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

Edmund J. Goehring

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| THREE MODES OF PERCEPTION IN MOZART

This is the first full-length, scholarly study of what is widely regarded as Mozart's most enigmatic opera and Lorenzo Da Ponte's most erudite text. Against the long-standing judgment that the opera uses a misguided confidence in reason to traduce feeling, Goehring's study shows how *Così* affirms comedy's regenerative powers and its capacity to grant access to modes of sympathy and understanding that are otherwise inaccessible. In making this argument, the book surveys a rich literary, operatic, and intellectual territory. It offers a new perspective on the relationships between text and tone in the opera, on the tension between comedy and philosophy and its representation in stage works, and on the pastoral mode, which the opera uses in especially subtle ways. Throughout, Goehring's argument is sustained by close readings of primary sources, many of them little known, and is richly illustrated with musical examples.

EDMUND J. GOEHRING is Assistant Professor of Liberal Studies at the University of Notre Dame. He has contributed essays to a number of volumes and has published in several journals, including *The Cambridge Opera Journal*. He is also a founding member of the Mozart Society of America.

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*Edmund J. Goehring*  
University of Notre Dame



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*To my parents*

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## PREFACE

Encounters with *Così fan tutte* usually leave the listener with basic questions. What is Don Alfonso up to when he sings “Vorrei dir?” Why does he participate in “Soave sia il vento?” Fiordiligi falls in love with Ferrando in the second act (or is it with his alter ego, Sempronio?); does Ferrando fall in love with her? How can the singer of the funereal “Smanie implacabili” be the same one who later insists, with elation, that love is a little serpent? (Peter Sellars, in dropping Dorabella’s second-act aria, implies that the two Dorabellas cannot be the same.) And is the reconciliation at the end of the opera more scribbled on paper than inscribed onto the hearts of the *dramatis personae*?

It would be easy enough to cut the Gordian knot by declaring the work incoherent or sinister. Both verdicts have settled deeply into thinking about the opera over its reception history. In theory, they make two incompatible claims: the former faults *Così fan tutte* for being a pastiche rather than a proper work of art; the latter cedes a purpose to the opera but identifies in it a cynical outlook born of myopia. In practice, these two long-lived objections usually come as a pair. The opera is said to fail as a coherent work of art because, finally, it promotes an untenable view of human nature. Try as it might to usurp the authority of feeling, the cold rationalism ascribed to the opera fails to account for the genuine passion that arises from its indelicate test of fidelity. This line of reasoning concludes that some region of the opera’s music, events, or words eludes the grip of Mozart, Da Ponte, Don Alfonso, or some combination of the three.

The present study, in contrast, argues that the opera has a coherent design and a generous vision. This reinterpretation does not aim to beat back a knavish view only to fall before a foolish one. Rather, through identifying the work’s generic conventions and examining its musical and literary ancestry, this study finds in Mozart’s test of fidelity a more

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complex reading of human nature than the indictments of cynicism or vacuity can encompass. The opera does not brandish a hubristic confidence in reason. On the contrary, the chief didactic ambition of the school for lovers is to impugn an untutored certitude about human potential and the transparency and autonomy of the self. In making deft, often poignant, observations about the mind's uneasy grip on the elusive heart, the opera shows an agency, a purpose, in its ambiguity.

The interpretive challenge here is to convey the complexity of the work without muffling it in a deadening univocal reading. Describing *Così fan tutte* through different modes of perception provides one way of maintaining this critical decorum. This approach offers a series of perspectives from which to inspect the opera, as if one were looking at a statue by strolling around it, observing it from different angles, or taking a series of snapshots of it. The resulting images are not unrelated, since they all refer to the same object, and together they give a more comprehensive view of the work. Individually, these modes shape the material of the opera in intricate ways. The chapter on the philosopher in comic opera, for example, shows that Don Alfonso cannot be forced into the role of comic dupe, a move frequently made in the critical literature. The opera also gives a subtle handling to the pastoral mode. In drawing some of its language and situations from this mode, *Così fan tutte* shows two faces to beauty: one that reflects a striving for the transcendent and the ideal, but also a contrary one, equally potent, that exposes an erotic, unstable side to this yearning. Finally, viewing the opera against the contemporaneous backdrop of sentimental comedy reveals that *Così fan tutte* does not ridicule passion *per se*, but only bad thinking about it, whereby the capacity to feel becomes the sole criterion of human virtue and identity. Collectively, of the three modes applied here – the philosophical, the pastoral, and comic – the last holds the greatest sway in the opera. The measure of comedy does not necessarily plumb all of the opera's mysteries, but it can explain why the opera does not always answer some of the questions it poses.

The main analytical approach of this study is to read *Così fan tutte* as an opera buffa. Such a method might seem self-evident, but much of the critical literature often strikes out on a different course, as if the

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opera's ideas were somehow detachable from their manner of representation. This is not necessarily a deficiency. A work of the eclecticism and allure of a late Mozart opera attains its own autonomy from disciplinary boundaries, and works of this caliber can fruitfully be examined from many perspectives. Still, studies that have ignored *Così fan tutte* as an opera – how it communicates through sound, word, action, and image – often court trouble by using a predefined cultural phenomenon to explain the work. It does not matter what abstraction the work is said to vindicate or traduce (materialism, sentimentalism, rationalism, and the Enlightenment make up the most frequent offerings); the main problem is that such approaches can reduce the opera to a product of culture rather than recognize it as something that itself produces culture. This inquiry, in contrast, grants *Così fan tutte* the independence to reshape its sources of inspiration, mostly by giving a central analytical place to genre. As conceived here, the study of genre, rather than imposing a rigid set of rules upon a text, provides a point at which musical analysis, reception history, and source studies all converge. Genre so understood can both excavate the sources of *Così fan tutte* and then show how the work itself deploys, adapts, or subverts them. To put the matter another way: viewing *Così fan tutte* as an opera buffa can grant access both to the work's particularity and its intelligibility.

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#### A NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

I have provided the original texts for all poetic and dramatic works and also for more obscure sources.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

- AmZ*      *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*  
*BmZ*      *Berlinische musikalische Zeitung*  
 Brown     Brown, Bruce Alan. *W. A. Mozart, "Così fan tutte."*  
              Cambridge Opera Handbooks. Cambridge, UK and New  
              York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.  
*LMF*      Anderson, Emily, ed. and trans. *The Letters of Mozart and*  
              *His Family*. 3rd edn. New York: Macmillan, 1985.  
*MBA*      Bauer, Wilhelm, and Otto Erich Deutsch. *Mozart: Briefe*  
              *und Aufzeichnungen*. 7 vols. Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1962–75.  
*NGO*      *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*. Ed. Stanley Sadie. 4  
              vols. London: Macmillan, 1992.  
 Sulzer     Sulzer, Johann Georg. *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen*  
              *Künste*. 2nd edn. 5 vols. Leipzig, 1792. Reprint, Hildesheim:  
              Georg Olms Verlag, 1970.