

Information Pack

Così fan tutte The School for Lovers

Dramma Giocosa in Two Acts by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte

Sung in Italian with English supertitles



GLYNDEBOURNE



1 The Characters



Ferrando

Tenor

An army officer, betrothed to Dorabella. He is rapturously in love and it is his strong conviction and faith in Dorabella which leads to the wager being placed. He is impulsive and spontaneous, a born romantic whose illusions are inevitably shattered.

Guglielmo

Baritone

Also an army officer, friend of Ferrando and betrothed to Fiordiligi. More down to earth than Ferrando. He has a capacity for arrogance: he has no worries about keeping Fiordiligi while also attempting to seduce Dorabella. This arrogance makes Fiordiligi's betrayal all the more devastating for him.

Don Alfonso

Baritone

A cynical philosopher, friend of the soldiers, and older man. He is a sceptic who is convinced that all women are capable of infidelity. He can be played as an evil puppet-master figure or a dispassionate scientist. All productions of *Così* hinge on how Alfonso is played.

Fiordiligi

Soprano

A young lady from Ferrara who is now living in Naples. She is in love with Guglielmo. She is very proud of her sensible nature and unshakeable love. It takes her longer than Dorabella to fall in love with her 'Albanian', but when she falls, she falls further and harder. Her name literally means 'flower of virtue'.

Dorabella

Soprano

Fiordiligi's sister, in love with Ferrando. Carefree and impulsive, less of a thinker than Fiordiligi. She easily changes from loving Ferrando to falling in love with her exotic 'Albanian'. Her name literally means 'Golden Beauty'. Although officially a soprano role, Dorabella is usually sung by a mezzo-soprano (a lower female voice) as the role's music is generally lower than Fiordiligi's.

Despina

Soprano

The maid to the two sisters. She is a veteran of the ways of men and has no illusions about life. Money and pleasure are everything to her. She advises her mistresses to aim for pleasure without emotional entanglement. Alfonso employs Despina to persuade the girls to give in to the Albanians' advances. She remains in the dark as to the Albanians' real identity. Despina is essentially a comic character and her moments of pathos and humanity made all the more poignant as a result.

2 The Story

Two soldiers are in love with two sisters (Ferrando loves Dorabella and Guglielmo loves Fiordiligi). The soldiers' old friend Don Alfonso, is very cynical of their relationships and thinks women are not to be trusted. He makes a bet with the boys that he will prove the sisters' lack of faith within twenty-four hours, on the condition that they do exactly as he instructs.

So, on Don Alfonso's instruction, the soldiers pretend to go off to war. Fiordiligi and Dorabella are heartbroken and are understandably horrified when two 'Albanians' (the soldiers in disguise) arrive and begin seducing them. At first the sisters utterly reject the men, despite strong encouragement from their maid Despina. (Despina has been bribed by Don Alfonso to help him execute his plan, though she doesn't

know the Albanians are Ferrando and Guglielmo in disguise.) However, after various schemes and conversations, Dorabella (Ferrando's girlfriend) falls in love with Guglielmo, and later Fiordiligi (Guglielmo's girlfriend) gets together with Ferrando. Both men rage with anger and jealousy. Don Alfonso can only comment that all women behave like that: 'Così fan tutte'.

Spurred on by Don Alfonso, the new couples agree to get married. During the mock wedding, Despina appears as a notary and the marriage contracts are signed. The soldiers then 'return' and confront the Dorabella and Fiordiligi with the contracts. The sisters admit their guilt, but after the men reveal themselves as the Albanians the women return to their original boyfriends.

3 The Synopsis

Act One

Ferrando and Guglielmo are arguing with the cynical bachelor Don Alfonso, defending the fidelity of their beloveds, the sisters Dorabella and Fiordiligi. They are ready to fight a duel for them but Don Alfonso instead proposes a wager: if they follow his plan and instructions, he will show them the true nature of women. Confident of victory, Ferrando and Guglielmo accept and speculate on some amusing ways to spend their winnings.

Fiordiligi and Dorabella are musing on the charms of their lovers, when Don Alfonso enters with bad news. The boys have been summoned to their regiment and must leave for the war at once. When they appear with their travelling kit, there are fond farewells and promises to write to each other everyday. The men leave, and the ladies and Don Alfonso wish them a safe journey (trio: 'Soave sia il vento' – 'O wind gently blowing'). Don Alfonso is left alone to sneer at such a display of empty sentiment.

Despina is complaining about her lot in life. She announces to her mistresses that breakfast is ready, but they are too agitated by the loss of their lovers to eat and Dorabella commands her to shut out the light. Despina airily advises the ladies to enjoy themselves in their lovers' absence; at which Dorabella gives vent to her brief. Indignantly, they leave their maid and Don Alfonso enters, intending to enlist Despina in his scheme. After he has slipped her a bribe, she agrees to co-operate. Don Alfonso tells her that he has two rich friends who wish to 'console' the girls. Ferrando and Guglielmo enter disguised as Albanians. Despina is astonished and fails to recognise their true identities. When Fiordiligi and Dorabella reappear, they are shocked to see that strangers have been admitted and even more appalled when the men profess their love for the two sisters. Fiordiligi makes an elaborate defence of the steadfastness. Guglielmo, Fiordiligi's lover, then lists he and his friend's physical attractions, but the ladies sweep out. The men, assuming they have won the bet are convulsed with laughter, but Don Alfonso insists that his plan is not yet complete. Ferrando reflects on the wonders of his Dorabella.

Alfonso and Despina confer further. The sisters are still moping when the two strangers rush in and swallow what appear to be a phial of arsenic. They collapse and the frightened sisters call for Despina, who goes off with Don Alfonso to find a doctor. Fiordiligi and Dorabella are moved to pity. Don Alfonso returns with Despina disguised as a doctor. Claiming to be a follower of the famous Mesmer, their 'doctor' extracts the poison from the would-be 'suicides' by magnetism. The men revive and pretend to believe that they are in heaven – Fiordiligi and Dorabella must be angels, from whom they demand a kiss. The sisters

resist angrily, but there is now a suspicion that their feelings may be about to change.

Act Two

Despina encourages her mistresses to flirt with their new admirers, and they decide that there can be no harm in a little more friendliness. They decide which of the strangers they will favour; Dorabella prefers the dark one, Guglielmo, while Fiordiligi plumps for the blond, Ferrando – thus selecting the other's 'real' partner.

Don Alfonso summons the ladies to an entertainment – a serenade by Ferrando and Guglielmo. All parties are overcome with bashfulness. Ferrando and Fiordiligi stroll off, leaving Guglielmo to declare extravagant passion for Dorabella. She concedes and they exchange lockets. Fiordiligi returns, pursued by Ferrando. She is troubled by the tug on her loyalty, and left alone she prays that her original lover will forgive her.

Ferrando and Guglielmo exchange notes. They are both outraged that their women have failed the test. Guglielmo vows vengeance whilst Ferrando laments the loss of Dorabella. Don Alfonso persuades them to follow the charade to its end.

Despina and Dorabella discuss developments. Fiordiligi is still more reserved than her sister, but Dorabella encourages her change of heart. After they have left, Fiordiligi (spied on by the men) resolves to don a man's uniform and follow Guglielmo to the front. But Ferrando begs her to accept his love, and she succumbs. A furious Guglielmo witnesses the scene. Don Alfonso reminds the men that women all behave the same way – 'Così fan tutte' – and they should not be taken too seriously.

In the final chapter of Don Alfonso's dastardly plan the marriage of the sisters to their new lovers is to be celebrated. There is a toast, to which Guglielmo grumpily refuses to contribute. A notary – Despina in another disguise – enters and reels off the contracts. Just as the ladies sign their names, a military band is heard. Don Alfonso goes off to investigate, and returns, mock thunderstruck, to announce that the soldiers have come back unexpectedly. In the confusion, the two men disappear, re-emerging without their disguise. They feign shock and horror at what they see, vowing to kill their rivals. But finally the whole ruse is revealed to the ladies' mortification – and Despina's amazement. Don Alfonso declares that the lovers should embrace again, and all point the moral; happy the man who is guided by reason through the trials of life.

4 Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart – A Biography



(b. Salzburg, January 27, 1756; d. Vienna, December 5, 1791)

The Man and the Myth

Perhaps more than any other composer in history, Mozart's life is surrounded by mythology. From his infancy, stories about his abilities were exaggerated and fabricated and his death has provided material for a hugely successful Hollywood thriller. He is perhaps the first composer in Western classical music to have attracted this kind of biographical interest, and it is no coincidence that he is essentially the first freelance composer, writing what he wanted to write, rather than what he was told to write by a royal or religious patron. With this romantic approach to composition comes a natural interest in the personality behind the music and Mozart's life certainly does not disappoint in this respect.

Mozart confirms (or perhaps even helped to create?) many myths that we have in our society about genius. He was a prodigy – his talent seems to have been innate and present from a very early age. We would like to believe that he didn't ever have to work at his compositions, but rather they were handed down to him from somewhere celestial. He was a passionate individual – he left the service of the Archbishop of Salzburg in a storm after refusing to be treated like a servant. He was a hedonist; interested in the pleasures that life has to offer. And of course he died extremely young at only 35 – and don't "All the best die young"? (James Dean, Jimi Hendrix, Jeff Buckley, Eva Cassidy, Kurt Cobain etc).

Wunderkind

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was born in Salzburg, Austria, in 1756. His father, Leopold, was a violinist, music theorist, composer and teacher. Wolfgang and his sister, Nannerl, both showed astonishing musical talent from an early age.

Wolfgang would pick out chords at the keyboard when he was only three years old and, at the age of six, he was discovered writing notes in a mess of blots and smudges, which was proudly announced to be a concerto! At about the same time he taught himself to play the violin, and was soon able to play chamber music perfectly, although his father had given him no lessons.

Trawling round Europe

Leopold Mozart – realising that he was sitting on a gold mine took his two 'prodigies of nature' on several gruelling tours to show them off to the nobility and paying public of Europe. Whilst travelling along poorly kept roads, the young Mozart would spend the time writing music, which he retained in his head until he could write it down at the end of the day. A letter from this time reminds us just how young the performer was – in 1762, Leopold refers to Mozart "cutting a new tooth".

After excursions to Munich and Vienna the family undertook a long journey culminating in triumphal receptions in Paris and London (1763-4). Both children came down with smallpox, but, undaunted, Leopold took them off round Europe again. In 1768, Mozart began his operatic career with, *La finta semplice*, aged only 12. By this time, he was also writing instrumental music; symphonies, wind ensemble pieces and, inspired by Joseph Haydn, string quartets.

Impressive in Italy

In 1770, Leopold took his son on a tour of Italy. During the trip, two myths are particularly interesting. Firstly, to prove that it was not his father but Mozart writing such advanced music, the young Wolfgang is said to have agreed to undertake a trial in which he (successfully) wrote an orchestral aria in complete isolation. Also during this trip, the Mozarts visited the Sistine Chapel in Rome. After only one hearing of Allegri's *Miserere* (a 20 minute, 8-part choral work), it is alleged that Mozart was able to write down the whole piece note for note having never seen the score, which had in fact never left the chapel.

Work Experience

At 15, Mozart started his first full-time paid job as music master for the Archbishop of Salzburg. His relationship with the Archbishop was incredibly fiery and after a youth spent rubbing shoulders with European aristocrats and royals, the young Mozart did not take kindly to being treated as a common servant.

In 1777, frustrated with his employer, Mozart visited the court of Carl Theodor at Mannheim looking for a position. Although he was unsuccessful in this, during his four-month stay, he made a number of useful contacts amongst the

singers and orchestra and acquainted himself with the progressive musical style. Then in 1780, after leaving the employ of the Archbishop following a serious dispute, he was finally given the opera commission that he so dearly wanted from Carl Theodor, who was now Elector of Bavaria. *Idomeneo* was based on a French setting of an ancient Greek myth and afforded Mozart the opportunity to use chorus, dancers and lavish spectacle.

During his initial visits to Mannheim, Mozart had fallen in love with Aloysia Weber, a singer, but when she married someone else Mozart turned his attentions to her younger sister, Constanze. They were married in Vienna in 1782 where Mozart was now desperately trying to earn a living as a freelance composer.



A match made in Heaven – Mozart and da Ponte

Perhaps Mozart's finest operas were written in the last five years of his short life. *Le nozze di Figaro* (The Marriage of Figaro) was written in 1786. The librettist was Lorenzo da Ponte with whom Mozart produced two other successful operas; *Don Giovanni* (1787) and *Così fan tutte* (1790).

Librettist, lover, lout

Lorenzo da Ponte (1749 – 1838) was a pretty colourful character. After becoming a priest in 1773, he spent some time as a poet in Venice. He was forever escaping from his creditors, or from various scandals, and in 1779 was expelled from the city for writing scurrilous political verse. After a short time in Germany he arrived in Vienna where he eventually obtained the post of poet to the Italian theatre in 1783. During that year da Ponte and Mozart met for the first time and forged their hugely successful partnership, borne of the same craftsman-like attitude to their work, and the ability to tailor and trim their contributions to fit those of their collaborator.

Salt of the Earth

Creating the text for comic opera was da Ponte's speciality and the genre suited Mozart well. It's unpretentious and earthy style was popular in Vienna. It portrayed people from everyday life rather than abstract ideals – the man or woman familiar from the family or the street rather than gods, heroes or classical archetypes. All three collaborations between the two artists explore very human matters of love, lust, betrayal and forgiveness.

Close collaboration

Mozart and da Ponte worked in a true collaborative relationship in producing these operas. The story goes that during the writing of *Don Giovanni*, which was premiered in Prague, Mozart and da Ponte occupied apartments on opposite sides of the same street and used to communicate with each other by yelling suggestions and ideas back and forth.

Così was the final opera produced by Mozart and da Ponte. Unusually in da Ponte's output, the libretto uses an original story, rather than taking a pre-existing one. The theme of fidelity and promiscuity appears to have been close to da Ponte's heart. Well known for his interest in the fairer sex, one of his mistresses during his 10 years in Vienna was Adriana del Bene, a fine singer with a stupendous vocal range, known as "La Ferrarese." (As usual, she was married.) Mozart was far less keen on this woman, but nonetheless da Ponte prevailed on him to cast her as Fiordiligi in *Così*. Mozart however got even by writing an impossible aria for her to sing. *Come scoglio* is full of incredibly wide intervals and absurd jumps from the top to the bottom of the soprano range and was intended to poke fun at La Ferrarese. It's now recognised as one of the show-off arias for sopranos.

Not for the Victorians

Though the rather racy plot did not offend the Viennese sensibilities of the time, throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries it was considered risqué. As such, *Così* fell out of the operatic repertoire for many years. It was not until after World War II that it regained its place in the standard operatic repertoire where it remains a favourite to this day.

The final year

1791, Mozart's final year, was one of frantic activity. As well as numerous instrumental works, he composed the (unfinished) *Requiem*, which had been commissioned by an unknown messenger on behalf of an anonymous patron. Work on the *Requiem* was interrupted by another opera, *La clemenza di Tito*, and when he resumed work on the *Requiem* progress was hindered by the onset of an illness. At the same time, Mozart was also busily working on his final operatic project, *Die Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute). Whilst desperately working on these two compositions, he began to see the visits of the unknown messenger as omens of doom and finally became convinced that he had been poisoned in a conspiracy against him, though this was never proved. He died in Vienna in December 1791, two months after the opening night of *The Magic Flute*, aged only 35. He left no money for a proper funeral and was buried in an unmarked pauper's grave.

5 The Structure

The first operas were created in the late sixteenth century by a group of Italian noblemen. Their experiments in form and content led to the development of a style known as opera seria, which dominated the European opera scene for over two centuries. At the time Mozart (an Austrian) was writing at the end of the 1700s, Italian was still considered the most fitting language for opera. In England earlier that century, Handel had written operas in Italian to much acclaim. Opera was predominantly an Italian form and composers, whatever their nationality were most assured of international success if they wrote their operas in Italian and in the Italian style.

Italian operas had a very fixed structure. *Così* follows this template and is known as a 'number opera'. The 'numbers' are closed musical forms like a *trio* or an *aria*, which are accompanied by the full orchestra. They are separated by *recitative*, a musical form that follows the rhythm of speech and is accompanied by spare chords on a harpsichord and sometimes a cello as well.

The dramatic function of recitative is to advance the plot swiftly, the narrative moving like a play. Mozart's recitative is vibrant and lively. In *Così fan tutte* the Italian language is salty and earthy: the language of real people. These characters are real and contemporary, not the shepherds and princes of much of the opera in the eighteenth century. Characters talk to each other and have believable conversations and arguments.

The recitative drives the plot forward to a moment of reflection, excitement or perhaps anger. The harpsichord gives way to the orchestra to accompany this fuller moment of emotion – contemporary composer Harrison Birtwistle describes this type of song as 'the poetic flowering of the moment'. If only one person sings, this is called an *aria* (the Italian for song). The *aria* began as an opportunity for virtuoso musical display by star singers but in the hands of a master dramatist like Mozart, the *aria* is far more than just a melody. It contributes to the plot, to character development, to the emotional impact of the opera. Not taking the verse-chorus-verse-chorus structure of twentieth-century song, the *aria* is like one elongated verse, exploring the textures and meanings of a short text. Fiordiligi's *aria* 'per pietà' is only a few written phrases but in Mozart's rendition becomes an eight minute epic of repentance and humility. The text is vital but is the servant of the music.

These two forms, recitative and *aria* are the main building blocks of Italian opera. Mozart was also a master of the Ensemble, where all the principal singers sing at once. The Act I Sextet and the Act I Finale are among the earliest and best examples of ensemble writing that is vital, dramatic and narrative based. With Mozart, the plot advances in the numbers as well as the recitatives.



6 Politically Correct?

Così fan tutte is known as the poor relation of the Mozart-da Ponte collaborations. It was the only original story of the three and many critics and spectators at the time felt the content of the plot, infidelity and deception, to be scandalous and unfitting material for such beautiful music. In the nineteenth century, the whole plot was sometimes excised and other words were substituted.

There is no doubt that the central idea of *Così* is difficult, even for a modern audience. The opera is a minefield for present-day directors and singers. Is it right to present in a plain, non-judgemental way a story that purports to say '*Così fan tutte*' ('all women do this') that all women cannot help but betray the men they love? Eighteenth century attitudes to women were very different to modern ones.

An attitude to *Così* has grown over the last 50 years that productions must have a viewpoint, that women cannot be seen as being merely driven by their hearts and hormones. But, in a post-feminist age, perhaps the women should be allowed to behave as they wish. Women are allowed to make mistakes. Or as Despina says, it's ok for women to use the men for pleasure and not think twice about it. No guilt, only pleasure: surely a modern viewpoint as well. The opera is not just an antique view of women: it still asks questions with a contemporary relevance that have numerous possible answers.

Any production of *Così* must address the deep-rooted irony and parody in the piece. Officially designated 'a comic opera in two acts', it also contains incredibly serious, difficult, virtuoso music. Take Dorabella's aria of loss after the men have gone to war for example. 'Smainie implacabili' is very extravagant – Dorabella calls on the Furies to kill her, she is so crazed with grief. It is knowingly over the top and the audience in Mozart's time would have been surprised to find such a serious aria in a comic opera. In using such a tragic aria, Mozart is perhaps poking fun at his characters, suggesting that they are over-reacting. But he is also accurately depicting the turbulent emotions of a young

women, practically a teenager, who feels that her life is not worth living without her man (until, that is, another comes along to replace him...).

Sometimes, Mozart makes fun of stage conventions of the time. Fiordiligi's aria, 'come scoglio' is a classic set-piece aria telling in vast detail and with vocal fireworks how her love for Guglielmo is 'like a rock'. It is also known as an 'exit aria' because the singer traditionally left the stage to a round of applause at the end of the aria. But Fiordiligi is not allowed to exit. 'Don't leave' sings Ferrando. Mozart is playing with the conventions of the time – the audience would have expected Fiordiligi to leave. By stopping her, Mozart tells us that the music will support a production that plays around with convention. A production which is not only light, but also takes itself seriously, which treads the fine line between drama, irony, satire and comedy. Too much crude, nudge-nudge humour and the opera teeters too far in one direction; a po-faced and overly-reverential production results in a *Così* that has no light and shade.

Light and shade is critical in *Così*; the hilarity and glitter of the Act I Finale is in huge emotional contrast to the middle section of Act II as the four lovers truly learn about the difficulties of love. It's one of the most searching sequences in the opera, examining the workings of the human heart.

But as the situation becomes more and more dysfunctional and complex, the music becomes more and more beautiful. Some of the most beautiful music in the piece involves one or more of the characters lying and pretending. As Ferrando tells Fiordiligi how much he loves her in Act II as Guglielmo, is he telling the truth or merely telling a lie with beautiful music? Can music lie or must Beauty always mean Truth?

Of course each production, each audience must try to decide the answers to these questions. The sub-title of the opera is 'The School for Lovers'. Together with the four lovers, the audience emerges at the end of the opera more experienced in the joys and pains of love.



7 A rough guide to Glyndebourne

What is the Glyndebourne Festival?

The Glyndebourne Festival is a leading opera festival that takes place at Glyndebourne, a country house in the Sussex countryside. Glyndebourne Festival Opera is the name of the opera company which stages the operas. The Festival is famous for its beautiful setting and for the quality of its productions, particularly of operas by Mozart.

What's the story behind it?

John Christie owned the manor house at Glyndebourne. He used to stage amateur opera productions in the Organ Room and one day his friends suggested that he ask Audrey Mildmay, a professional singer, to take part to add some polish. John and Audrey fell in love and were married in 1931. The couple continued to stage amateur opera productions and John had plans to build a tiny theatre. But Audrey had a better idea: 'If you're going to spend all that money John,' she said, 'for God's sake do the thing properly.' So the Christies built a 300 seat theatre with a proper orchestra pit and the most modern equipment, and the first Glyndebourne Festival took place in 1934. The first opera was *Le nozze di Figaro* (*The Marriage of Figaro*) by Mozart, and Audrey sang the part of the heroine, Susanna. Glyndebourne was beginning to become world famous for its superb performances and productions when war broke out in 1939. Nevertheless, by the time Audrey Mildmay died in 1953 Glyndebourne was one of the most important Arts organisations in Britain. John Christie died in 1962 and later in the 1960s the range of operas that were staged at Glyndebourne was increased. Many opera singers who later became world famous began their careers there. The original theatre was loved by Glyndebourne's visitors but by the early 1990s it was too small and out of date. Glyndebourne had become one of the most famous opera companies in the world and it needed a modern opera house that could fit bigger productions and seat more people. So a new opera house was built and opened in 1994.

What else does Glyndebourne do?

Glyndebourne on Tour takes three productions to theatres all over the country. The productions open at Glyndebourne in October and are then on the road until December. They are important not only because they allow people who can't get to Glyndebourne to see popular productions at much cheaper prices, but also because the singers are often young artists at the beginning of their careers, who are looking for their big break. Apart from the Festival, Glyndebourne runs lots of education projects, which help all sorts of people to discover more about opera and maybe develop an interest in it. Most of Glyndebourne Education's projects are for young people, and the programme allows people to find out more about the operas that are being performed at the festival and on tour. The department even produces its own CDs; each one is an introduction to a different opera, with information and examples of music.

What is Glyndebourne like today?

Today the new theatre sits next to the beautiful Tudor house, surrounded by the famous gardens. The theatre is very light and modern inside, with pale wooden panelling; There are three tiers of seats, each with its own large gallery outside. The atmosphere is very exciting; You feel as if you are in a special place, doing something that you wouldn't normally do. Even if you often go to the theatre, you probably won't have been to one in the middle of a beautiful garden. The gardens are carefully planted with trees and flowers to look their best during the summer, when the Festival takes place. They have smooth lawns, where people have picnics during the interval of the opera, and there is a lovely lake and views across meadows; Glyndebourne is probably the only opera house in the world which has sheep and cows as its neighbours. There is a sunken garden, a rose garden, a terrace and an orchard, and people who regularly come to Glyndebourne often have their favourite nook.



8 A rough guide to opera

Opera is...

A dramatic art which uses music, singing, words and drama, movement, dance, set design, lighting and costume to tell a story! The emotional content is in the music as much as the words and drama, telling stories of love and hate, death and power. Opera doesn't try to reflect real life like a TV drama (it couldn't with all that singing!) but steps into the realms of deep human experience. In the overpowering combination of singing, music and visual spectacle it can evoke a strong response from an audience.

History...

Opera was invented in Italy in the 1600's and has been popular ever since. The cost of opera (tickets can be pricey) is probably where it gets its 'elitist' image but although the first operas were for the aristocracy it quickly became the entertainment of the masses. For centuries it was where people went to socialise, hear their favourite singers and chat to their friends. Only in the late 19th Century were audiences first expected to watch the performance in silence. Opera has become very expensive to put on as it involves a huge number of performers (soloists, chorus, orchestra, dancers, actors), highly skilled staff behind the scenes, making costumes, creating the set and running the show, who put together and rehearse each opera.

Singers

Obviously singers weren't able to use microphones when opera was invented, and so opera singers have always had to develop large voices to fill the auditorium. At the same time they try to create the 'perfect' vocal sound which also has emotion and dramatic character. It takes years of training to crack this! Singers and the roles they play are classified by their vocal ranges.

The different voices are:

Soprano Highest female voice, often plays the heroine, dies a lot

Mezzo Soprano Not quite as high as a soprano

Contralto Low pitched female voice, often more mature characters or mothers

Countertenor Really high male voice, falsetto, like Justin Timberlake/Pharrell

Williams, they were once the superstars of opera

Tenor High male voice, from the 19th Century became the hero character when Countertenors went out of fashion

Baritone Bit lower than a Tenor

Bass Right at the bottom. Often plays comic characters or those with dubious moral fibre

The Chorus A body of singers who sing and act to make the crowd scenes more plausible

Songs and dialogue Traditional opera consists of different modes of singing:

Recitative (known as recit.) which drives the plot and passages of dialogue through speech-like singing

Arias Songs where the plot pauses for a character to reflect on their emotional state

Choruses Rousing group numbers sung by the chorus

Ensembles Where a number of soloists sing together. They are really useful dramatic tool and a great way to end an Act, where each character can reflect on a situation from their perspective at the same time. Mozart wrote great ensembles!

The Orchestra

Instruments have changed since the early operas of the 1600's, and the number of instruments in a standard opera orchestra has grown. By the time of Wagner (late 19th Century) the orchestra was enormous and singers had to develop bigger voices in order to be heard. The orchestra is normally in the pit half under the stage, which helps stop them drowning out the singers.

The librettist writes the libretto (the script)

The Composer writes the music

These two really need to have a good understanding of theatre and how to tell a story.

It's more than just writing music or words. It's a hard job and what we now know as 'the repertoire' is the best of the bunch from the last 400 years. Till around the 19th Century composers would churn out operas really quickly (in as little as 3 weeks sometimes), and the local opera house would always be performing a new piece. It's actually a lot closer to how the popular music industry works today.

Opera – then and now

Opera has always reflected the time it was created in, and has often contained political and social messages. Many of them caused uproar and scandal and were closely censored by governments. When an opera is put on stage today it needs to be brought to life by modern artists, the key people are:

The director (who creates a concept for the production)

The conductor (who decides how to interpret the music, and makes sure everyone sings together during the show!)

The designer (who works with the director to infuse the ideas of the production into the stage design)

Even though some operas are hundreds of years old they can still be exciting and audiences can look at these works with a fresh eye.

9 Discography

Così on CD:

Glyndebourne recommends EMI's recording conducted by Sir Simon Rattle with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment staged at Glyndebourne in 1991. The catalogue number is EMI-CDS 5561 702.

EMI's recording conducted by Karl Böhm with the Philharmonia Orchestra and Chorus.

The catalogue number is CMS5673822 and the ASIN is B00004U0C8.

Così on DVD:

Deutsche Grammophon have a DVD of the opera conducted by John Eliot Gardiner conducting the English Baroque Soloists, who use period instruments. The catalogue number is 0730269 and the ASIN is B00006J9OU.

Glyndebourne photography by Mike Hoban. Images of Ferrando, Mozart and da Ponte on pages 2, 4 and 5 from the Lebrecht Collection.

