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# Women in the Mozart-Da Ponte Trilogy

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in Music.

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Under the mentorship of Dr. Allen Henderson

## Abstract

Opera is a commentary on the social, political, and cultural atmosphere in which it is composed and performed. This research is focused on the historical and modern representations and implications of the women in the Mozart-Da Ponte trilogy: *Le nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan tutte*.

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### *Le nozze di Figaro*

*Le nozze di Figaro* by W.A. Mozart was the first of three collaborations with Lorenzo Da Ponte that later became known as the Mozart-Da Ponte trilogy. This opera marks a critical point in Mozart's career and in the history of opera itself. The *opera buffa* based on Pierre Beaumarchais's *La folle journée, ou le Mariage de Figaro*, is a cornerstone of the repertoire and consistently appears on opera stages around the world. There are many factors that go into making this an audience favorite around the world, but the characters that Mozart and Da Ponte created are the key, especially the women. Mozart and Da Ponte created prominent female characters, such as Susanna and the Countess, that are still to this day seen as essential to the development of women within opera. In order to understand the importance of these women, one must look at the historical context in which the opera was written and performed and how that impacts performance practices today.

The play that *Le nozze di Figaro* was based on was premiered in 1784, the opera premiered two years after in 1786. Beaumarchais's prior play, *The Barber of Seville*, told the story of the Count, Rosina (the Countess), Figaro, and Bartolo three years prior to the timeline of *Le nozze di Figaro*. This play was also turned into an opera by Giovanni Paisiello and Gioachino Rossini. *The Barber of Seville* and *The Marriage of Figaro* (*Le nozze di Figaro*) were premiered nine years apart because of censorship and rewrites (Brown-Montesano, 2007). These modifications were crucial to the development of the characters in Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*, especially the women.

The time period that the play and opera were written in is extremely important to the why the character portrayals are so intriguing. The opera and play were written in the

18<sup>th</sup> century, otherwise known as the Age of Enlightenment. Major upheaval was occurring during this time in both the political and social realms of society. Both gender and class norms were being challenged. According to Kristin Elaine Dauphinais (2004) the time period was not necessarily “defined solely by the events, but rather by a philosophical movement” (p.8). There were many influential philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant who defined the movement in his work “What is Enlightenment?” in the following statement:

Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one’s own understanding without another’s guidance. This nonage is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one’s own mind without another’s guidance. Sapere aude! (Dare to know!) “Have courage to use your own understanding,” is therefore the motto of the Enlightenment.

The Age of Enlightenment was highly focused on an emphasis on the rational mind over faith or superstition (Dauphinais, 2004). This philosophy touched all aspects of society, especially gender differences. There was a lot of debate within 18<sup>th</sup> century society surrounding the issues of gender, most of which was based around women’s place in society based off of what was considered natural or not (Dauphinais, 2004). Since the natural role of childbirth falls upon a woman, society over time has put the responsibilities of virtue, caretaking, and religion on women as well (Dauphinais, 2004).

This burden of being the embodiment of virtue put a lot of tension on the new sense of sexual enlightenment that also came with this new era (Dauphinais, 2004). The idea of honor and virtue are closely connected and a woman's honor during this time was directly tied to a man's (Dauphinais, 2004). Dauphinais (2004) describes this connection between honor and virtue in the following: "for women, the rules of social conduct demanded an overt appearance of piety and sexual restraint in order to maintain their own honor and that of their families" (p.16-17).

This idea of sexual purity being tied to honor can be seen in Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* in several characters. For example, in Act I when the Count suspects the Countess of having an affair with Cherubino, her godson, he reprimands her for disgracing him and his honor. This is an extremely ironic situation because the Count is openly pursuing multiple women throughout the opera, specifically focusing on Susanna, the Countess's maid and friend; however, it goes to further prove how gender specific the idea of honor and sexual fidelity was during the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

This treatment of the Countess in respect to her husband's actions is one of the many reasons that the character is so important to discuss. The Countess is a very interesting character for many reasons, but one of the driving factors is how her marriage to the Count influences her and her decisions.

Beaumarchais introduces the character of the Countess in his first play before she is married to the Count, she is known by her maiden name, Rosina, at this point. The Rosina that Beaumarchais creates is a ward of Bartolo and of noble descent, although it is lower station than the Count. There is debate about different versions of Rosina that were presented in different interpretations after censoring. A more bourgeois version of Rosina

“represents a femininity that is at once lofty and grounded, feisty and hesitant, sensual and demure” (Brown-Montesano, 2007, p. 160). Rosina was a very witty character who also used her power of deception in order to escape the advances of Bartolo by marrying the Count. This quick-witted female character escaping the unwanted advances of an older upper-class man can also be seen in *Le nozze di Figaro* in Susanna as she wards off the Count’s advances.

However, the Countess that the audience sees in *Le nozze di Figaro* has lost much of her younger spunk (Howard, 2016). Mozart and Da Ponte’s Countess is struggling with both the internal and external repercussions of her husband’s philandering.

Beaumarchais discusses that the Countess is struggling with two conflicting sentiments:

Abandoned by a husband she has loved too well, when is [the Comtesse] first presented for our consideration? At the critical moment when her benevolence for a lovable child, her godson, could become a dangerous preference, if she allows the resentment that encourages it to gain too much authority over her. It is to emphasize better her love of duty that the author includes a moment when she must contend with a nascent fondness that battles against it (p. 164).

Beaumarchais valued the Countess’s struggling to be good as much as her “righteous suffering” (Brown-Montesano, 2007, p. 165). The Countess must struggle against the temptation to give in to Cherubino’s advances and give up on her adulterating

husband. Brown-Montesano (2007) discussed this righteous struggle emphasizing the idea of “an ordinary woman whose personal struggle is heroic” in the following passage:

The sorrow of losing a husband is not what touches us here: such a personal grief is far from being a virtue. What pleases us here in the Comtesse is her candid struggle against an incipient fondness that she condemns and a legitimate resentment. The efforts she makes therefore to recover her unfaithful husband place her in two painful sacrifices, of her affection and her anger, in the most favorable light. One had no need to think twice before applauding her triumph; she is a model of virtue, the exemplar of her own sex, and the love of ours (p.164-165).

The Countess presented in *Le nozze di Figaro* is defined completely by her husband. Brown-Montesano (2007) discusses how the Countess’s internal conflict is now centered around the theme “her husband’s love as absolutely requisite to her happiness and her very life” (p. 169). The audience is first introduced to the Countess in her aria “Porgi amor,” in which the Countess laments that the Count has lost his love for her, saying that if he will not love her to let her die. Mary Hunter argues “that ‘Porgi amor’ presents the sort of performance-within-a-performance favored by sentimental heroines in late-eighteenth-century opera buffa” (Brown-Montesano, 2007, p. 170). Brown-Montesano (2007) further elaborates on this idea in the following passage:

In the context of Viennese opera buffa, this sort of performance- a moment of self-absorbed, song-like beauty, used to introduce a character- is overwhelmingly a female moment. Men do sing arias as they walk on stage, but

these are not laments or pastorale. Men do plead for the audience's sympathy in touching cantabile pieces, but these are always preceded by engagement in the action. The act of making one's first stage appearance alone singing fully fledged solo music, and engaging the audience's sympathies by doing so, was, by convention, a female act, and in the context of this repertoire, the Countess is making a peculiarly female claim on the audience's attention.

Mozart and Da-Ponte used this tactic in order to persuade the audience into empathizing with the Countess. They also used this aria to establish the Countess as the moral center of the opera (Brown-Montesano,2007). This is commonly seen in 18<sup>th</sup> century literature, which ties in with the previously mentioned Age of Enlightenment views on women as the center of virtue in society.

Another extremely defining relationship for the Countess is her relationship with Susanna. The relationship between Susanna and the Countess is a crucial turning point for women in opera. Their friendship defies the norm of women being pitted against each other because of jealousy and they defy the standard social class divide. Wye Jamison Allanbrook (2000) describes this pivotal relationship in the following statement:

Susann and the Countess are the characters at the opera's center; they step out from behind the masks of comic convention, and in doing so enable some of the other characters, touched by the humanity of the two women, to undergo a similar metamorphosis. The opera concerns the two women's friendship, one based on mutual trust and affection, which has begun before the opera opens. The warmth radiating from this friendship generates in us a real concern for the



various couples in their couplings and uncouplings, and raises the plot above the level of mere farce. It moves us to be genuinely happy for Marcellina's transformation, in act IV, from bluestocking harridan to beaming mother, when ordinarily we would have felt mere relief at the fortuitous resolution of a serious complication. And it makes us momentarily disappointed in Figaro, late in the day, when he fails to put his trust in the two women's grace. The opera is about this grace (p.156).

The relationship between these two women is exemplified during their duet. As previously mentioned, Susanna's character is very similar to a young Rosina, the Countess, which is a crucial part to why they have developed such a close relationship despite social boundaries such as their class difference. The women are so similar that they can be heard as almost one voice in their duet. The letter duet marks a major turning point in the opera. In this duet the Countess and Susanna work together to scheme against the Count. Brown-Montesano (2007) states that "in all of Mozart's major operas, it is the only duet in which two women are both united in purpose *and* represented in a favorable light" (p. 193).

While the two women may be similar, they aren't generically interchangeable. Brown-Montesano (2007) states that "Susanna's fluent spontaneity is unmatched in the opera and has been a key to her charm for more than two centuries now" (p.193). Sharon (1997) describes her as "one of the most idealized feminine characters of all in Mozart's operas." Susanna is a fierce female character who is at the center of almost everything in the opera. From her very first entrance Mozart sets her apart as a strong woman who can

manipulate her surroundings. In the opening duet of the opera Figaro sings about the room while Susanna sings about her wedding day, by the end of the duet Susanna has convinced Figaro to stop singing his march like tune and join her gavotte dance rhythm (Brown-Montesano,2007).

Susanna uses her wit, intellect, and understanding of human nature throughout the opera in order to control the situations around her (Howard, 2016). For example, in the Act I trio between Susanna, the Count, and Basilio, Susanna is in a very tricky situation and uses her gender as a way to manipulate the men in the situation so that she is in control. In this trio the Count has just come out of the hiding place that Susanna had previously put him in to confront Basilio, this is also while Cherubino is hidden in a chair. Susanna knows that if the Count were to find out that Cherubino had been hiding in the chair while he made unwanted advancements on her that it would not end well for either of them, so she fakes fainting in order to draw the Count and Basilio's attention away from the previous matter and focus on her. As the two men run to help her, they change into different musical approach, "a hushed, seductive duet," very different from the Count's previous firm, slow rhythms, and Basilio's "pleading, descending motives" (Howard, 2016). Howard (2016) praises Susanna for using her wits to transform "a delicate, potentially scary situation into one in which she has the upper hand."

Susanna is placed at the center of everything within this opera and one of the driving forces for the action that takes place. Charles Ford (2012) comments on this in context with the Enlightenment: "Whilst the Enlightenment denied women the privilege of reason, it is they and not the men who drive the sexual politics of *Figaro*" (p. 135). Great examples of this control can be seen in Susanna's interactions with the Count. For

example, in “Crudel, perché finora parmi languir così” the Count may feel as if he is in control of the situation and Susanna is just a compliant pawn, but she has complete control of the sensuous details (Ford, 2012). This can be also seen in her aria “Deh vieni, non tardar.” In this aria Susanna is seducing the Count by singing a serenade. This was a very interesting choice by Mozart, to set the aria as a serenade as serenades are usually sung by men. Sharon (1997) sees this as “Susanna behaving like a man, trying to forge her own path in life.”

Another interesting female character in *Le nozze di Figaro* is Marcellina. The Marcellina presented in Beaumarchais’s play and the one created by Mozart and Da Ponte are quite different. This is due to Da Ponte taking out one of Marcellina’s main speeches, which talked about the “injustices and abuses that men inflict on women of every rank” (Brown-Montesano, 2007, p. 197). In general Mozart and Da Ponte changed Marcellina’s character “to fit more neatly into the mold of the amusing *vecchia donna*, steering clear of the more mixed tone of Beaumarchais’s characterization” (Brown-Montesano, 2007, p. 197).

When Marcellina is first introduced in *Le nozze di Figaro* she is portrayed as an old spinster whose only goal is to marry Figaro, however, the audience later discovers that Marcellina is Figaro’s mother. Once Marcellina discovers that she is Figaro’s mother her entire demeanor shifts completely; she goes from bitter spinster to loving mother.

There is much debate about Marcellina’s transformation, many view it to be sappy or just a way to remove an obstacle from Figaro and Susanna’s marriage. There are two basic problems with these complaints, motivation and balance/relevance. However, these problems can be resolved by including the speech that Marcellina gives in the

original play during the trial scene. It tells her backstory, “how the embittered spinster was formed, and likewise, how the restoration of her stolen/lost motherhood changes her” (Brown-Montesano, 2007, p. 201). As for balance/relevance, Marcellina’s speech ties in with one of the primary themes of the opera: “every woman in the play suffers at the hands of a man, whether by jealous abuse or sexual tyranny” (Brown-Montesano, 2007, p. 201).

Also, her transformation into the role of mother figure brings her full circle to the “protective mother” figure for the other women at the end of the opera. In her aria she says “Ah, when personal interest does not set us against one another we women are all moved to defend our poor, oppressed sex, against these proud, these terrible, and yet rather block headed men.” Sadly, this aria is often left out of performances, but Brown-Montesano (2007) sees this as “a mistake, both in terms of dramatic structure and of character development” (p. 207). This aria both acts a “stirring response to Figaro’s knee-jerk vow to ‘avenge all husbands,’ it is strongly tied to the essential theme of female friendship as comfort and protection against (male) injustice” (Brown-Montesano, 2007, p. 207).

Just as Susanna is like a younger version of the Countess so is Barbarina similar to a young version of Marcellina. Barbarina is the gardner’s daughter and another one of the Count’s trivial affairs, however, her true love interest is Cherubino. Just as a young Marcellina fell into the trap of the attention of a upper-class man, Bartolo, which resulted in a baby and an unfulfilled promise of marriage, Barbarina is falling for Cherubino, despite the obvious class difference.

It is extremely important to note Barbarina's youth in this opera. While she may be young, she is also wise for her age and her interaction with the Count and Cherubino "have taught her to use her few valued assets- sexual appeal and a willingness to serve- to gain advantages" (Brown-Montesano, 2007, p. 210). An example of this can be seen when the Count tries to send Cherubino away, she uses her moments with the Count as a blackmail of sorts saying that all the times he kissed her he promised that if she were to love him he would give her anything she wanted, and what she wants now is to marry Cherubino. While this witty response is admirable, she is still naïve to the fact that Cherubino will never be able to actually marry her because of their class differences.

While each of these women are extremely important, what makes *Le nozze di Figaro* stand out from previous operas of this time was the feeling of sisterhood that Mozart and Da Ponte developed. This can be seen most clearly between the Countess and Susanna, but Marcellina is also involved in this sisterhood. Dauphinais (2004) describes the sisterhood created by Mozart and Da Ponte in the following statement:

The women created by Mozart and Da Ponte suffer injustices of infidelity by twenty-first century standards, but in their own era they were taught to accept social mores and they found a common bond through them. They were taught to bear guilt, abandonment, and even abuse. They learned to maintain a reputation and overtly give power while covertly maintaining control. They are women defined by weakness but vindicated by their strength (p.40-41).

These unique women and their relationships are cause for discussion among professionals in the field all around the world. A lot of the discussions are based around

how to stage these women in modern settings. Do you stay true to a historical adaptation? Do you take a more modern approach? Should the women be more centered around the men? Or should they be able to stand on their own? Allanbrook (2000) talks about this in the following statement:

Two questions that might arise in staging an opera where the heroine gets what she wants, but where all she wants is her man, are whether a production (or a singer) can comment on the conditions that make marriage the only possible happy end, and whether the singer can project a set of desires or values distinct from, or larger than, those of the character, thus throwing the situation of the character into relief (49).

Bringing these women into the 21<sup>st</sup> century is tricky, especially now with as many feminist movements as there are. It's a very interesting situation figuring out how to "stage the 'then' of Mozart's world versus its 'now'" (Allanbrook, 2000, p.49). It is difficult for directors and performers alike to figure out how much they want to stick to the historical representations and productions and how much to bring the opera into the modern age and use it to discuss modern cultural issues.

In conclusion, Mozart and Da Ponte took Beaumarchais's play and transformed it into a classic opera that will last through the ages. The female characters that they produce are crucial stepping stones in opera history. The relationships and sisterhood that these women form is even more of a pivotal moment for the rest of opera. It is essential, when looking at this opera and the women within, to understand the historical and social context in which they were written. Women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were viewed much

differently than women are viewed now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Bringing these paramount female characters to life in the modern world brings about a new challenge of historical representation and commentary on current social situations.

### *Don Giovanni*

*Don Giovanni* by W.A. Mozart is a fascinating work, which provides Mozart's take on the story of Don Juan. This is a classic tale, however, there is a discussion about how the different characters are portrayed within each persons' interpretation. Many scholars have investigated the gender stereotypes that are present within this opera and how they were interpreted in the 18th century versus how they are interpreted today. In order to look deeper into the meaning of this piece one has to look at the performance practices, the historical context of the 18th century, and the social situations of the 18th century and present day.

The story of Don Juan is one that was very popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> century; a famous lover that made more than a thousand sexual conquests. While there are many different versions of this story, Mozart and Da Ponte pulled inspiration from the different versions and then put their own take on the classic tale. This collaboration resulted in the debut of the opera *Don Giovanni* in Prague in 1787. According to letters written by Mozart, the opera took a bit longer to get started and performance ready than originally anticipated. However, that did not deter the audience from receiving it with enthusiasm (Mersmann, 1986). The audience in Prague enjoyed the production so much that they requested that it be performed a fourth time, which was unusual for the normal debut run of three

showings (Woodfield, 2012). The cities' interest of the Don Juan story played an important role in why *Don Giovanni* did so well.

*Don Giovanni* was successful for a number of reasons, one of which is that Mozart and Da Ponte was able to walk a fine line between opera buffa and opera seria throughout the show. This balance between serious and comedic lies noticeably in the characters themselves. Each character has their own unique personality, but ones that are extremely interesting in this opera are Donna Elvira, Donna Anna, and Zerlina and their interactions with Don Giovanni. How each of these characters interacts with the others plays a vital role within the show, but so do three other elements: impersonation, flattering lines that build up to a promise of marriage, and an understanding of how to manipulate a scene and then escape at the perfect moment (Sisman, 2006).

All three of those aspects tie into how Don Giovanni manipulates each of the women within this opera. For example, the first time that the audience is introduced to Donna Elvira and Don Giovanni together he manipulates the situation around so that he diverts Donna Elvira's attention onto Leporello while Don Giovanni sneaks away without getting caught. Another example of this with Donna Elvira is seen in Act 2 when Leporello disguised as Don Giovanni persuades Donna Elvira to forgive him and come back to him. Although this may be one of the most beautiful pieces of music within in the show, it is also tied to a repulsive situation because of the deception, so the best way for Mozart to pull that off was to portray it was in a more comic light (Steptoe, 1998).

This can be seen also in Don Giovanni's seduction of Zerlina. Don Giovanni happens to stumble upon Zerlina's wedding party and decides that he wants to add her to his infamous list, so he pulls her aside and entices her with words of marriage and



improving her rank in life and saying that she is too good for the lowly station of a servant. This obviously intrigues Zerlina for during this time the best way of taking care of oneself a woman had was who she married. It is assumed that if Donna Elvira had not interrupted their discussion that Zerlina would have potentially given in to Don Giovanni's desires.

Each of these interactions not only say something about Don Giovanni, but they also speak to the women themselves. There are many different interpretations about how the women in this opera should be perceived or portrayed. Although many critics may try to lump the women in this opera together as simple stereotypes, it is important to understand each character for the individual that they are and how that influences the message of the work.

The opening scene of the opera begins with a comic scene by Leporello as he complains about his situation with his master and how he wishes he was of higher standing. Despite this light opening the opera quickly changes into a more intense, violent scene as Don Giovanni comes running on stage being chased by a distraught, angry Donna Anna shouting that she will not let him get away with what he's done to her. This introduces the audience to Donna Anna right after she was raped, off stage; a rather shocking first entrance. However, the opera doesn't lighten up any time soon as Donna Anna runs off to get her father, the Commendatore, who dies fighting for his daughter's honor.

The audience is introduced to Donna Anna in a rather emotionally tense state due to the fact that Don Giovanni just tried to rape her, and her father was murdered. One would think that this would entice the audience to view her with a little bit of pity and

understanding. However, there are many critics who describe her as just an angry upper-class woman (Curtis, 2000). A lot of this reasoning comes from the fact that throughout most of the show Donna Anna is consistently calling for her betrothed, Don Ottavio, to avenge her father's death by getting revenge on Don Giovanni.

However, this steady call for revenge should not be seen as just the act of some angry woman who was scorned; it should be seen as the act of a brave woman who fought her attacker and now will avenge herself and her father. This view of seeing Donna Anna as a strong female figure in this opera is quite important, because it sets her apart so vastly from the stereotypical casting of an opera heroine being feminine and soft (Curtis, 2000). This is a unique factor of Mozart and Da Ponte's Donna Anna which distinguishes her from her potential predecessors in the many versions of *Don Juan* (Locke, 1995). But sadly, this opinion is often swept under the rug, because the audience tends to admire the protagonist despite his cruel actions (Brown, 1997).

Another view that some critics and directors take is that Donna Anna actually is attracted to Don Giovanni and therefore is overexaggerating what happened in order to save her image (Brown-Montesano, 2007). Many critics come to this conclusion because they think that Donna Anna lacks warmth because she delays her engagement to Don Ottavio; however, this is not due to a lack of affection. Rather, it is due the fact that she needs time to grieve her father and heal from the emotional and physical trauma she's gone through (Brown, 1997). In fact, Mozart and Da Ponte do show a more vulnerable side to her when she talks about her father and reassures Don Ottavio of her love in the second act (Brown-Montesano, 2007).

While Donna Anna may be a figure of female strength in the opera, Donna Elvira is one of protection and caution. What brings about the downfall of Donna Elvira is many viewers eyes is her connection with Don Giovanni. Donna Elvira has been abused and abandoned by Don Giovanni, and yet she still naively hopes that she can change his ways and save him (Brown-Montesano, 2007). This causes Donna Elvira to be classified as the poor lost soul or mad woman (Brown-Montesano, 2007). Much of this judgment comes from her first aria in which she swears to get revenge upon the man who abandoned her. This causes the audience to look at her as lesser than she is and not value her emotions as much throughout the rest of the show (Brown, 1997).

However, Donna Elvira is not just simply some scorned woman who is out to wreak havoc on the man who hurt her; she is a character who shows more soul and humanity than any of the other characters in the show. Donna Elvira does not intervene when Don Giovanni seduces Zerlina because she is jealous, no, she intervenes because she wants to protect the innocent Zerlina from experiencing the same fate that she did at the hands of Don Giovanni (Brown, 1997). This brings in an idea of sisterhood that crosses class distinctions from a lowly peasant girl, Zerlina, to an upper-class woman, Donna Anna. Donna Elvira is driven to make public confessions of what has happened to her in order to try and prevent it from happening to others. This is a bold move for a woman during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, because during this time if a woman was not a virgin then she had practically no marital prospects, and that was a woman's only power in that era (Curtis, 2000).

Donna Elvira also embodies the classical opera heroine because of her tender heart, idealistic spirit, and youthful naivety (Brown, 1997). Her aria in act two, "Mi

tradì,” shows the inner conflict that she has between her love for Don Giovanni and her anger at what he has done to her. Donna Elvira is a wonderful example of how *Don Giovanni* walks a fine line between *opera buffa* and *opera seria*. If one was to take seriously all of the horrible things that Don Giovanni has done to her it would make the show even darker than it already is; that’s why so many people decide to look at Donna Elvira in a bit more of a comic light (Brown-Montesano, 2007). Her connection to Don Giovanni may be what causes her demise in the end, but her ability to pity him and still wish to save him from the fate he is destined for is what makes her so raw and human. This allows her to connect with the audience members on a level that no male character would be able to do (Locke, 1995).

Then there is Zerlina, who seems to be an audience favorite because of her simplicity. There are some critics who look at her as just a plain peasant girl who is the latest target of Don Giovanni, but she is vital to the direction of the opera when she screams and refuses his advances at the end of Act 1. This makes her unique for her class, because she is the only woman in the opera that refuses Don Giovanni’s sexual advances even though she had welcomed them earlier (Brown-Montesano, 2007).

There is discussion about Zerlina’s character and how innocent she can be when she clearly uses her body in sensual manners throughout the entire show. This leads into the idea that when Zerlina tells Don Giovanni “no” that she can’t really mean it, which has extremely negative connotations, especially in the present day (Brown-Montesano, 2007). Another opinion that is similar to that is that Zerlina facilitating back and forth between Masetto and Don Giovanni is just a natural instinct (Brown-Montesano, 2007).

A lot of these discussions are based around the idea of performance practices and what responsibilities the directors and performers have in regard to the work. When it comes to performing *Don Giovanni* in present day situations it takes on a two-fold meaning: the historic context and the present-day context. Directors and performers must be careful about how they present this opera because the ideals and cultural norms during the 18<sup>th</sup> century are vastly different than what is considered acceptable today. For example, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century women were viewed as property of men rather than their own individuals. There was also a cultural tradition, which is somewhat present today, of glorifying rapists as heroes and viewing the women as victims. This cultural norm creates an idolized version of *Don Giovanni* in which Don Giovanni is not seen as a violent rapist who deserves to be punished, but rather as a brave man who dared to go against the norm (Curtis, 2000).

This idea of idolizing this type of behavior does not sit well in today's society when things such as date rape are more prevalent. It also does not help that campus life on many colleges still provide an environment that encourages students to think that violence is a normal part of sexual behavior (Curtis, 2000). It is important to really investigate the sexual violence in works such as *Don Giovanni* and figure out how to best present it, so that it doesn't reinforce values that encourage or permit sexual violence (Curtis, 2000).

It is also important in modern productions to make sure that each woman is their own unique character that isn't classified by gender stereotypes. Each of these women are representative: Donna Anna of stranger rape, Donna Elvira of manipulation, seduction, deceit, and abandonment, and Zerlina of an initial attempt to charm that leads to the

attempt of violent rape. How each of these women and their situations are portrayed broadcast a message to the audience of how to view each of these types of situations.

In conclusion, *Don Giovanni* is a daring opera that portrays many sensitive subjects, such as rape. But what makes this opera so intriguing is how the female characters are portrayed in the context of such a touchy subject. Despite how some people may view each character it is ultimately up to the director and performers and how they decide to present their take on Mozart and Da Ponte's work. Opera has always served a significant role of influencing culture. This still stands true today, even when performing historic operas. Therefore, it is of great importance that these performances be representative of both the past and how the world has changed to view things today.

### **Così fan tutte**

*Così fan tutte* is the third and final opera that W.A. Mozart and Lorenzo Da Ponte collaborated on. This opera is a significant turning point for many reasons, one of which is the gender representation that is present in this work. Mozart and Da Ponte originally titled the work *Così fan tutte, ossia La scuola degli amanti*, which translates to "thus do they all, or the school for lover." This opera tells the stories of two pairs of lovers who are being schooled in love, but this "school of love" is not equally beneficial for all involved. There are some interesting representations of women's roles in this opera, which is unsurprising as the literal translation of the title is "thus they all do," which is implying women. In order to have a well-rounded understanding of this piece and its significance, one has to look at the historical context in which the opera was composed

and premiered, social situations during the eighteenth century, and the origins of the opera itself.

The origins of *Così fan tutte* are unique not only for the story itself, but the situation in which the opera was created. *Così fan tutte* is very different compared to the two other Da Ponte- Mozart collaborations, *Le Nozze di Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*. One of these differences is the fact that this opera was not commissioned by anyone at the Viennese Court (Stephoe, 1988). It was once believed that Emperor Joseph II paid for Mozart to write the opera, but recent research shows that there is no evidence of this (Stephoe, 1988). However, Mozart was in contact with the Emperor during this time and tried to get some commissioned works, as he had fallen on extremely hard financial times (Mersmann, 1986).

The time surrounding the premier of *Così fan tutte* was one of struggle for both Mozart and Da Ponte, and the opera was their attempt to try and please the Viennese court. Mozart was struggling not only with financial issues, but also with personal health problems. However, this was not all that was troubling Mozart during this time as the public had begun to lose interest in his keyboard works, and they had not responded as well to some of his other recent works which caused him to suffer a loss in his creative confidence. Mozart needed something to pull him out of this downturn in his career, and according to Steptoe (1988) “*Così fan tutte* was therefore located at a pivotal moment and must have been seized upon by the composer both as an artistic challenge and a golden opportunity” (p. 209).

As for Da Ponte, he was seeking to re-establish his position in Vienna, which had been degraded after his affair with Adriana Ferrarese was exposed (Steptoe, 1988). According to Steptoe (1988) Da Ponte chose the tantalizing subject matter to try and engage the interest of the Court. The subject matter of the opera is unique in the fact that most of Da Ponte's other works were derived from earlier stage works, but the story behind *Così fan tutte* is a bit more original. However, Da Ponte did pull inspiration from two traditional stories: the wager theme and the myth of Cephalus and Procris (Steptoe, 1988).

These two themes play a key role in the discussion of gender issues within this opera, as they both cast women in an unflattering light. The wager theme can be seen in Ferrando and Guglielmo's wager with Don Alfonso that their fiancés will remain true to them no matter what. Although this may sound like an endearing statement at first, in the full context of the opera it really is not. The men are not betting on their fiancés' faithfulness because they believe that they are true in their love or their chastity, but rather because they believe that they are attractive enough that their fiancés would have no motivation to stray. According to Steptoe (1988) "the motive for the wager stems not from an honest defense of virtue, but from masculine complacency" (p. 128).

Then there is the myth of Cephalus and Procris, which is the story of a husband disguising himself and then testing his wife's virtue by trying to woo her while in disguise. This story is seen in many examples of European literature, including Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, which is where Da Ponte pulls inspiration for the characters'



names. This idea of disguised trickery is obviously present in *Così fan tutte* as this is exactly what the soldiers do to try and trick their fiancés.

Despite the efforts of Da Ponte and Mozart to appeal to the Viennese court, *Così fan tutte* was not received as well as its predecessors, *Le Nozze di Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*. The opera was only performed five more times after its premiere, and then Emperor Joseph II died, and performances of the opera almost came to a complete stop. These were not, however, the only reasons that the opera was not well received.

As mentioned earlier, the opera was premiered during a time of momentous change in the world, especially Europe. The social structures that had been place for many years were beginning to shift as the lower class began to undermine the courtly lifestyle (Stephoe, 1988). There was also a shift in gender roles during this time, such as the fact that women were more idealized during the nineteenth century than in the eighteenth century (Till, 1998). These shifting views of women and the suggestion that women were unreliable and not to be trusted cause it to not sit well with the audience. Steptoe (1988) worded it very well in saying that “it is ironic that the opera emerged at the moment when the world for which it was designed for began to crumble” (p.139).

The treatment of the women in *Così fan tutte* is an ongoing discussion that’s still very timely today. Each of the women represent their own unique situations and interpretations of what is expected of them. Da Ponte and Mozart collaborated to create an interesting view point of women that is represented in Fiordiligi, Dorabella, and Despina. The main gender issue that comes from *Così fan tutte* is influenced by philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau who, according to Brown-Montesano (2007),

“reduces the nature of women to a single characteristic: capriciousness, in both mood and love” (p. 257). This idea that all women are the same is prevalent throughout the entire opera and reflects the opera’s title which translates as “thus do all women,” implying that all women are fickle and faithless (Till, 1998).

This idea of uniformity in women can be seen in how the two sisters, Fiordiligi and Dorabella, are portrayed at the beginning of the opera. However, as they begin to develop their own stories, the audience can begin to see how the two sisters, although they may be similar, are two different individuals who react and feel differently. These differences can be seen from each sister’s first aria: Dorabella’s hysterical outburst in “Smanie implacabili” and Fiordiligi’s stern and formal aria “Come scoglio” (Till, 1998). Till (1998) compares these different emotional portrayals to the sisters in Jane Austin’s *Sense and Sensibility*.

Dorabella is commonly portrayed as the easier going, more emotionally driven female in the opera. Brown-Montesano (2007) discusses that Dorabella “demonstrates the eighteenth-century view of the feminine body as a battlefield of conflicting ‘natural’ forces— rampant sexual desire and modest timidity that compete for control of the feminine body” (p. 238). Dorabella is seen as the weaker of the sisters because she gives into these “natural” forces rather quickly after Despina convinces her that women should take advantage of these opportunities to have fun, and after Guglielmo successfully woos her. This succumbing to temptation is seen as proof of a commonly accepted idea during the eighteenth-century: that a woman is too enslaved to her body to resist attention if it comes in an attractive form (Brown-Montesano, 2007).

Fiordiligi, on the other hand, is not as quick to succumb to these new feelings. This battle between her pleasure and her principle is what causes some of the most emotionally draining moments of the opera. Fiordiligi begins the opera firm in her love for her fiancé, as seen in the aria “Come scoglio,” in which she compares her love to a steadfast rock. But as the opera progresses, she begins to weaken in her reform, ultimately leading to her submission to Ferrando in “Fra gli amplessi.” Her struggle with these new feelings can be seen in her aria “Per pietà,” in which she begs for forgiveness from her fiancé. Brown (1995) discusses these “conflicting claims of passion, reason and honor on the human heart” as common concerns in eighteenth-century opera (p.86).

Waldoff (2006) discusses the idea of Fiordiligi as the sentimental heroine of the opera, stating: “she is a woman of feeling whose affectionate sensibility and natural sympathy for the suffering of others make her vulnerable to men, and whose ultimate submission to male desire places her virtue ‘in distress’” (p. 224). Fiordiligi’s inner struggle “reflects the culture of sensibility’s contradictory views on the role of the women in society” (Waldoff, 2006, p. 224). Brown-Montesano (2007) compares Fiordiligi’s submission to Ferrando with that of Zerlina to Don Giovanni in *Don Giovanni*, saying that where Dorabella and Zerlina were “bribed into surrender, Fiordiligi is emotionally blackmailed” (p. 251). Fiordiligi’s submission is the dramatic height of the show as she battled with her feelings of right and wrong for so long that when she finally gives up and succumbs to Ferrando, it is extremely important. Brown-Montesano (2007) says that “Fiordiligi’s conquest is not exactly rape, but it not wholly consensual either” (p.253).

Then there is Despina who portrays not only a different class level, but a completely different view of women. Brown-Montesano (2007) discusses Despina in the following statement:

Often, stage and musical directors reduce her to a shallow conniver whose glib comments on fidelity promote the opera's "Così fan tutte" premise. However, Despina is more complicated than this, as are her attitudes about love (p. 260).

Da Ponte was very clever in his creation of Despina's name. It is believed to come from "Fiordispina" which means thorn flower. This accurately represents Despina's character as she is very sharp tongued and sharp witted, like a thorn. She is also missing her "flower" as she implies in her first aria that she has been deflowered. This gives the audience a bit more understanding as to why she has such flippant views about men and love (Brown-Montesano, 2007).

Despina is somewhat of a double-edged sword because she falls into the stereotypes of some of the maidservant buffa roles, but then she also goes against the norm in some cases. For example, she falls into the norm of being witty and opportunistic, but she goes against the norm of ending up with a guy at the end. There are the conflicting views that she is cruel for participating in Don Alfonso's plan to trick the sisters, but in actuality she does not know the entirety of the plan and she genuinely believes that she is helping the sisters in the end. She also represents the double standard for men and women that this opera has. In the finale, Don Alfonso is able to brush off his misdoings as beneficial to all involved and they forgive him, whereas Despina is shamed

and shunned for her part in the plan, even though she was an unknowing pawn in Don Alfonso's game the entire time (Brown-Montesano, 2007).

In conclusion, *Così fan tutte* represents many things, including a major turning point in history. The opera came at a time in which the world was changing and the context of the opera itself shows this changing world. Da Ponte and Mozart used *Così fan tutte* as an opportunity to try and pick themselves up from low points in their lives, both professional and personal. However, due to this changing world it wasn't received as well as they were hoping. Their representation of women in the opera is just one of the reasons that it did not do as well in the changing society. This representation is still a touchy subject in present day performances, and directors have to be careful how they portray this story so that it is not offensive.

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