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Così fan tutte and Mozart's Penultimate Year

By Kate Pitt

Così fan tutte, Mozart's third and final collaboration with librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte, premiered in Vienna on January 26, 1790, one day before the composer's thirty-fourth birthday. Though Mozart could not have known it, *Così* was to be the first of his final three operas. The composer died after a short illness less than two years later, leaving *Così* as a crowning achievement of his penultimate year of life.

Despite the successful premiere of *Don Giovanni* in 1787, Mozart's fortunes and health declined rapidly in the years that followed. His lavish spending failed to keep pace with his earnings, and high taxes imposed by the Emperor Joseph II to pay for a war with Turkey drained the coffers of Mozart's patrons.

While society was looking forward to a future full of promise, Mozart's own prospects were increasingly bleak. He began borrowing money from friends to pay his debts, his moods were often dark, and his papers from this period are full of half-finished projects. However, working on *Così* seems to have pulled him out of his melancholy somewhat.

The composer Antonio Salieri had previously attempted to write an opera on the same subject and failed. Salieri's effort, titled *La scola degli amanti*, may have been based on an earlier version of Da Ponte's libretto. While there are no direct literary sources for *Così*, it is inspired by elements of such works as *Orlando furioso*, an epic Renaissance poem, and Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the seminal 14th-century collection of short stories. Salieri's uncharacteristic abandonment of the project may have been partly motivated by a personal rift between Da Ponte and himself, as well as by a lack of artistic decisiveness in the years 1788-89. Perhaps the prospect of succeeding where his rival had failed was a motivating factor for Mozart in *Così*'s rapid completion.

Despite Mozart's renewed professional focus, his health continued to deteriorate during this period, as did that of his wife Constanze. In 1789, while Mozart was working on *Così*, she traveled to the spa city of Baden for treatment. This trip distressed Mozart greatly, not only because of its enormous expense but also because of Constanze's rumored improprieties.

The spa at Baden allowed mixed-sex bathing and while there is no definitive evidence of indiscretion, Mozart felt compelled to write his wife and remind her that, "a woman must always make herself respected, or else people will begin to talk about her." While writing *Così*, an opera that generalizes about the flirtatious behavior of all women (the title can be roughly translated as "Thus do all women"), Mozart may have had one particular woman in mind.

Mozart, like the characters he created in *Così*, loved life. He was witty, bawdy, flirtatious and impulsive, chasing pleasure and facing both the rewards and the penalties of his behavior. He, like his characters, found it possible to love more than one person and, like Dorabella and Fiordiligi, he may have agonized over temptation before succumbing to it. Scholars may continue to argue about the extent to which incidents in *Così* directly parallel Mozart's life, but the mingled joy and pain of love it describes is surely universal.

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