



Infidelity & love a modern story

by ELAINE GUREGIAN

March 2, 4, 6, and 8
at Severance Hall

MOZART
COSÌ FAN TUTTE



WHEN IN NEED of an opera plot, a good juicy tale of infidelity can usually fill the bill. And there's always a real-life headline to provide fresh inspiration, whether it's about a politician or a sports star. In that respect, things haven't changed since Mozart and his collaborator Lorenzo Da Ponte created their third opera, *Così fan tutte*, in 1789. Music Director Franz Welser-Möst and The Cleveland Orchestra perform it in a fully staged presentation at Severance Hall on March 2, 4, 6, and 8 — with an international cast of stars and the Cleveland Orchestra Opera Chorus. This new staging comes from Zurich Opera, where Welser-Möst led the premiere last summer.

An irreverent sense of humor sparks this production, conceived by the team of stage director Sven-Eric Bechtolf, set designer Rolf

Glittenberg, and costume designer Marianne Glittenberg — the same team that created the Zurich production of *The Marriage of Figaro* presented at Severance Hall last season. Following Mozart and Da Ponte’s lead, the humor is worldly, bouncing between dark comedy and the giddy light-heartedness of cartoons. The laughter balances the seriousness of taking a direct look at love and fidelity. As Bechtolf has commented, there is nothing more difficult, when talking about love, than to look honestly into one’s own head and heart.

The opera’s full Italian title is a bit ambiguous to translate but often rendered into English as “All Women Do the Same, or The School for Lovers.” Timo Schlüssel, who returns to Cleveland to stage-direct this year’s opera, notes that although Mozart called *Così* an *opera buffa* (“comic opera”), the action is more serious than one might expect in such a work.

The plot is set in motion by Don Alfonso (sung by Antonio Abete), a cynical and duplicitous older associate of two friends, Ferrando and Guglielmo (Javier Camarena and Ruben Drole). In this production, Alfonso is first seen in front of a display case that holds specimens such as butterflies and stuffed birds, with a scientist’s distant, calculated approach to a plan he suggests: Ferrando and Guglielmo should test the fidelity of their girlfriends, Dorabella and Fiordiligi (Anna Bonitatibus and Malin Hartelius). Alfonso bets that his subjects won’t last a day, given the right bait — their boyfriends, disguised as Albanian soldiers. Alfonso enlists the help of the ladies’ maid, Despina (Mar-



tina Janková), in encouraging the two sisters to accept amorous advances from each other’s lover in disguise.

In *Così fan tutte*, the balance between humor and pathos tips back and forth for effects that can be hilarious and heart-wrenching at the same time. The two sisters are separated from their sweethearts, who must march off to battle (a false errand devised as a test by Alfonso). In turn, each sister vocalizes her feelings. As Dorabella sings about her grief, Fiordiligi comically considers how to help end her sister’s anguish. Later, Fiordiligi pronounces her own love as firm as a rock, but overstates the case a bit too seriously. In case we don’t get the hint that this is meant to be absurd, the Zurich production has Dorabella poke fun at her sister’s pronouncements, as if to say “Will she EVER finish singing?” For modern audiences, this is not far from a situation comedy on television, or even a cartoon.

In other words, Mozart, Da Ponte,



and the Zurich team advise, it's okay to laugh. All women are like that — fickle. And, of course, their men aren't so very unimpeachable either, in setting up their lovers for a fall. By putting these characters in a sparsely decorated space that just hints at the opera's traditional garden scene, with a single giant cypress tree and the suggestion of a seaside setting as viewed through large windows, the creators of this production keep us focused on the psychology of the situation — what makes these characters go.

Franz Welser-Möst has called *Così* his favorite opera, because of its insights into human nature. The opera tells us it can be dangerous to play with other people's feelings.

And what of the psychology underneath it all? Mozart himself first fell in love with the sister of the woman he

eventually married. Perhaps the best proof that he never worked out his feelings on the matter is *Così's* ending. The libretto doesn't clearly answer whether the sisters will go back to their original lovers when the deception is revealed, or if they will stay with their new partners. Each production has to decide what direction to make us believe they take.

In the end, after all the singing and testing between the couples, what we will carry away is Mozart's glorious music — and the message that love is a funny but dangerous game to play.

TICKETS

Così fan tutte is being presented at Severance Hall on March 2-8.

For tickets, clevelandorchestra.com or call (216) 231-1111.



PHOTOGRAPH BY ROGER MASTROIANNI