

**Oberlin Opera Theater to present
Mozart's *Così fan tutte***

by Mike Telin



Here's a plot worthy of an opera: in a single day the philosopher Don Alfonso will prove to the young officers Guglielmo and Ferrando that like all women, their fiancées Fiordiligi and Dorabella are incapable of remaining faithful. And there's the maid Dispensa who, for a price, is more than happy to help move things along. Thus the stage is set for *Così fan tutte*.

This week Oberlin Opera Theater will present Mozart's comic opera — subtitled *The School for Lovers* — directed by Jonathon Field with

Christopher Larkin conducting the Oberlin Orchestra. Performances take place in Hall Auditorium on Wednesday, March 11, Friday, March 13, and Saturday, March 14 at 8:00 pm, and Sunday, March 15 at 2:00 pm. Tickets are available [online](#).

Although the plot may sound misogynistic, one must remember that it is a comedy of a certain time. “It is a hard piece to produce for a contemporary audience, yet, in a way, it's kind of an easy piece,” Jonathon Field said during a telephone conversation. “One thing we are doing is putting it in the period in which it was written, which is vaguely from 1770 to 1790. One of the reasons I'm doing that is because in the first scene, Guglielmo and Ferrando draw their swords in a duel. They're reacting by the code of honor that gentlemen had back in those days and you can't take that away, so for me it's always been a period piece.”

Field said that while understanding that behavior does not make it excusable, at least it makes it explicable. “We no longer participate in duels of honor, but we still lie to each other, so that part still exists.”

That code of honor can also explain why the two young soldiers go along with Don Alfonso's scheme. "He is challenging their honor and veracity. And they, being military men, accept the challenge."

No comic opera would be complete without people dressed in disguise. Here, after claiming to be going off to war, Guglielmo and Ferrando return dressed as Albanians. Field believes that gives them the freedom to be less inhibited, which their girlfriends find attractive. "When they're leaving for war, they are very hands-off because they're not used to showing affection. But by inhabiting these characters, they can explore a different side of their feelings, as do the women. They're made to feel like they are more important and adored than their boyfriends made them feel, so they quickly give in because it is a level of attention that they are not used to."

Field noted that staging the opera in the late 18th century has presented some challenges, like teaching the men how to properly seat a lady at a table. "They had never done that before. And all the little details like holding fans and handkerchiefs, carrying swords and bowing — all these tiny things build up to create the entire picture."

To get insight into the maid Despina, we spoke to Tori Adams, a fifth-year student from Minneapolis studying with Marlene Rosen. Adams will sing the role on Friday and Sunday.

Mike Telin: Why does Despina want to get involved in all of this?

Tori Adams: For a couple of reasons. As we learn throughout the opera, she is a promiscuous person, though she keeps it hidden. But once she has her opportunity to move in and teach the girls what she knows, she is going to run with it. Of course Don Alfonso has paid her to play along. Fiordiligi and Dorabella are shallow and privileged, and although she's sick of it, she keeps her opinion inside because she is the maid.

MT: Your character spends a good deal of time in disguise — first as a doctor, then as a notary.

TA: Honestly, that is the best part of the role. There are very few roles for my voice type (soubrette) where you get to do a character voice, and Despina has two, and I'm having a blast with that.

MT: Have you had your eye on this role for a while?

TA: Yes. My two arias, *In uomini, in soldati, sperare fedeltà?* (“In men, in soldiers, you hope for faithfulness?”) and *Una donna a quindici anni* (“A fifteen year old woman”), are vocally accessible for young singers, so I think I started working on them when I was sixteen.

When I came to Oberlin my teacher was Daune Mahy (now retired). I bring her up only because we worked on these arias together. She loved using them as a teaching tool and she would talk about how my voice type is often a maid kind of character. We’d talk about how they are always the person in the room who knows the most about what’s really going on.

MT: What have you discovered about Despina during the rehearsal process?

TA: A lot. I’ve had the time to understand her as a three-dimensional character — how she feels about the girls because of her relationship with Don Alfonso, and how that sheds light on who she believes that she is. She’s almost overconfident in herself and in her abilities to control men.

MT: Are you having fun with your castmates?

TA: I’m having so much fun. Everyone in my cast are dear friends and our two boys are really goofy together and have great chemistry. The show lends itself to being playful and funny in rehearsals. And I have to say that I feel more connected to this orchestra than I have for any other production here. I’m not sure what it is, maybe just the magic of Mozart. I just feel like we’re a team.

To get a better understanding of the soldiers, we spoke to Jedidiah Rellihan, a fourth-year student from Kansas City studying with Timothy Lefebvre. He will sing the role of Ferrando on Wednesday and Saturday.

Mike Telin: Who is Ferrando and why does he want to take part in this plot that Don Alfonso has cooked up?

Jedidiah Rellihan: Jonathon Field and I have talked about why Guglielmo and Ferrando even bother with the whole charade. Part of it is their moral code, and their moral obligation to their uniform. They are military men and they want to respect their calling.

Also, throughout the opera, Ferrando realizes that he might be more morally aligned with Fiordiligi than he is with Dorabella, and I think that’s an interesting plot point. When we go undercover as these Albanian men in order to seduce each other’s lovers, at

first they staunchly reject our advances, saying they are women of honor. Immediately we are joyous and think they are wonderful.

Later on I sing *Un'aura amorosa* (“A loving breath”), which is a lovely aria about our women and how they are our prize at the end of the day. At that point I realize that the act of remaining true is stronger in Fiordiligi than it is in Dorabella.

I think Dorabella and Guglielmo are more about quick gratification, where Ferrando and Fiordiligi are more about staying true to our morals and beliefs. In our duet at the end of the opera, we discover that we do love each other. It's subtle and tricky to bring out onstage, but I'm enjoying the journey that I'm having over the course of the opera.

MT: What is Guglielmo's and Ferrando's relationship with Don Alfonso?

JR: I think we see him as an older respectful guy who has the money to do what he wants. One of the things we've talked about is that something has obviously happened to him in his younger years that makes him want to prove that women are disloyal. He's had a heartbreak that we don't know about, and because of that he wants his revenge.

It is a weird relationship because we're not really friends with him and we're always trying to prove him wrong. I think Don Alfonso has always been kind of a recluse, but everyone knows him because he's smart and has money.

MT: Are you having fun with Mozart?

JR: I like Mozart a lot. In this opera the group numbers are all so much fun, and there are so many of them that you can go a little bit crazy, but you keep grounded in the music because if you don't, then you're going to get lost.

I do love my aria, *Un'aura*. It's tough but I think it'll be good, and my duet with Fiordiligi in the second act is very special — that's where everything changes. We're the only two left who haven't turned against our original lover, but once it happens, everything turns to chaos.

MT: Any final thoughts?

JR: It's going to be a great show and I'm looking forward to getting it in front of an audience.

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