

Program 6

***Così fan tutte*, K. 588**

**Music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)
Libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte (1749-1838)**

Composed in 1789-1790.

Premiered on January 26, 1790 in Vienna.

In June 1789, soon after he returned to Vienna from a trip to Dresden, Leipzig and Berlin to drum up some business among the local nobles, including King Friedrich Wilhelm II of Prussia, Mozart learned that Emperor Joseph II wanted to hear again *The Marriage of Figaro*, first given in Vienna two years before with only limited success, and had instructed that a revival of the opera take place at the end of the summer. The date of the production was set for August 29th; Mozart helped with the preparations and composed a few replacement pieces. It was a success, and was seen at ten additional performances before the end of the year, and another fifteen in 1790. The Emperor allowed that more of the same might not be a bad thing, and he commissioned Mozart to write another *opera buffa* with Lorenzo da Ponte, the librettist of both *Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*. The story has it that da Ponte was called into the imperial chambers and told that the plot of the new opera should deal with a delicious wife-swapping scandal that had recently amused the Viennese. The poet mentions nothing of the incident in his memoirs, however, and it may be that he in fact adapted his libretto from that for *La grotto di Trofonio* by Giovanni Battista Casti, for which Antonio Salieri had supplied the music in 1785. Mozart was at work on the music of the new opera by September, and he completed the score by the end of the year. He invited his friends Joseph Haydn and Michael Puchberg (a fellow Mason from whom Mozart regularly begged money at that time) to an informal run-through of the piece at his apartment on New Year's Eve; it is thought that they accepted. Rehearsals began soon thereafter at the Burgtheater (one report had Mozart and Haydn walking arm-in-arm to the first orchestral rehearsal on January 21st), and *Così fan tutte* was successfully premiered on January 26th. After just five performances, however, the Emperor died and the theaters were closed for a period of mourning. The opera played four more times in June and July, and then was not heard again in Vienna during Mozart's lifetime.

In his classic study of Mozart's operas, Edward Dent gave this plot summary of *Così fan tutte* ("*Thus Do They All!*"): "Ferrando and Guglielmo are two young Neapolitan officers engaged to be married to two young ladies, Fiordiligi and her sister Dorabella. A cynical old bachelor, Don Alfonso by name, persuades the young men to put their mistresses' constancy to the test. They pretend to be called away from Naples on duty, but return that same afternoon disguised as Albanian noblemen. Don Alfonso, with the help of Despina, the ladies' maid, persuades the two sisters to receive them. The strang-

ers make violent love to them, and after some hesitation each succeeds in winning the heart of his friend's betrothed. The affair proceeds with such rapidity that a notary is called in that very evening to draw up a marriage contract for their signatures. Suddenly Don Alfonso announces the return of the soldiers; the Albanians vanish, and the terrified ladies are obliged to confess everything to their original lovers. Needless to say, everything ends happily."

Needless to say, a more prim sensibility might have found this lubricious tale of questionable taste. Beethoven declared it to be simply immoral (he said the same thing about *Don Giovanni*); Franz Niemetschek, one of Mozart's earliest biographers, wondered in 1808 how "that great mind could lower itself to waste its heavenly melodies on so feeble a concoction of text"; Richard Wagner vilified the libretto. What even such astute commentators failed to take into account, however, was the transformative power of Mozart's music. The title of the opera was taken from a line in *The Marriage of Figaro* in which the cynical Don Basilio observes, "*Così fan tutte le belle, non c'è alcuna novità*" — "*That's what all the pretty girls do, there's nothing new in that*" — when the Count tries to seduce his wife's maid, Susanna, and the libidinous teenager Cherubino attempts a dalliance with the gardener's daughter, Barbarina. *Figaro* culminates, however, not in a sexual farrago but in a scene of tender, complete forgiveness, when the Count's advances towards Susanna are exposed and the Countess reconfirms her love for her husband. *Così fan tutte*, for all its deception and sardonic wit, reaches a similar end through the humanizing quality of Mozart's sublime music. "I believe," wrote the noted scholar of 18th-century music H.C. Robbins Landon, "that the particular poignancy of *Così fan tutte* lies in the fact that the necessity for forgiveness is present not only at the end of the opera but throughout the scenes of deception, when the audience knows — although the ladies do not yet — that their actions require more forgiveness than does any other action, perhaps, in any other Mozart opera. The emotions generated are therefore doubly powerful and the cynicism of the libretto is in part assuaged."

Così was virtually forgotten during the 19th century, receiving little recognition until the German conductor Hermann Levi revived it in Munich in 1896; it was not heard in the United States until the Met staged it in 1922. Such neglect was absolutely unjustified — from a purely musical viewpoint, this is the greatest opera Mozart ever wrote. Edward Dent, in his study of Mozart's operas, concluded that it "is the best of all da Ponte's librettos and the most exquisite work of art among Mozart's operas." The eminent English musicologist Sir Donald Tovey called it "a miracle of irresponsible beauty unlike anything else in Mozart." And Mozart authority Alfred Einstein said, "This opera is iridescent, like a glorious soap-bubble, with the colors of buffoonery, parody, and both genuine and simulated emotions. To this, moreover, is added the color of pure beauty."

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