

# NEGATING OPERA THROUGH OPERA: *COSÌ FAN TUTTE* AND THE REVERSE OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

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## ABSTRACT

*Among the operas on which Mozart and Da Ponte collaborated, *Così fan tutte* is a special case. In some ways, the libretto is more conventional than those provided for *Le nozze di Figaro* or *Don Giovanni*, and Mozart was not the first composer asked to set it. To understand the work best, it is necessary to read the text closely. This article concentrates on a few, highly significant characteristics – in particular, the locations in which the opera takes place. Such details provide the foundations for surprising insights into the opera. First, the libretto deals with central issues in eighteenth-century aesthetics, but the mechanist philosophy that informs the plot (reminiscent of that theorized by Julien Offray de La Mettrie in *L’Homme machine*) defuses these issues over the course of the action. Secondly, the music that turns the libretto into an opera resonates with specialist issues of eighteenth-century music aesthetics, often to turn them, once again, on their heads. In the last analysis, *Così fan tutte* is an opera in which both text and music question truth and reliability, and the consequences are serious for the opera, for music and for the very Enlightenment itself.*

## I

*Così fan tutte* is surrounded by difficulties. However, these difficulties do not, as one might think, derive from the opera’s negative reception. Indeed, in spite of a libretto that the critics, within a few years of Mozart’s death, began to regard as simply unsuccessful and frivolous, and in spite of the series of disfiguring adaptations to which the opera was subjected thereafter, *Così* has taken a much straighter course through the thickets of criticism and interpretation than either *Don Giovanni* or *Die Zauberflöte*, which were pulled this way and that by varying philosophical interpretations.<sup>1</sup> Rather, the opera’s difficulties lie in the fact that the premises behind Mozart’s music and even Da Ponte’s libretto have remained largely obscure. In many interpretations of the work, Da Ponte plays at best only a marginal role – as if he were involved in the affair only incidentally.<sup>2</sup> Such an assumption is especially problematic with respect to this opera. In the case of

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- 1 See Klaus Hortschansky, ‘Gegen Unwahrscheinlichkeit und Frivolität: Die Bearbeitungen im 19. Jahrhundert’, in *Così fan tutte: Beiträge zur Wirkungsgeschichte von Mozarts Oper*, ed. Susanne Vill (Bayreuth: Mühl, 1978), 54–64; reprinted in *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Così fan tutte. Texte, Materialien, Kommentare*, ed. Attila Csampai and Dietmar Holland (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1984), 205–224.
- 2 Recently there have been attempts to reverse this neglect of Da Ponte. See especially Eduardo Rescigno, *Da Ponte: poeta e libertino tra Mozart e il Nuovo Mondo*, with an Afterword by Giovanni Carli Ballola (Milan: Bompiani, 1989); Paolo Spedicato, *La sindrome di Sheherazade: intertestualità e verità in Lorenzo da Ponte* (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2000); Richard Bletschacher, *Mozart und Da Ponte: Chronik einer Begegnung* (Salzburg: Residenz, 2004); *Lorenzo Da Ponte: Aufbruch in die Neue Welt*, ed. Attila Csampai and Dietmar Holland (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2006); Herbert Lachmayer and Reinhard Eisendle, *Lorenzo Da Ponte: Opera and Enlightenment in Late 18th Century Vienna*



*Le nozze di Figaro*, as Da Ponte himself testified, Mozart suggested the topic for the opera. The composer's prominent role is further suggested by a statement in the Preface: the opera was written 'because of the new kind of drama' ('wegen der neuen Art des Schauspiels').<sup>3</sup> In *Don Giovanni*, we can assume a close collaboration between composer and librettist. But in the case of *Così fan tutte*, Da Ponte had already completed the libretto before Mozart began his work. Although we know little about the genesis of the text,<sup>4</sup> the testimony of Costanze leaves us in no doubt that Mozart was only the second composer to be asked to set the libretto. This is not surprising, however, if we remember that the court Kapellmeister had priority of place in the Josephinian opera hierarchy. Indeed, it was this very Kapellmeister, Antonio Salieri, who first took on the project, possibly even some time before 1789.<sup>5</sup> Why he gave up the task after a relatively short time is not known: the few surviving fragments contain clues neither to his motivations nor to the dates of his involvement.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, for Mozart the commission would fulfil his long-held desire to return to the Viennese stage. Despite the considerable differences between Salieri's fragments and Mozart's finished score, we can assume that Mozart may have had some say in the shape of the final text but that his influence on the choice of topic or the essential framework of the plot had been minimal.<sup>7</sup>

*Così fan tutte* is difficult in another aspect as well, and in a way that may be tied to the obscurity of its origins. At first glance, the work appears to step back from the various complexities and audacities that characterize Da Ponte's other joint opera projects, for example the multiplicity of plotlines in *Le nozze di Figaro* and the genre-bending complexity of *Don Giovanni*, or the fantastic elements of *Una cosa rara* of 1786 (set to music by Vicente Martín y Soler) and the harsh criticism of the nobility in *Bertoldo* of 1787 (music by Francesco Piccchio) – *Bertoldo* must have delighted the libertine Vienna of the Josephinian era. Next to such works, the libretto of *Così fan tutte* seems to return to the Goldonian comedy that had always fascinated Da Ponte. It certainly bears all the Goldonian hallmarks: it is a play in two acts with a symmetrical constellation of six characters – two couples, a chambermaid and, to set the plot in motion, a wire-puller. It also adheres strictly to Aristotelian unities of place, time and action: the play is set in the historic present of a single mild summer's day in the late 1780s; the action takes place in Naples and (with the exception of the first scene) at the palazzo of two wealthy sisters from Ferrara.

The perfect maintenance of a specific model of comedy accords with a linear plot development based on a problem of mistaken identities. Around 1800 this plot offended notions of faithfulness and honour, and the

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(Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2005); Jürgen von Stackelberg, *Figaro, Don Giovanni und Così fan tutte: Da Pontes Libretti und deren Vorlagen. Ein Beitrag zur Literaturgeschichte von Mozarts Opern* (Vienna: Praesens, 2008); and Volker Kapp, 'Wer war Lorenzo da Ponte?', in *Mozarts Lebenswelten: Eine Zürcher Ringvorlesung 2006*, ed. Laurenz Lütteken and Hans-Joachim Hinrichsen (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2008), 176–190.

3 [Lorenzo Da Ponte,] Preface to *Hochzeit des Figaro: Ein Schauspiel in Musik in 4. Aufzügen aus dem Französischen herausgezogen. Aufgeführt in dem k. k. Nationaltheater. Im Jahre 1786* (Vienna: Kurzböck, no date [1786]), [i].

4 On the chronology see Alan Tyson, 'Notes on the Composition of Mozart's *Così fan tutte*', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 37/2 (1984), 356–401, and Ian Woodfield, *Mozart's 'Così fan tutte': A Compositional History* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2008).

5 See John A. Rice, *Salieri and Viennese Opera* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 474–479. The volume contains an edition of the fragments.

6 See the materials preserved in A-Wn Sm. 4531. There are two gatherings, originally separate but later combined, each consisting of two sheets. They contain two numbers in Salieri's hand. The first is the trio 'È la fede delle femine', which is fully elaborated but written with different kinds of ink and showing a considerable number of corrections. The introductory recitative appears after the trio in these sketches and is utterly different from Mozart's version. The second number is the first trio 'La mia Dorabella', of which only the vocal lines have been sketched. No definite conclusions can be drawn from examining the watermarks. The watermark of the first layer corresponds with Tyson 62, that is, a paper-type that Mozart himself used in Vienna around 1782 in such works as the Symphony No. 35 in D major, K385, 'Haffner', and the Rondo for Piano and Orchestra in A major, K388.

7 The textual divergences between the Salieri fragments and the text as it was set by Mozart are so significant that we have to assume that Da Ponte and Mozart made substantial changes to the entire libretto.



play was considered indecent.<sup>8</sup> But the moral doubts that eventually grew up around the opera do not imply complexity of plot, and the plot certainly does not deviate from contemporary traditions of comedy. At the most, it did not fit the image of the Apollonian Mozart that began to emerge shortly after the composer's death. What was it that fascinated Da Ponte and Mozart about this project – one that so obviously rejected the complexity of *Don Giovanni* and *Le nozze di Figaro*? Why did they turn to an opera buffa of relatively traditional cast for their next collaboration – indeed an opera buffa that turned away both from the complex web of characters in *Figaro* and from the metaphysical elements of *Don Giovanni*? In the discussion that follows, I offer a number of observations that are intended not so much to provide answers to these questions, but to attempt to stress new or neglected aspects of a seemingly familiar work. At the same time, this heuristic experiment aims at nothing more – nor less – than a deep hermeneutic understanding of the opera.<sup>9</sup>

## II

As was common in the eighteenth century, the stage directions for *Così fan tutte* are sparse. Yet they indicate a quite specific setting and context, and the constellation of places that together determine them is significant. The first reference is found already in the list of characters: 'La scena si finge in Napoli'. It is a convention of opera buffa that the setting should be a geographically and temporally specific world, and in this case it is the city of Naples in the late 1780s. Da Ponte originally wanted to set the action within the Habsburg Empire, at the seaport town of Trieste, but Mozart, while he was still working on the score and before the libretto was printed, requested specifically that the plot be shifted south and thus beyond the realm of Habsburg influence.<sup>10</sup> Unlike Trieste, however, Naples was regarded throughout the eighteenth century as a place with a distinctly double aspect: reports of scenic beauty stood in contrast to a reality of extreme peril. In an entry in Zedler's *Universal-Lexikon* of 1740, Naples is described as a 'peninsula' ('Halb-Insel') that is blessed by 'clean air and incomparably fertile soil' ('eine klare Luft, und einen unvergleichlichen fruchtbaren Boden').<sup>11</sup> But it is precisely these conditions that are threatened by the perilous reality of Mount Vesuvius. Heavenly surroundings are juxtaposed with permanent terror, as Zedler points out: 'Further, the region is subject to a great many earthquakes' ('Sodann ist das Land sehr vielen Erdbeben unterworfen').<sup>12</sup> Zedler quotes what he says is a popular Italian proverb: 'Il regno Neapolitano è un delicato paradiso, ma habitato da gli diavoli' ('the kingdom of Naples is a delicate paradise, but inhabited by devils'). This leads him to cite a second proverb, in which the deceptiveness of the town is directly attributed to its inhabitants: 'Napoli odorifera e gentile, ma le gente cattiva' ('Naples is fragrant and amiable, but its inhabitants are bad people').<sup>13</sup>

The link between external beauty and terrible danger was a constant theme in the eighteenth century and one that made its way into debates on aesthetics. Although this link was an ancient topos, it took on new

8 See, for example, Werner Wunderlich, *Mozarts 'Così fan tutte': Wahlverwandschaft und Liebesspiele* (Bern: Haupt, 1996), 56–70.

9 Another example of such hermeneutic study is Jessica Waldoff, *Recognition in Mozart's Operas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Of secondary importance are overtly politicizing interpretations by scholars such as Constanze Natošević, *'Così fan tutte': Mozart, die Liebe und die Revolution von 1789* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2003).

10 See Faye Ferguson and Wolfgang Rehm, Preface to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Così fan tutte ossia La scuola degli amanti*, Neue Mozart-Ausgabe, work group 5, volume 18/1 (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1991), xxii. See also Michael Zywiets, "'Meeresstille' und 'Glückliche Fahrt': Das Terzettino 'Soave sia il vento' aus Wolfgang Amadeus Mozarts 'Così fan tutte'", *Acta Mozartiana* 47/3–4 (2000), 72–84.

11 'Neapel, Neapolis', in *Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexicon* (Halle: Johann Heinrich Zedler, 1732–1751), volume 23 (1740), columns 1416–1431, especially column 1416. All translations from German and Italian are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

12 'Neapel', *Universal-Lexicon*, volume 23, columns 1426–1427.

13 'Neapel', *Universal-Lexicon*, volume 23, column 1416.



relevance when the Lisbon earthquake of 1 November 1755 shook the pervasive optimism of the Enlightenment and became a paradigm of the terrible sublimity of nature. This natural catastrophe could be explained and experienced aesthetically, as a dreadful spectacle that could give pleasure.<sup>14</sup> In a similar way, Mount Vesuvius became a token of uncontrollable terror that at the same time could elicit aesthetic delight in the sublime qualities of nature. For instance, the natural scientist Michele Torcia, whose sensitivity to emotions and the subjective side of experience is also manifested in his homage to Metastasio, saw the severe eruption of Mount Vesuvius that shook Naples in 1779 as a magnificent natural spectacle – a ‘spettacolo’. Not only did it provoke terror, but it also displayed ‘richness’ (‘ricchezza’) as well as ‘admirable variety’ (‘varietà ammirabile’).<sup>15</sup> Another, anonymous author, in *Phisikalische Briefe über den Vesuv* (1785), describes ‘the city of Naples, consisting of mountain and valley, with its harbour in which the multiplied ship masts construct a new city in the sea’ (‘die aus Berg und Thal bestehende Stadt Neapel mit ihrem Hafen, wo die vervielfältigten Masten eine neue Stadt im Meere bauen’).<sup>16</sup> In the centre of this panorama stands Vesuvius, with its ‘earthquakes that are produced at times of volcanic eruption’ (‘Erdbeben, die bei einem vulkanischen Ausbruch vor sich gehen’).<sup>17</sup> They appear ‘like a terrible very black thunderstorm’ (‘wie ein schreckliches sehr schwarzes Gewitter’).<sup>18</sup> The eruption of 8 August 1779, therefore, caused him to pose the question ‘whether perhaps the sad story of Pompeii might not repeat itself above Naples’ (‘ob sich nicht die traurige Geschichte von Pompejana über Neapel erneuern würde’).<sup>19</sup> In short, Naples appeared to him as a town ‘close to heaven and to hell’ (‘an Himmel und Hölle nahe’).<sup>20</sup> And in his novel *Ardinghella* (1787), Wilhelm Heinse seizes upon the image once again:

Der Vesuv ist ... in seiner einfachsten, allergrößten und furchtbarsten Gestalt zu sehen, so stolz und erhaben, daß die höchsten Alpen davor verschwinden. Er sieht aus wie ein Wesen, das sich selbst gemacht hat, alles andre ist wie Kot dagegen, und der Dampf aus seinem offenen Rachen ist im eigentlichsten Verstand entsetzlich schön. An keinem andern Orte möcht ich seine Feuerwürfe betrachten; es muß ein wahres Bild rasender Hölle sein. Unten am Fuß sind die Menschen mit ihren Wohnungen wie unschuldige Lämmer, die er sich zur Beute herschleppte; und die alte Mutter, die See, zieht vergebens zärtlich rauschend heran, sie zu retten.<sup>21</sup>

Vesuvius can be seen in its simplest, greatest and most terrible form, so proud and sublime that even the highest Alps fade before it. It looks like a creature that has created itself – all else is mud by comparison – and the steam from its open jaws is in the truest sense horribly beautiful. There is no other place from which I want to see its spewing fire; it must be a true image of furious hell. Down at its foot, the people with their homes are like innocent lambs that it has dragged to itself as prey, and, rustling tenderly, the old mother – the sea – approaches to save them, but in vain.

Mount Vesuvius – a symbol of the terrible and the sublime close to heaven and hell – is visible from the garden at the seaside (the ‘giardino sulla spiaggia del mare’) of *Così fan tutte* (Act 1 Scene 2). And eventually, at the height of confusion in the centre of Act 2, it becomes a metaphor of sensibility: ‘I seem to have a

14 See *Die Erschütterung der vollkommenen Welt: Die Wirkung des Erdbebens von Lissabon im Spiegel europäischer Zeitgenossen*, ed. Wolfgang Breidert (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994).

15 [Michele Torcia,] *Relazione dell'ultima eruzione del Vesuvio accaduta nel mese di Agosto de questo anno 1779. Relation de la dernière éruption du Vésuve arrivée au mois d'Août de cette année 1779* (Naples: Raimondi, no date [1779]), 24. Michel Torcia, *Elogio di Metastasio, poeta cesareo* (Naples: Raimondi), 1771.

16 Anonymous, *Phisikalische Briefe über den Vesuv und die Gegend von Neapel* (Leipzig: Schönfeld, 1785), 18.

17 Anonymous, *Phisikalische Briefe*, [45].

18 Anonymous, *Phisikalische Briefe*, 97.

19 Anonymous, *Phisikalische Briefe*, 93.

20 Anonymous, *Phisikalische Briefe*, 141.

21 Wilhelm Heinse, *Ardinghella und die glückseligen Inseln: Eine italiänische Geschichte aus dem sechszehnten Jahrhundert*, fifth edition (Leipzig: Insel, 1961), volume 2, 332.



Vesuvius in my chest' ('Nel petto un Vesuvio | D'averne mi par'), the unfaithful Dorabella says in her duet with Ferrando. A fundamental eighteenth-century aesthetic paradigm thereby finds physical embodiment, and indeed in a manner that brings all aspects of Dorabella's surroundings to the fore. The sea, after all, is a central part of the very paradigm of pleasure experienced at the sight of terrible objects. For the 'shipwreck with onlooker', as Hans Blumenberg has termed a topos that reaches as far back as Lucretius, was transfigured in the eighteenth century into the scene of an aesthetically heightened experience of primal terror.<sup>22</sup> According to Lucretius, the spectator who observes from the beach the destruction of a boat at sea is horrified by the dreadful event, but at the same time is filled with happiness at having escaped this terrible fate.<sup>23</sup> In *Così fan tutte*, the beach with the imposing Vesuvius above it thus, on the one hand, shows the Lucretian topos of shipwreck-with-onlooker crystallized as stage scenery. But, on the other, just as the two soldiers take the boat out to sea at the beginning of their experiment and therefore abandon their role as spectators, Dorabella also proclaims Vesuvius to be in her heart, and, in a way, she enfolds the terrible and sublime natural scenery into her body. The contours of the topos blur: the spectators within the scene (Guglielmo and Ferrando, Dorabella and Fiordiligi) become shipwrecked, while the spectators in the theatre audience turn into the observers of a shipwreck, but without experiencing the bliss that is supposed to ensue. There is a similar allusion to the topos when a chorus of sailors sing at the festivities in Act 2. Thus everyone present in the theatre – the actors as well as the audience – is simultaneously shipwrecked and a spectator of the shipwreck.

Lorenzo Da Ponte addressed the issue in a slightly different way in a poem published in 1788, that is, shortly before the opera was written. He joined man and sea in a complex, life-enclosing context in which actors and spectators enter a unique symbiosis:

a l'uom il Mondo  
 Serve, e l'uom serve al Mondo, in quella forma  
 Che dal mar vien la fonte, e poi nel Mare  
 Tributaria ritorna;<sup>24</sup>

the world serves man | and man serves the world, in the same way | as the fountain comes from the  
 sea, and then to the sea | returns as a tributary.

Once again, the sea provides a metaphor for the limits of human endeavour, and the observer (here, man) is embedded within a larger event.

If we turn from the general setting to the characters themselves, we find similar clues hidden in seemingly insignificant details. It is only Despina about whom we know little; she is the purest representative of a particular character type, that of the libertine servant. All the other characters take part in the web of places and roles that informs *Così* as a whole. With the exception of Despina and perhaps Don Alfonso, all the protagonists are members of the nobility, namely, members of a social class that is exempt from actively having to earn its living. As such, they are particularly suited to taking the position of observers and to remaining impassive in the first instance. However, Ferrando and Guglielmo, the two officers, are also men of action – that is, of military action – and in the late eighteenth century such action primarily implied

22 Hans Blumenberg, *Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer: Paradigma einer Daseinsmetapher* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979). Lucretius's metaphor circulated widely in eighteenth-century discussions of the sublime. The shipwreck (or even its possibility) observed from the secure position of the coast produces a double, mixed sensation: horror, because of the terrible accident, and joy, because of the distance of the spectator, who is in a secure position.

23 See also Carsten Zelle, 'Angenehmes Grauen': *Literaturhistorische Beiträge zur Ästhetik des Schrecklichen im achtzehnten Jahrhundert* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1987), 12–14.

24 Lorenzo Da Ponte, 'L'uomo non puo vivendo essere intieramente felice, ma solo desiderare di esserlo. Sciolti', in *Saggi poetici* (Vienna: Taubstummenanstalt, 1788), volume 2, 17–25, especially 20.



achievements with regard to strategy.<sup>25</sup> Here again, then, a topos – that of the tactical warrior – fuels a metaphor of what is happening on stage. The two ladies, on the other hand, are ‘dame ferraresi’ – they come from the North. This indication is not without meaning either. To see its sense, one can turn to a travelogue of 1693 by the English prelate and scholar Gilbert Burnet (1643–1715), whose book so captured the imagination of readers that it was widely read well into the eighteenth century and may perhaps have accompanied Leopold Mozart on his journeys, even to Naples. Burnet portrays a distinct rivalry between the kingdom of Naples and the city of Ferrara, a possession of the Papal States. Ferrara, in Burnet’s words, is ‘now utterly ruined’ (‘nunmehr gantz ruinirt’),<sup>26</sup> ‘desolate’ (‘wüste’) and ‘very poor’ (‘sehr arm’).<sup>27</sup> As an external sign of this condition, he mentions the polluted air, usually an indication of earthquakes: at Ferrara ‘the air has become so unhealthy that one would not be able to live there for long’ (‘die Luft dermaßen ungesund worden, daß man daselbst nicht lange leben könnte’).<sup>28</sup> Naples, on the other hand, is distinguished by affluence, beauty and – despite its hazardous location – the excellent air, which, as we have seen, Zedler also mentioned:

Hier giebt es den besten Wein in Europa, das beste Fleisch, und die besten Fische. Im Winter fühlet man wenig Kälte, und im Sommer streichet ein kühler Wind von der See über die Berge, und erfrischet das gantze Land.<sup>29</sup>

Here they have the best wine in Europe, the best meat and the best fish. In winter one rarely feels the cold, and in summer a cool breeze from the sea brushes over the mountains and refreshes the entire region.

The threat posed to these idyllic conditions can be seen by looking at Mount Vesuvius, which, to Burnet, is ‘a very well-known thing’ (‘eine sehr bekandte Sache’) because of the ‘earthquakes caused by this mountain’ (‘Beben der Erde, so dieser Berg verursacht’).<sup>30</sup>

Originally from Ferrara, then, the two ladies are strangers to Naples.<sup>31</sup> And, if the fictional world of *Così* resembled in any way the actual Italy, they obviously had good reason to leave their desolate home town to begin a new life close to the beauties of the sea. However, their new city of residence proves much more dangerous than Ferrara could ever be. Their impending catastrophic ‘shipwreck’ is foreshadowed when a boat docks at the beach and a soldiers’ choir accompanies the two officers out to sea (Act 1 Scene 5). The two women may have moved from Ferrara to Naples for good reasons, but those reasons now begin to show cracks.

Cracks can also be seen in the character of the ‘vecchio filosofo’ Don Alfonso, one for which there are but few models in traditions of comedy.<sup>32</sup> His age remains as unspecific in the opera as the reason why he maintains such close relations with two young officers. Moreover, his identity as a philosopher has thus far been little explored. The kingdom of Naples was reputed to be especially favourable to philosophy. Even

25 Compare, for example, Georg-Heinrich von Berenhorst, *Betrachtungen über die Kriegskunst*, second expanded and corrected edition (Leipzig: G. Fleischer der Jüngere, 1798–1799).

26 Gilbert Burnet, *Durch die Schweiz, Italien, auch einige Oerter Deutschlands und Frankreichs vor wenig Jahren gethane Reise, Vnd derselben Curieuse Beschreibung, Worinn die neuesten Im Geist- und weltlichen Staat entstandene Revolutionen enthalten* ([Leipzig:] Gleditsch, 1693), 681.

27 Burnet, *Reise*, 413.

28 Burnet, *Reise*, 415.

29 Burnet, *Reise*, 477.

30 Burnet, *Reise*, 501.

31 The choice of Ferrara pays homage to the soprano who originally sang the part of Fiordiligi, Adriana Ferraresi del Bene[o], but the significance of the city name goes beyond that of a knowing wink to the original public.

32 See Gerhard Splitt, *Mozarts Musiktheater als Ort der Aufklärung: Die Auseinandersetzung des Komponisten mit der Oper im josephinischen Wien* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 1998), 298–308, and *Opera Buffa in Mozart’s Vienna*, ed. James Webster and Mary Hunter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), especially the articles by Paolo Gallarati and Edmund J. Goehring.



Burnet mentions that in Naples one was interested ‘particularly in the new philosophy’.<sup>33</sup> He is undoubtedly referring to the English school of empiricism – John Locke’s major writings began to appear in 1689 and attracted almost instant attention in certain parts of Europe – and Alfonso’s experiment presupposes and is made possible by an empiricist approach to human thought and emotions. Giambattista Vico and Antonio Genovesi, among others, made Naples one of the most important centres of Locke reception, and, in the case of Genovesi, developed an empiricism with pragmatic social implications. Da Ponte demonstrated the qualities of the kind of fashionable philosopher that Alfonso was in *Bertoldo* (Vienna, 22 June 1787). At the beginning, the poet has the protagonist sit down on King Alboino’s throne. When the latter is shocked at this lack of respect – ‘I am a king’ (‘Ich bin ein König’) – Bertoldo retorts: ‘And I am a man; what difference is there?’ (‘Und ich bin ein Mensch; was ist denn für ein Unterschied?’).<sup>34</sup> After this exchange, Bertoldo is not punished but, rather, is made the king’s counsellor. Once he has assumed this role, he mimics the philosopher and throws out samples of wisdom that might as well come from Alfonso; for example: ‘Do not expect constancy from womenfolk, do not seek friends at court’ (‘Such nicht beim Weibsbild Treue, such nicht bei Hofe Freund’).<sup>35</sup>

No less important than the complex constellation of settings that define the characters and the general location are the specific places in Naples in which the play unfolds. The palazzo of the two ladies, a symbol both of noble independence and representation, is displayed in great detail in all its different facets: at first we are shown a garden, the place where nature is put on a leash for the delectation and recreation of the nobility. It also serves as a tangible contrast to the view of the untamed Mount Vesuvius. From here one moves inside the palazzo to a ‘camera gentile’, and, at the end of Act 1, one moves out again to a ‘giardinetto gentile’. In Act 2 this arrangement is inverted. The act begins in a ‘camera’, then moves outward to a ‘giardino alla riva del mare’ (which is probably the same as in Act 1) and then finds its way back to a ‘camera’. Only at the end of the opera, in the evening, do we enter what would have been the central space of any palace, the ‘sala richissima illuminata’. But whereas a richly illuminated hall would have been the traditional site of august courtly festivities, here it is a comic trial of fidelity that takes place. This location, however, the inner heart of any palazzo, corresponds in strange ways with the site of the opera’s beginning – the coffee house – the only place external to the enclosed space of the palace and its garden.

The coffee house – a central place of concern to students of the Enlightenment since Jürgen Habermas’s *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*<sup>36</sup> – abolished the hierarchy of social classes that reigned in the palace hall.<sup>37</sup> Its importance was recognized by dramatists: it served as a locale in Carlo Goldoni’s play *La bottega del caffè* (1750) and in one of the first dramas that Da Ponte wrote after *Così fan tutte*, *La caffettiera bizzarra* (music by Joseph Weigl, 1790). The typical coffee house was a place of open discourse, which was favoured by the supposed physiological effects of coffee. These in turn were responsible for the not insignificant dubious aspects of this institution: the consumption of alcohol, games of hazard and prostitution.<sup>38</sup> An anonymous essay on coffee houses written in 1789 puts particular emphasis on the low character: the first ‘coffee stalls were too much like the lowest taverns and frightened off good society’ (‘weil die ersten Caffeebuden zu sehr den niedrigsten Schenken glichen, und die gute Gesellschaft abschreckten’).<sup>39</sup> In the ‘coffee house of good

33 Burnet, *Reise*, 468.

34 [Lorenzo Da Ponte,] *Bertoldo ein lustiges Singspiel in zwey Aufzügen: Aufgeführt im k. k. Hoftheater* (Vienna, 1787), 4.

35 Da Ponte, *Bertoldo*, 7.

36 Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft. Mit einem Vorwort zur Neuauflage 1990*, third printing (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993).

37 On the coffee house see Ursula Heise, *Kaffee und Kaffeehaus: Eine Kulturgeschichte* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1987).

38 On the political context see Marina Schneede: “... für Deutschland ein Muster”: Hamburgs alte Kaffeehäuser’, in *Rainvilles Fest: Panorama, Promenade, Tafelfreuden. Ein französischer Lustgarten im dänischen Altona*, ed. Bärbel Hedinger (Hamburg: Altonaer Museum, 1994), 131–140, and John A. Rice, ‘Music in the Age of Coffee’, *Eighteenth-Century Music* 4/2 (2007), 301–305.

39 Anonymous, ‘Ursprung des Caffee’, in *Der Spion von Wien: Eine Wochenschrift* (Vienna: Taubstummenanstalt, 1789), 126–127.



taste,' by contrast, 'one enjoyed coffee, tea, hot chocolate, ice cream and liqueurs in a beautifully decorated and well-furnished assembly room' ('im Gegensatz zum Caffeehaus im guten Geschmack, wo man Caffee, Thee, Chokolade, Gefornes, Liqueurs, in einem schön verzierten, und gut eingerichteten Saale genoß').<sup>40</sup> The wager made at the beginning of *Così fan tutte* for the exorbitant sum of 100 sequins (Venetian ducats) is just one such typical product of the coffee house. It was a place where noble officers were able to consort without trouble with the likes of Alfonso, who in *Così* is obviously of somewhat doubtful background. This adventurous wager did not necessarily depend on the consumption of alcohol, as coffee was believed to have quite similar effects on man's bodily fluids. In a treatise on coffee describing the devastating effects of excessive consumption, Giovanni della Bona emphasizes the ability of this beverage to influence every bodily fluid ('tutti fluidi') of a human being: there is 'a strangely disordered movement, principally in the animal spirits and in the nerve fibres' ('un movimento stranamente sregolato, e principalmente nello spirito animale, e nelle fibrille nervose').<sup>41</sup>

### III

In short, such settings constitute a tight web of meaningful interrelationships: Naples, the sea and Mount Vesuvius, the palace with its layered localities, the coffee house as a place of gambling and wagers, the Ferrarese noblewomen, the Neapolitan naval officers, the old philosopher and the libertine chambermaid. In order to be at all comprehensible, the places, characters and their combinations require a certain plausibility or verisimilitude. They find their match in a complex web of motifs that pervades the opera and gives considerable depth to the overtly simple action.

The central theme of the drama is fidelity; its means of enactment is the trial. Although both theme and plot type originated in classical antiquity, they were omnipresent in Vienna in the 1780s in all their facets, and not just with respect to the faithlessness of women.<sup>42</sup> In the *Wöchentliche Wahrheiten für und über die Herren in Wien* of 1783, for example, we find the following argument:

Wer nährt in uns den unseligen Trieb zur *Koketterie*? – Wer verderbt unser Gefühl von Ehre und Tugend? – Wer legt unsrer Unschuld die gefährlichen Fallstricke? – Ich getraue mich zuversichtlich sagen zu können, daß dieses alles, und noch weit mehr das Werk der Männer sei. Diese Herren der Schöpfung (wie sie sich nennen) betrachten uns als lebendige Puppen, die zu ihrem Zeitvertreibe geschaffen sind, wenn sie einige Zeit mit einer Puppe gespielt haben, so werden sie ihrer überdrüssig, und suchen eine andre, an die der Reitz der Neuheit sie auf eben so kurze Zeit fesselt.<sup>43</sup>

Who nurses in us the wretched inclination towards coquetry? – Who spoils our sense of honour and virtue? – Who tries to capture our innocence with dangerous snares? – I dare say with confidence that all this and much more is the work of men. These masters of creation (as they call themselves) consider us to be living dolls, created for their pastime; when they have amused themselves with one doll for a while they tire of it and seek out another, in which the allurements of novelty will captivate them for an equally short time.

40 Anonymous, 'Ursprung des Caffee', 127.

41 Giovanni della Bona, *Dell'uso e dell'abuso del Caffè: dissertazione storico-fisico-medico. Con aggiunte, massime intorno la Cioccolata, ed il Rosoli*, second edition (Verona: Berno, 1760), 29. Lorenzo Da Ponte had access to this treatise in Vienna.

42 See Marina Cristina Leuzzi, 'Non fan tutte così: Mme du Châtelet e il suo discorso sulla felicità', in *Così fan tutte: 250° anniversario di Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Le donne creative nell'era dei lumi* (Rome: Colombo, 2006), 95–101, and *Die Frau, der Mann nicht traut: Così fan tutte. Treueprobe und Liebesverwirrung im (Musik-)Theater*, ed. Silvia Kronberger and Ulrich Müller (Anif: Mueller-Speiser, 2005).

43 *Wöchentliche Wahrheiten für und über die Herren in Wien. Bearbeitet von einer Gesellschaft belesener Frauenzimmer und herausgegeben von Emilie Grünthal* (Vienna and Prague: Schönfeld, 1783), issue 5, 79–80.





Similarly, the comedy *Das vermeinte Kammermädchen* (adapted from Marivaux's *La Fausse Suivante* by Christian Gottlob Stephanie, Vienna, 1783) depicts an equally villainous masculine world. One of the protagonists, the Baron, declares, for example: 'There is nothing more laudable in a man than to deceive a woman' ('Es ist nichts rühmlicheres für einen Mann als ein Frauenzimmer zu betrügen').<sup>44</sup> And he adds: 'But isn't it true, women are veritable fools about their virtue? What may they earn by it? Nothing in the world' ('Aber nicht wahr, die Weiber sind rechte Narren mit ihrer Tugend? Was gewinnen sie wohl damit? Nichts auf der Welt').<sup>45</sup>

This play about fidelity, its trial and its breach thus had many resonances in the Vienna of the 1780s. When seen in this context, the decision to set the plot in Naples gains in significance. As the author of the article on Naples in Zedler's *Universal-Lexikon* wrote:

[Die Einwohner sind] nemlich alle, insonderheit aber die Weibes-Personen, abergläubisch, und insgemein so karg und faul, daß sie durch Arbeit sich etwas zu erwerben suchen sollten. ... In den Städten aber wird viel Zeit mit Theatralischen Schau-Spielen verderbet. Die Damen sind nur allzu galant; und wo die Männer irgend in einem Lande Ursache haben, eifersüchtig zu seyn, so ist es gewiß in diesem Lande.<sup>46</sup>

[The inhabitants] and in particular the womenfolk are all superstitious, and generally so poor and lazy that they ought to gain a little extra income by working. ... Yet in the towns much time is wasted with theatrical play-acting. The ladies are all too *galant*; and if ever in any country men have cause to be jealous, this certainly is the case here.

The themes of fidelity, reliability and jealousy and even the 'partner-swapping' in *Così fan tutte* were very topical and had a clear place on the Viennese stage.

Yet Da Ponte radicalizes the subject, and at this point *Così fan tutte* marks itself off from its time and place. When the theme of fidelity is turned into a wager, even the spectator-philosopher loses his role as an uninvolved observer. For it now falls to him to establish proof in an experiment with living human beings, all in a Neapolitan palazzo turned laboratory. After all, Alfonso wishes to prove not fidelity or infidelity, but rather the relativity of human relationships altogether. No comedy by Marivaux went so far. Nor did any other play on the stage in Vienna.<sup>47</sup> The test of fidelity propels an experiment in which human qualities are reduced to their physiological foundations. The assumptions behind sentiments (or *Affekten*) are laid bare, especially those sentiments that overlay erotic feelings with moral strictures. They become calculable and succumb to momentary whims. The wager as a game of chance – and both Da Ponte and Mozart knew about passionate gambling – is at the same time the most futile reason for such a trial. Yet in so far as the wager and trial reduce a human being to physiological reactions, the test of fidelity is related to a mechanistic psychology of a type found particularly in *L'Homme machine* (1748) and other writings by Julien Offray de La Mettrie, writings that were easily available in the libertine atmosphere of Josephinian Vienna.<sup>48</sup> Thus the presumed infidelity of women becomes the topic not of a moralizing comedy but of a radical experiment.

44 [Gottlieb Stephanie der Jüngere,] *Das vermeinte Kammermädchen: Ein Lustspiel in drey Aufzügen. Nach dem französischen des Herrn Mariveaux [sic]* (Vienna: Logenmeister, 1783), 19.

45 [Stephanie,] *Das vermeinte Kammermädchen*, 20.

46 'Neapel', *Universal-Lexikon*, volume 23, column 1427.

47 On the similarities between Da Ponte and Marivaux, first mentioned by Charles Rosen, see the extended discussion in Splitt, *Mozarts Musiktheater*, 299–302.

48 On these connections see Dieter Borchmeyer, "'Così fan tutte': Ein erotisches Experiment zwischen Materialismus und Empfindsamkeit', in *Studien zur Musikgeschichte: Eine Festschrift für Ludwig Finscher*, ed. Annegrit Laubenthal (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1995), 353–364; Dieter Borchmeyer, *Mozart oder die Entdeckung der Liebe* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 2005); Manfred Hermann Schmid, *Mozarts Opern: Ein musikalischer Werkführer* (Munich: Beck, 2009), 98; and Carsten Zelle, 'Was ist josephinische Aufklärung – in der Literatur?', in *Mozarts Lebenswelten*, 132–158.



Seen from this perspective, nearly every other facet of the action attains new significance. Despina's disguises, for example, superficially come straight from the standard wardrobes of comedy. But in this case she not only responds to the men, who are also disguised, but she acts according to aspects of this mechanistic psychology. Her appearance in Act 1 as a physician is based on a specific assumption: the assumed suicide of the two suitors. Interpreted as a state of extreme emotion, suicide had been a central topic in aesthetics since the 1750s.<sup>49</sup> Particularly its depiction on stage had become the subject of heated controversies about truth and verisimilitude in the fine arts: should one allow such a terrible and morally objectionable event to become the subject of aesthetic pleasure? Moses Mendelssohn was the first to debate the issue. Da Ponte now also turned to the topic, yet the suitors only feign suicide. On the one hand, the fake suicide befits the conditions of a mechanistic experiment, for, given La Mettrie's presupposition, nothing would make less sense than suicide. On the other, it defuses at a single stroke one of the most heatedly debated issues of Enlightenment aesthetics. The tragic suicide at the end of Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, for example, is suddenly rendered pointless.

Here then, Despina, disguised as a physician, attains her particular significance. It has frequently been pointed out that the finale of Act 1 alludes to Franz Anton Mesmer, the physician with whom Mozart became acquainted during his first stay in Vienna and who had to leave the city in 1778.<sup>50</sup> Despina mentions a 'pietra mesmerica'. As Mesmer's famous (or infamous) theories of magnetism essentially explain human behaviour by reducing it to tremors caused by magnetic waves, it is no coincidence that Mesmer was triumphantly successful in pre-revolutionary Paris, where events seemed driven less by the conscious volition of individuals than by an impersonal energy that joined everyone together, or that Da Ponte integrated Mesmer into his play, a play that reduces human affective life to the mechanics of a machine.<sup>51</sup>

In the parallel disguise scene in Act 2, the aptly named notary Beccavivi is once again a stock figure of comedy. However, 'he' is transformed in such a way that the figure loses its conventional significance. The treatment of the marriage contract as a legal transaction can be traced far back in the history of opera buffa, but here the motif takes on a meaning of its own. There are a number of entanglements that render the legality of the affair questionable: the notary is a disguised chambermaid; the two 'dame ferraresi' (as Despina specifically designates them) maintain their true identities yet only feign emotional confusion; the two 'nobili albanesi', on the other hand, appear with false identities yet display their true (if crossed) emotions. It is symptomatic that not one of the four persons concerned wishes to hear the text of the contract. Once again, one of the most important premises of the Enlightened state – the grounding of human relationships in natural right and their transformation into mutually binding legal relationships safeguarded by contract – loses its value. Thus the disguises of the physician and the notary ridicule eighteenth-century ideals in a remarkable way.

Such transformations of motifs also occur at other levels. There are a number of allusions to specific motivic fields, as, for example, in Fiordiligi's and Dorabella's initial reactions to the impending departure of their suitors: the scene recalls both Pyramus and Thisbe and the death of Dido. Only rarely does Da Ponte resort to direct quotations, however. He does so most clearly in three places, where he cites Sannazaro,

49 See also Zelle, 'Angenehmes Grauen'.

50 See Andrew Steptoe, 'Mozart, Mesmer and "Cosi fan tutte"', *Music & Letters* 67/3 (1981), 281–294; Steptoe, *The Mozart-Da Ponte Operas: The Cultural and Musical Background to 'Le Nozze di Figaro', 'Don Giovanni', and 'Cosi fan tutte'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Pierpaolo Polzonetti, 'Mesmerizing Adultery: *Cosi fan tutte* and the Kornman Scandal', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 14/3 (2003), 263–296; and Lothar Kreimendahl, 'Mozart und der Streit der Fakultäten: Ein bislang unbeachteter Aspekt von "Cosi fan tutte"', *Acta Mozartiana* 56 (forthcoming).

51 After all, the inventory of Mozart's library contains a hint that he was familiar with such ideas. He owned a (no longer identifiable) edition of the Automathes biography: John Kirkby, *The Capacity and Extent of the Human Understanding, Exemplified in the Extraordinary Case of Automathes* (London: Printed for R. Manby and H. S. Cox, 1745). In this novel, empirical psychology combines with mechanistic approaches. See Ulrich Konrad and Martin Staehelin, *allzeit ein buch: Die Bibliothek Wolfgang Amadeus Mozarts* (Weinheim: VCH, Acta humaniora, 1991), 67–68.



Metastasio and the Bible.<sup>52</sup> How complex such associations are is best seen in 'È la fede delle femmine' (No. 2). Don Alfonso evokes 'the faithfulness of women' and compares it to the Arabian phoenix (an eighteenth-century metaphor for the philosopher's stone). This is a (slightly altered) quotation from Pietro Metastasio's *Demetrio*, and thus we have a transgression of genre boundaries – the embedding of an opera seria in an opera buffa. But this quotation is actually a quotation within a quotation: Metastasio's line was first used by Goldoni in his *Scuola moderna* (1748). In 1823 Da Ponte still esteemed Goldoni and Metastasio as the most important Italian poets of the eighteenth century. Given Da Ponte's respect, the irony of such a quotation lies in alienation *in situ* and thus once again in its devaluation.<sup>53</sup>

Such alienation techniques can be seen even more clearly with Alfonso. In the opening terzetto of the opera, 'La mia Dorabella' (No. 1), he points to his grey hair and speaks 'ex cathedra'; that is, he proclaims his thesis as if it were solemn doctrine from the highest church authorities. The blasphemy behind this allusion is further enhanced in the first quintet, 'Sento, oddio, che questo piede' (No. 6): Alfonso reaffirms his view and, with his declaration 'finem lauda' ('praise to the end'), refers to the Bible, specifically to the third book of Ben Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), which contains the warning never to praise anybody before his end. Church doctrine is associated with a wager in which the relativity of human emotions is offered up to ridicule.

#### IV

*Così fan tutte* thus proves to be a drama that highlights central themes of eighteenth-century aesthetics. The themes are put on stage with one stroke, so to speak, and then with a second stroke held up to ridicule. This is unprecedented. The comedy displays an experiment conducted upon living people, the human emotions are shown as mechanistic and relative, and the characters, as a result, find themselves shipwrecked. In so far as he has exposed the presumed aesthetic achievements of his century to merciless criticism, Da Ponte has put the shipwreck at the very heart of his theatre. Just as the boundary between the shipwrecked and the audience dissolves, the borderline between truth and verisimilitude blurs on stage. In this play about absolute relativity, the comedy itself joins in the process of cancellation by robbing itself of its central premises. Thus at the end of the century of the brilliant Enlightenment, the proclamation of reason in the final sextet ('Fortunato l'uom') turns out to be a pragmatic, minimal solution, and with this number the comedy dissolves. Happy – 'fortunato' – are those who see reason as the last anchor, saving them from the shipwreck of their life, the 'turbini' (whirlwinds). Thus reason, rather than an idealistic tool by which humanity moves towards knowledge, is the pragmatic means to avoid shipwreck and destruction. Only reason guarantees man's peace and tranquillity. Only reason guarantees the comedy's theatrical feasibility. The catastrophe suddenly evaporates into a happy end – and after *Così*, the happy end would become an established feature of Viennese comedy: 'Glücklich ist, wer vergißt, was doch nicht zu ändern ist' ('Happy is he who forgets that which cannot be changed' (Johann Strauss, *Die Fledermaus*, Act 1)).

But this leads to the decisive question: why, then, is this drama of relativity, of minimized Enlightenment, an opera? Would it not do as a play? The question touches on the aesthetic discussions that preceded Da Ponte and Mozart's opera. From the beginning, the Enlightenment had a difficult relationship with music and especially with opera: as a non-conceptual art, music appeared to evade rational, conceptual control most successfully.<sup>54</sup> And as Johann Christoph Gottsched remarked, taking up a French dispute that had sprung up two centuries earlier, wasn't it perfectly irrational to put singing actors on the stage?<sup>55</sup> In fact,

52 For these quotations (including the one by Metastasio) see Splitt, *Mozarts Musiktheater*, 294.

53 After the end of the Josephinian era, it was apparently this kind of re-evaluation that triggered extensive criticism of Da Ponte, as, for example, in the anonymous polemic *Anti-da Ponte* (Vienna: printed by J. Hraschankzy, 1791).

54 See Laurenz Lütteken, *Das Monologische als Denkform in der Musik zwischen 1760 und 1785* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1998).

55 See Wilhelm Seidel, 'Saint-Evremond und der Streit um die Oper in Deutschland', in *Aufklärungen: Studien zur deutsch-französischen Musikgeschichte im 18. Jahrhundert. Einflüsse und Wirkungen*, ed. Wolfgang Birtel and Christoph-Hellmut Mahling (Heidelberg: Winter, 1986), 46–54.



Enlightenment critics approached opera with a prejudice: it supposedly injured the laws of truth and verisimilitude to such a degree that one could enjoy it aesthetically only if one renounced reason altogether. At best, words might provide the accompanying music with the required meaning.

Nevertheless, such reservations were indeed prejudices, for they were unable to negate the fact that, despite its incommensurability with the principle of mimesis and despite its lack of concepts, music without words could have such an enormous impact on the emotions. After the 1760s this resistance to the conceptual was seen as an advantage, as a particular potential of music and of music alone. Mozart took his cue for his own aesthetics of opera at this point, and his approach culminated in the three collaborations with Da Ponte in the 1780s. In the world of *Così fan tutte*, however, these aesthetics were sharpened in a way that became inseparable from the comedy itself; namely, in a drama about the relativity of human emotions – about real, pretended or only presumed emotions – it falls to the music to thematize these emotions in an appropriate way. If, however, Da Ponte did indeed use the topos of the shipwreck to integrate the theme of the relativity of emotions into the underlying structure of his comedy, as I have argued, then – to put it forcefully – it is almost to be feared that the meaning of Mozart's music may spring from the same source.

Why is this so? The continuous conflict between real, enacted and pretended emotions is also an underlying theme of the music itself. In the eighteenth century the problematic distinction between real and affected emotions was often discussed, frequently with reference to Horace's dictum 'Si vis me flere, dolendum est primum ipsi tibi' ('If you wish me to weep, you yourself must first feel grief' (*Ars poetica*, line 102)).<sup>56</sup> However, the distinction was never as radically posed as in Mozart's music. Fiordiligi's first aria, 'Come scoglio immoto resta' (No. 14), may serve as an illustration. After a string of numbers that are principally ensembles and predominantly comic in style, Fiordiligi chooses a heroic-pathetic style of expression – the wide ambitus was apparently a particular speciality of Adriana Ferraresi del Bene. This change of register is foreign to the opera buffa genre. The style is proper to opera seria, as is the preceding large-scale recitativo accompagnato 'Temerari! Sortite!', pervaded by the triadic motives that also characterize the beginning of the aria. As noted above, Fiordiligi's boasts skirt the topos of the shipwreck. Fiordiligi states that she will weather the storms like a rock in the sea, unaware that at this moment she has already left the shore and in her thoughts is by now way out to sea.

The heroic style of the aria is puzzling, and not just because it is alien to comedy. Rather, Fiordiligi here sings of her steadfastness with great emphasis only moments before it begins to break down. It is no accident that this occurs in the highly 'inappropriate' key of B flat major, a key that, according to Johann Georg Sulzer, lent itself to mixed, not heroic sentiments. The slow introduction to the aria, which Mozart developed out of the preceding recitative, permits no doubts as to the verity of the heroic sentiment. Yet the recapitulation of this slow passage within the aria – now as a wildly moving accompagnato that has lost its tonal stability – nonetheless questions the force of this emotion. Seen from the perspective of the opera as a whole, moreover, the choice is a startling one. Mozart leaves no doubt that the heroic sentiment presented here is feigned, even at the moment of its powerful articulation. What Fiordiligi claims at this point will prove untrue. Often discussed by eighteenth-century writers on aesthetics,<sup>57</sup> the 'power of music' was used by Mozart in order to thematize it and thus to question it with a radicality that is disturbing at the very least. Mozart's approach to music is an adequate response to Da Ponte's similar problematization of comedy.

Mozart's technique is without doubt most effective in the ensembles. In part, it is a technique born of an essential trait of opera buffa; namely, ensembles clash at the most basic level with an important convention of 'reasonable' opera aesthetics: protagonists should not sing jointly and in competition simultaneously. However, in no other ensemble did Mozart or any other composer take the flaunting of reason so far as in the

56 See the foundational essay by Jürgen Stenzel, "'Si vis me flere...' – 'Musa iocosa mea': Zwei poetologische Argumente in der deutschen Diskussion des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts", *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 48/4 (1974), 650–671.

57 See, for example, John Brown, *A Dissertation on the Rise, Union, and Power, the Progressions, Separations, and Corruptions, of Poetry and Music* (London: Davis and Reymers, 1763; reprinted New York: Garland, 1971).



terzettino 'Soave sia il vento' (No. 10). Once again, the topos of shipwreck hovers in the background. Fiordiligi, Dorabella and Don Alfonso wish the departing soldiers soft winds, tranquil seas and conditions favourable to the desires of all. Hardly any other ensemble by Mozart achieves such strong effects within so short a time or with such unconventional means. The terzettino has no clearly structured formal units. The three protagonists sing an almost archaic sounding trio with two upper voices over a bass line. The clarinets and the bassoon offer *colla parte* accompaniment, while the strings weave a harmonic background texture.

The two diminished chords on 'desir' (see Example 1, bars 22 and 25), however, indicate a strange vagueness that puts the veracity of the terzettino into question, and in just two chords. Mozart's compositional choices are also disturbing at a broader level. At the moment they sing, Dorabella and Fiordiligi are still convinced of the veracity of their emotions, even though only moments later these emotions will be rendered false. From the start, however, Don Alfonso only pretends. Even if he is involved in the action at the broadest level of all – he gives up his spectator status and becomes embroiled in the shipwreck that consumes all – he is at this moment an unashamed liar. The emotion he feigns arises from a deliberate delusion. Thus in a single trio Mozart presents the strong impact of music and at the same time cancels it in a shocking way. Again, Mozart's music suits Da Ponte's drama. At the beginning of the recitative that precedes the trio, Dorabella poses the revealing question 'Dove son?' – 'Where are they?' – as Alfonso interprets her question, but also 'Where am I?' Just after the number, Don Alfonso comments, 'I'm not a bad actor' ('Non son cattivo comico').

Thus the shipwreck with spectators is not only the central metaphor and controlling topos of the opera, but it is that also and particularly with respect to the opera's music.<sup>58</sup> Enormously self-reflexive, the music thematizes itself and destroys its own aspirations and claims by simultaneously putting its force to maximal use and cancelling its own impact. Listeners become shipwrecked in so far as they allow themselves to be captivated by the music, even though they must know that it lacks veracity even on the theatrical stage. At the moment that they are most deeply animated by the music, they are shown that this music has lost its true soul. And so reason – which is proclaimed at the end in an ensemble that is strangely pale for Mozart and in this respect answers the mechanistic overture – becomes the emergency anchor for the music as well: it continues to function only if one pragmatically turns away from the abyss it has revealed. Probably no composer in music history has gone as far as Mozart has here. His play with real, enacted, presumed and pretended emotions leads eighteenth-century musical aesthetics, and thus music itself, towards an imaginary goal – the negation of opera through opera.

Thus the opera – a musical comedy – radically sharpens aesthetic positions and compositional procedures and thereby becomes the means by which the genre as such can be questioned, its truth and verisimilitude negated and its spectators pulled into an unfathomable vortex. In the opera, reason no longer functions as Enlightenment intellectuals had hoped, as a brilliant chance to order one's existence anew thanks to progress and ever fresh insights. Rather, reason is a mere emergency anchor that protects man from the worst. Only reason lets comedy be comedy, and only reason warrants – as a last resort – one final success of a score that, true to the conventions of opera buffa, derives its meaning from the liberating laughter of the finale: 'I too can deceive many others' ('Ch'a molt'altri anch'io la fo'), Despina sings just before the concluding sextet.

Yet in this sense the theatrical veracity of the work is a theatrical veracity of the eighteenth century, just as Mozart's music is music of the eighteenth century. Only when we successfully stage and make plausible this reality of the eighteenth century; only when we succeed in constructively appropriating the symbols of Neapolitan aristocracy, Mount Vesuvius, or the scenes that figure in the trio; only when we manage to keep the terrible abysses of this particular comedy at bay by employing the mechanisms of eighteenth-century comedy; in other words, only when we become aware of the radical historicity of the work will we finally be able to see how strongly this so very distant past is still capable of affecting us today.

58 See Wolfgang Proß, *Mozart in Mailand* (Winterthur: Amadeus, 2006).



16

Clar. I  
(in La)

Clar. II  
(in La)

Fag.

V. I

V. II

Va.

Fiord.

Dor.

D. Alf.

Vc. e B.

l'on - da, ed o - gni e - le - men - to be - ni - gno ri - spon - da ai no - stri de -

Pon - da, ed o - gni - le - men - to be - ni - gno ri - spon - da ai no - stri de -

l'on - da, ed o - gni e - le - men - to be - ni - gno ri - spon - da ai no - stri de -

pizzicato

22

Fl.

Clar.  
(in La)

Fag.

Cor.  
(in Mi)

V. I

V. II

Va.

Fiord.

Dor.

D. Alf.

Vc. e B.

sir , ai no - - stri de - sir

sir , ai no - - stri de - sir

sir , ai no - - stri de - sir

Example 1 'Soave sia il vento' (No. 10), *Così fan tutte ossia La scuola degli amanti*, ed. Faye Ferguson and Wolfgang Rehm, Neue Mozart-Ausgabe, work group 5, volume 18 (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1991), part 1, 110, bars 16–25. Used by permission