lorenzo Da Ponte* (Dresden: Paul Aretz, 1924), II:255–308 (293). The second part puts Da Ponte on trial, with Apollo as judge and a line-up of witnesses for the prosecution which includes Kasperle (representing the suburban theaters, from which Da Ponte is accused of plundering material), Martín y Soler, Dittersdorf, Beaumarchais, and others.

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Mozart's supposed indifference is of little critical relevance to the opera.⁹ Even could such feelings be demonstrated, they would be only of historical interest and irrelevant to the meaning of the work. In any case, it is not clear how fully this charge was thought through, because the opera was often lauded for the excellence of its music. Sometimes, such praise could even follow immediately on the heels of condemnation of the text, as if to imply that Mozart had performed a minor miracle in discovering anything of value in Da Ponte's collage. A 1791 report in the *Annalen des Theaters* from Berlin, for example, called the text a "miserable Italian product," only to conclude the very same sentence with praise for the "powerful, elevated music of a Mozart."¹⁰ Niemetschek, in his second edition of Mozart's life (1808), seems to have thought better of his original condemnation of the opera and muted his aversion this time around by praising Mozart's musical achievement: "In considering the wretched text of this opera, one can only marvel at the fecundity of a creative genius who was able to enliven so arid and inane a topic and to coax out of it such beauties."¹¹

Some early critics found a way out of this hermeneutic maze by using the categories of enthusiasm and genius to thread their way through Mozart's enigmatic work. Such a theory was advanced by one "Arithmos," who carried on a fascinating exchange about the opera over the course of three issues of the *Berlinische musikalische Zeitung*. Arithmos locates the problem of *Così fan tutte* not in a composer indifferent to a trivial text but rather in his excess of enthusiasm. Arithmos censures the composer of *Così fan tutte* for the failure of talent to mature into genius. He finds in the opera plenty of the former, but little of the latter:

⁹ I follow Stanley Cavell in conceiving intention not as some kind of verbal formulation that exists in the composer's mind prior to or independent of the work, but as an act that is realized as the work itself. The appropriate question to ask is not, what was the composer thinking? but, what has the composer done? Stanley Cavell, "A Matter of Meaning It," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Scribners, 1969), see esp. 235–38.

¹⁰ Anonymous, "Verzeichniß der in Mainz von den Nationalschauspielern aufgeführten Stücke vom November 1790 an bis zum April 1791 mit einigen Bemerkungen," *Annalen des Theaters* 8 (1788–97; reprint, Munich: Kraus, 1981): 46.

¹¹ Niemetschek, *Leben*, 87. Although Perfahl's reprint is of the first edition, he includes an appendix showing changes made in the second edition.

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“The music has a few beautiful moments, which, however, is only to be expected from a born composer. These, however, cannot be attributed to genius. Had the good Mozart more learning and taste, he would have chosen such texts with reluctance and would probably not have made so much ado about nothing” [Die Musik hat einzelne schöne Stellen, die man aber von einem gebornen Musiker erwarten muß, und dem Genie nicht angerechnet werden können. Hätte der gute Mozart mehr Studium und Geschmack gehabt, so würde er schwerlich solche Texte gewählt, und wahrscheinlich nicht so viel Lärm um nichts gemacht haben].¹² Inanity and absurdity are charges that could be leveled against other Mozart operas, too, as Arithmos is aware. Unlike *Così fan tutte*, however, works like *Don Giovanni* and the *Magic Flute* find redemption in an irrepressible striving for transcendence: “I love Mozart most of all when he loses himself, as it were, in the otherworldly. At least then he comes across as an endearing enthusiast. As senseless as even his *Magic Flute* and *Don Giovanni* may be, just so surprisingly do his bold modulations succeed in the statue scene and in Sarastro’s temple” [Ich liebe Mozart allenfalls, wenn er sich gleichsam in das Ueberirrdische verliehrt; er erscheint dann doch wenigstens als ein lebenswürdiger Schwärmer, und so unsinnig auch seine *Zauberflöte*, sein *Don Juan* seyn mögen, so überraschend würken doch seine kühnen Modulationen in der Geisterszene und dem Pallaste des Sarastro].¹³ In drawing from the elevated and the vulgar alike, Mozart’s enthusiasm is perceived as indiscriminate and indifferent to matters of virtue and vice. Such apparent waywardness made critics like Arithmos recoil, for they could not fathom how the same man could have “preached the touching virtue of Sarastro” and yet also “sung a contemptible tale of frivolity” in *Così fan tutte* [Denn nimmer hätte sonst derselbe Mann jene rührende Tugend des Sarastro predigen, nimmer sonst diese verderbliche Moral des Leichtsinns singen lassen].¹⁴ This line of thought makes all the more unusual Richard Wagner’s judgment about the opera. Arithmos faulted Mozart for having too much enthusiasm for the work, but

¹² Anonymous, “Musikalischer Briefwechsel,” *BmZ* 1, no. 74 (1805): 294.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 293. ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 294.

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Wagner was grateful that Mozart lacked it. He gave him eternal praise for *not* being able to set excellent music to such an execrable text: “Oh, how highly honorable and eternally dear to me is Mozart, that it was not possible for him to discover a music for *Tito* like that for *Don Giovanni*, for *Così fan tutte* a music like that of *Figaro*: how shamefully would this have dishonored music.”¹⁵ Whatever one thinks of Wagner’s opinion, it has the virtue (or vice) of consistency. It views the opera as a union of text and music. Most everyone else toiled with the apparent incongruity between the two, striving, generally in vain, to see the landscape of the work as having something more than a few musical oases in an otherwise vast verbal desert.

Some thinkers of the time were dissatisfied with the idea that Mozart did not have his heart in the opera, and they looked elsewhere to resolve the paradox between the perceived beauty of the music and the perceived frivolity of the text.¹⁶ One such attempt comes in the continuation of the above-cited “Musikalischer Briefwechsel.” “Phantasia,” although Arithmos’s epistolary opponent, grants one of his main points, that Mozart did indeed forget himself by imbuing the text with more weight than it could really bear:

Everything is just disguise, play, jest, flirtation, and irony: things that ought to be in every way more difficult to grasp than the usual monotony of life. Concerning the serious scenes that appear in between, Mozart by no means meant them seriously. They served him simply for shaping the form and, one might say, for darkening, shading the humor, if one cannot exactly deny that he allowed himself to go too far in these

¹⁵ Richard Wagner, *Oper und Drama*, vol. III of *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen* (Leipzig: E. W. Fritzsch, 1871), 306. Bruce Alan Brown identifies a Wagnerian ethos as a reason behind *Così fan tutte*’s decline in the nineteenth century: to an era that shunned end-rhyme, word-repetition, and set pieces, a work like *Così fan tutte* must have seemed alien at best, trivial at worst. Brown, 172. One could also add that in the context of a Wagnerian *Weltanschauung* that strove for the dissolution of the self into the world unconscious, *Così fan tutte*’s exposure of the self must have seemed disconcerting, if not immoral.

¹⁶ Joseph Kerman recently offered a modern gloss on this old objection: “I have never felt that Mozart was happy with the libretto of *Così fan tutte*.” Joseph Kerman, “The Miracle Worker,” *The New York Review of Books* 47, no. 5 (23 March 2000): 34.

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dark situations, as if they had, in the process of working on them, grown in spite of himself.

[Alles ist nur Maske, Spiel, Scherz, Tändelei und Ironie, Dinge, die allerdings schwerer zu erfassen seyn dürften, als das gewöhnliche Einerlei des Lebens. Mit den ernstesten Zügen, die dazwischen erscheinen, ist es Mozart gar kein Ernst gewesen, sie dienen ihm nur zur Gestaltung, und wie man sagen könnte, Bedunklung, Schattirung des Scherzes, wenn man gleich nicht leugnen kann, daß er sich in diesen dunklen Stellen zu sehr hat gehen lassen, indem sie ihm gleichsam bei der Arbeit über den Kopf gewachsen sind.]¹⁷

Phantásus's opinion likely comes not from the original Italian libretto but from Georg Friedrich Treitschke's adaptation entitled *Mädchentreue* (Berlin, 1805), which makes the opera appear more frivolous than the original. This is, for example, how Treitschke ends the opera:

Selig, wer im Liebesbunde
Sanft an des/der Geliebten Munde,
In der frohen Söhnungstunde,
Leicht vergißt der Untreu Schmerz.
Eifersucht mag ängstlich wachen,
Weg mit Angst, wir scherzen, lachen,
Sich das Leben froh zu machen,
Braucht man nur ein leichtes Herz.

[Blessed is he who, in the embrace of love and with the sweet whispers of his beloved, easily forgets the pain of faithlessness in the happy hour of reconciliation. Should jealousy anxiously awaken: away with worry! We jest, we laugh. To make life happy, all one needs is a light heart.]

Treitschke's envoi gets the original wrong: it is a pollyannaish interpretation of a far more subtle opera. Jealousy is only a side show in the original, and the nostalgic exhortation to banish care had already been tried in the opera and found wanting. But even if Treitschke can be faulted for a send-off that disowns the work, Phantásus's conclusions reach well beyond the context of this particular adaptation. He

¹⁷ "Musikalischer Briefwechsel," *BmZ* 1, no. 76 (1805): 300.

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transforms the question of text and music into one of competing authorial voices: the composer forgets not only the text but even himself. In the next century, as we will see, this observation about one particular opera – that the work gets out of the control of its composer – will solidify into a critical theory potentially about *all* opera.

Meanwhile, the early nineteenth century was rapidly according Mozart the status of a musical divinity, which meant that one dismissed a mature work like *Così fan tutte* at one's critical peril. One way of rescuing the opera came from ignoring the text altogether. Many adaptations of the opera reflect this attitude by substituting texts that have little in common with the original. In some critical circles, this bifurcation became so complete that *Così fan tutte* ceased to be an opera at all. A tacit nod to this aestheticized understanding of the opera comes in Ignaz Arnold's account, which invests almost all of its analytical capital in the overture, in other words, in instrumental music.¹⁸ The previously cited exchange in the *Berlinische musikalische Zeitung* makes a more overt move. Phantasus's explanation for *Così fan tutte*'s poor showing among the general listener is that it dwells too much on heaven, not enough on earth (to borrow an opposition enjoined in the opera itself):

Nonetheless, my dear man, the house was not very full even at the first performance, still less so at the second one . . . [Audiences] prefer to have their *Donau Nymphs* and *Labyrinths*, their *Superficialities* and *Entanglements*, their *Handkerchiefs* and their *Opera tailors*, their pleasantries and their curiosities. In contrast, you know indeed that the music to *Così fan tutte* is, as you have read from Arithmos, simple concert music, and such pure ethereal music in every way escapes common people.

[Demungeachtet, mein Bester, war schon bei der ersten Vorstellung das Haus eben nicht sehr gefüllt, und bei der zweiten noch weniger . . . Dafür haben sie ja ihren Donaunymphen und ihre Labyrinth, ihre Flachheiten und Verworrenheiten; ihre Fanchons und Operschneider, ihre Süßlichkeiten und Bizarren! Außerdem weißt Du ja, ist die Musik zu

¹⁸ The analysis of the overture runs from pages 389 to 392.

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Così fan tutte eine bloÙe Concertmusik, wie Du bei Arithmos gelesen haben wirst, und solche reine Aethermusik verfliegt den Leuten ja.]¹⁹

The previous issue of the *Berlinische musikalische Zeitung* weighs in on this matter, too. The first part offers a cautionary tale about the reliability of presumably first-hand accounts. What for Phantastus was mediocre attendance was for this commentator a full house:

One of Mozart's most beautiful pieces has returned. *Così fan tutte* had left our theater thirteen years ago for lack of interest. Maestro Seidel [the director] wanted to bring it back to the local theater through Treitschke's adaptation (which reworked only the poetry, not the plot). On the ninth the opera was given to a full house and received the liveliest applause.

[Jetzt kehrte eine der schönsten Mozartschen Musiken zurück. Seit dreizehn Jahren hatte *Così fan tutte* unser Theater verlassen, weil sie keinen Beifall erhielt. Herrn Treitschkens Umarbeitung (nicht des Sujets, sondern nur der Poesie) vermogte Herrn Seidel sie wieder aufs hiesige Theater zu bringen. Den 9ten d. wurde sie zum erstenmale bei vollem Hause gegeben, und mit dem regsten Beifall aufgenommen.]²⁰

It is true that the next week's performance did not go well, but the anonymous author could explain away the poor attendance by noting that another charming spectacle – Prof. Jungius's balloon ride – had siphoned off part of that afternoon's crowd.²¹ In any event, the commentator, like Phantastus, takes the Aristotelian view of stagecraft as a distraction from the main business of a dramatic work. Whereas Aristotle, at least according to some passages in the *Poetics*, locates the essence of drama in its text (reading Sophocles is, if anything, a more immediate experience of the play than seeing it with the distraction of spectacle),²² the critic in the *Berlinische musikalische Zeitung* locates the essence of *Così fan tutte* in its music:

¹⁹ "Musikalischer Briefwechsel," *BmZ* 1, no. 77 (1805): 305.

²⁰ Anonymous, "Vermischte Nachrichten, Berlin, den 17ten Sept.," *BmZ* 1, no. 76 (1805): 301.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 301.

²² "The Spectacle, though an attraction, is the least artistic of all the parts, and has least to do with the art of poetry. The tragic effect is quite possible without a public performance and actors; and besides, the getting-up of the Spectacle is

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Mädchentreue – Treitschke’s title for the opera – is no mere show piece. The tale is never less than interesting, because Mozart’s beautiful music stands alone in its full glory. Neither eye nor reason is drawn away by trivialities, which so many other operas make into main points. The music alone occupies us, entertains us, and indeed so agreeably that we gladly dispense with those main points or trivialities – or whatever you want to call them! The opera is not an opera, but rather an outstanding concert piece. Indeed, a judiciously chosen orchestra afforded a pleasure not to be found on just any day in the concert hall.

[*Mädchentreue* – so hat Herr Treitschke die Oper bennant – ist kein Spektakelstück, das Sujet nichts weniger als interessant, so steht denn die schöne Mozartsche Musik allein im vollen Glanze da, weder Auge noch Verstand werden von Nebensachen, die so oft Hauptsachen sind, abgezogen, nur die Musik beschäftigt, unterhält uns, und zwar so angenehm, daß wir einmal gerne jener, – Haupt– oder Nebensachen, gleichviel! – entbehren. Die Oper ist keine Oper, aber ein vortreffliches Concert. Ein sehr vortheilhaft gewählter Künstlerverein gewährte einen Genuß, den man nicht alle Tage im Concertsaale findet.]²³

This critic asks us in effect to listen to the opera with our eyes closed.

So, even where the piece found acceptance in the nineteenth century, it generally came at the denial of *Così fan tutte* as a work of art, as an opera, or both. E. T. A. Hoffmann’s praise of the genuinely operatic character of the text and the delicious irony of the music is rare almost to the point of singularity.²⁴ A decade earlier, in 1804, an anonymous critic in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* had come

more a matter for the costumier than the poet.” Aristotle, *Poetics*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. and trans. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 1450b17–20.

²³ “Vermischte Nachrichten,” *BmZ* 1/76 (1805): 301–2.

²⁴ “Ludwig: So kann z.B. in der Musik der Ausdruck der ergötzlichsten Ironie liegen, wie er in Mozarts herrlicher Oper *Così fan tutte* vorwaltet.” E. T. A. Hoffmann, *Die Serapions-Brüder*, vol. IV of *Sämtliche Werke in sechs Bänden*, ed. Wulf Segebrecht and Hartmut Steinecke (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2001), 112. This essay, which goes under the title “Der Dichter und der Komponist,” originally appeared in *AmZ* 49–50 (8 and 15 December 1813): cols. 793–806, 809–17.