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Opera Opposed to Opera: Così fan tutte and Fidelio

EDWARD W. SAID

The topic of influence and its anxieties, so rich in the history of literature, is less discussed in the history of music. Certainly the intimidating and inhibiting effect of Ludwig van Beethoven's *Nine* on subsequent symphonists (Brahms, Mahler, Bruckner) is much referred to, but the dynamics of an active, energizing struggle with an antecedent both disliked and respected have not often received much attention. This is a pity, since the case I want to consider here helps us make more sense of two popular and yet very problematic operas, one that I believe follows the other with considerable agitation. I have in mind Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, first performed in 1790, and Beethoven's *Fidelio*, which went through three versions, 1805, 1806, and 1814–15. There are all sorts of reasons for Beethoven's difficulties with his only opera—his unfamiliarity with the form, his restless reconsideration and redoing of the work, his inability to satisfy himself—but one of them, I think, was the taunting antecedence of Mozart's most perfect and, unlike *Fidelio*, most effortless and, from Beethoven's rather staid point of view, most amoral performance.

Mozart has tried to embody an abstract force that drives people by means of agents (in *Così fan tutte*) or sheer energy (in *Don Giovanni*) without the reflective consent of their mind or will, in most instances. The intrigue in *Così fan tutte* is the result of a bet between Alfonso on the one hand and Ferrando and Guglielmo on the other, inspired neither by a sense of

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moral purpose nor by ideological passion. Ferrando is in love with Dorabella, Guglielmo with Fiordiligi; Alfonso bets that the women will be unfaithful. A subterfuge is then enacted: the two men will pretend that they have been called off to war. Then they will come back in disguise and woo the girls, which is what happens. As Albanian (i.e., Oriental) men, the two attempt to seduce each other's fiancée: Guglielmo quickly succeeds with Dorabella; Ferrando needs more time, but he too is successful with Fiordiligi, who is clearly the more serious of the two sisters. Alfonso is helped in the plot by Despina, a cynical maid who assists in her mistresses' downfall, although she does not know of the bet among the men. Finally the plot is exposed; the women are furious but return to their lovers, even though Mozart does not specify exactly whether the pairs remain as they were at the outset.

As many commentators have noted, the opera's plot has antecedents in various "test" plays and operas, and, as Charles Rosen accurately says, it resembles "demonstration" plays written by Marivaux, among others. "They demonstrate—prove by acting out—psychological ideas," Rosen adds, "and 'laws' that everyone accepted, and they are almost scientific in the way they show precisely how these laws work in practice" (314). He goes on to speak of *Così fan tutte* as "a closed system," an interesting, if insufficiently developed, notion, which does in fact apply to the opera.

We can learn a good deal here about *Così fan tutte* in the late-eighteenth-century cultural setting by looking at Beethoven's reactions to the Lorenzo da Ponte operas, which, as an Enlightenment enthusiast, Beethoven seems always to have regarded with a certain amount of discomfort. Like many critics of Mozart's operas, Beethoven is—so far as I have been able to discover—curiously silent about *Così fan tutte*. To generations of Mozart admirers, including Beethoven, the opera seems to refuse the kind of meta-physical, or social, or cultural significance found readily by Søren Kierkegaard and other luminaries in *Don Giovanni*, *Die Zauberflöte*, and *Le nozze di Figaro*. There therefore seems very little to say about it. Most people concede that the music is extremely wonderful, but the unsaid implication is that it is wasted on a silly story, silly characters, and an even sillier setting. Significantly enough, Beethoven seems to have thought *Die Zauberflöte* the greatest of Mozart's works (mainly because it was a German work), and he is quoted by Ignaz von Seyfried, Ludwig Rellstab, and Franz Wegeler separately as expressing his dislike of *Don Giovanni* and *Figaro*; they were too trivial, too Italian, too scandalous for a serious composer (Sonneck and Martens). Once he expressed pleasure at *Don Giovanni*'s success, although he was also said not to have wanted to attend his great older contemporary's operas because they might make him forfeit his own originality.

These are the contradictory feelings of a composer who found Mozart's work as a whole unsettling and even disconcerting. Competitiveness is clearly a factor, but there is something else. It is Mozart's uncertain moral center, the absence in *Così fan tutte* of a specific humanistic message of the kind that *Die Zauberflöte* is so laboriously explicit about. What is still more significant about Beethoven's reactions to Mozart is that *Fidelio* can be interpreted as a direct, and in my opinion a somewhat desperate, response to *Così fan tutte*. Take one small but certainly telling example: Leonore's appearance at the outset disguised as a young man who comes to work as Rocco's assistant at the prison and engages the amorous attentions of Rocco's daughter, Marzelline. You could say that Beethoven has picked up a bit of the *Così* plot, in which the disguised lovers return to Naples and proceed to make advances to the wrong women, Ferrando coming on to Fiordiligi, Guglielmo on to Dorabella. No sooner does the intrigue start up than Beethoven puts a stop to it, revealing to the audience that young Fidelity is the ever-faithful and constant Leonore, come to Don Pizarro's prison to assert her fidelity and her *amour conjugal*, to use the exact title of Jean-Nicolas Bouilly's work, from which Beethoven took some of his material.

Nor is this all. Leonore's central aria, "Komm Hoffnung," is full of echoes of Fiordiligi's "Per pietà, ben mio" in act 2 of *Così*, which Fiordiligi sings as a last, forlorn plea to herself to remain constant and to drive away the dishonor she feels might be overcoming her as she suffers (and perhaps slightly enjoys) the impress of Ferrando's importuning: "Svenerà quest'empia voglia / L'ardir mio, la mia costanza, / Perderà la rimembranza / Che vergogna e orror mi fa" (I'll rid myself of this terrible desire with my devotion and love. I'll blot out the memory that causes me shame and horror). Memory for her is what she must try to hold on to, the guarantee of her loyalty to her lover, for if she forgets, she loses the ability to judge her present, timidly flirtatious, behavior for the shameful wavering it really is. And memory is also that which she must banish, as she recalls what she is ashamed about, her trifling with her real, but absent, lover, Guglielmo. Mozart gives her a noble, horn-accompanied figure for this avowal, a melody to be echoed in both key (E major) and instrumentation (horns) in Leonore's great appeal to hope, "lass den letzten Stern / Der Müden nicht erbleichen" (let this last star for the weary not be extinguished). But Leonore actually depends on hope and love; she does not doubt them, and although like Fiordiligi she has a secret, hers is an honorable one. There is no wavering, no doubting or timidity in Leonore, and her powerful aria, with its battery of horns proclaiming her determination and resolve, seems almost like a reproach to Fiordiligi's rather more delicate and troubled musings. Finally, Fiordiligi ends her aria on a note of regret, since she has

already embarked on her course of betrayal, whereas of course Leonore is beginning her own ordeal of constancy and redemption on behalf of her still-missing husband.

One can see that fidelity and how to represent it is an issue of importance to Beethoven—an issue with which he wrestled in *Fidelio* independently of *Così*, but I think we have to grant that something about the world of Mozart's mature and greatest operas (with the exception of *Die Zauberflöte*) kept bothering Beethoven. One, of course, is their sunny, comic, and southern setting, which amplifies and makes more difficult to accept their underlying critique and implied rejection of the middle-class virtue that seems to have meant so much to Beethoven. Even *Don Giovanni*, the one da Ponte opera that twentieth-century reinterpretations have turned into a “northern” psychodrama of neurotic drives and transgressive passions, is essentially more unsettlingly powerful when enacted as a comedy of heedlessness and enjoyable insouciance. The style of famous twentieth-century Italian Dons like Ezio Pinza, Tito Gobbi, and Cesare Siepi prevailed until the 1970s, but their characterizations have given way to those of Thomas Allen, James Morris, Francesco Furlanetto, and Samuel Ramey, who represent the Don as a dark figure heavily influenced by readings in Kierkegaard and Sigmund Freud. *Così fan tutte* is even more aggressively southern in that all its Neapolitan characters are depicted as being shifty, pleasure-centered, and, with the exception of a brief moment here and there, selfish and relatively free of guilt, even though of course what they do is, by *Fidelio*'s standards, patently reprehensible.

Thus the earnest, heavy, and deeply serious atmosphere of *Fidelio* can be seen as a reproach to *Così*, which for all its ironies and beauties—well described by recent critics like Rosen and Scott Burnham—is grippingly without any kind of gravity at all. When the two pseudo-Oriental suitors are repulsed by Fiordiligi and Dorabella at the end of act 1, they drag the sisters into a broadly comic, false suicide scene. What transpires is based on the ironic disparity between the women's earnest concern for the men and the two suitors' amused playacting, with Despina's pretending to be a Mesmer-like “medico” whom the women can't understand (“Parla un linguaggio che non sappiamo”) added on for good measure. Genuine emotion is thus undercut by the ridiculousness of what is going on. In act 2, where the disguises and playacting advance quite significantly into the emotions of the four main characters, Mozart extends the joke even further. The result is that the four do fall in love again, though with the wrong partners, and this undermines something very dear to Beethoven, constancy of identity. Whereas Leonore takes on the mask of the boy Fidelio, her disguise is designed to get her closer to, not further away from, her

real identity as faithful wife. Indeed, all the characters in *Fidelio* are rigorously circumscribed in their unvarying essence: Pizarro as unyielding villain, Florestan as champion of good, Fernando as emissary of light, and so forth. This is at the opposite pole from *Così*, where disguises, and the wavering and wandering they foster, are the norm, constancy and stability mocked at as impossible. Despina puts it quite explicitly in act 2: “Quello ch’è stato, è stato, / Scordiamci del passato. / Rompasi omai quel laccio, / Segno di servitù” (What’s done is done, and the less said, the better. Let’s break all ties to the past, as a symbol of servitude).

Maynard Solomon notes that 1813 was an unproductive year for Beethoven, immediately after which he resorted to an “ideological/heroic” manner that yielded a series of noisily inferior works “filled with bombastic rhetoric and ‘patriotic’ excesses” that “mark the nadir of Beethoven’s artistic career” (221, 223, 222). Such works as *Wellington’s Victory* and several compositions written for the Congress of Vienna belong to the same period as the revisions to *Leonore* that resulted in the 1814 *Fidelio*. Solomon suggests that this ideological heroic style can be traced back to the 1790s in such works as the Joseph and Leopold cantatas, as well as Friedelberg war songs; yet in central works—Solomon in particular cites the Third and Fifth Symphonies, *Fidelio*, and the Incidental Music to *Egmont*—this aggressive and quasi-militaristic style “was sublimated into a subtle and profound form of expression” (223). It is therefore not surprising that *Fidelio*, the last work in this series, explicitly recalls some of its predecessors, perhaps as part of its obsession with the past. A well-known example occurs in the second scene of act 2: given permission by Don Fernando to release her husband from his chains, Leonore steps forward to perform the task of liberation. The music modulates from A major to F major and proceeds to a moving oboe solo and chorus borrowed almost literally from the *Cantata on the Death of Emperor Joseph II*: in the opera the episode bestows a majestic sense of order and calm on what has so far been a turbulent and confused scene. And—a second example—in the final scene of the opera it is hard not to hear echoes of the finale of the Fifth Symphony, animated and enlivened by words and voices. In both cases there is a similar, poundingly insistent use of C major to make affirmations and possess the tonic so as to dispel any lingering shadows.

Finally, *Fidelio* as a whole can be interpreted as an attempted counter-blow to *Così fan tutte*, whose traces as an important antecedent are part of the past that Beethoven is working with. On the one hand, he incorporates the disguises, if not the malice, of *Così*; on the other, he uses unmasking as a way of asserting the virtues of the bourgeois matrimonial ideal of constancy in adversity. As I said earlier, memory in *Così fan tutte* is a faculty to be done away with in the pursuit of pleasure, whereas in *Fidelio* it is a vital part of

character and, of course, constancy. Yet at the heart of the very thing that Beethoven is arguing for—persistence, the durability of fidelity, personal character as a source of continuity—there seems always to be a contradiction that will not disappear. It is lodged there as part of the very condition of its existence. Every affirmation, every instance of truth carries with it its own negation, just as every memory of love and conjugal fidelity also brings with it the danger and usually the actuality of something that will cancel it, annul it, obliterate it. Most critics who have written about Beethoven's powerfully heroic and teleological middle-period style seem to be more successful than Beethoven was in dispelling everything but the triumphalism with which he appears always to end his middle-period works. If we look a bit more closely at *Fidelio*, however, with its background of incorporated and canceled earlier versions in mind, we will see a more gripping, much more ambiguous and self-conscious struggle going on, a struggle that I believe makes *Fidelio* a more challenging opera than it usually appears to be.

Most commentators tend to treat the opening scene, in which Jaquino and Marzelline spar over their future together (which Marzelline dreads because she has already fallen in love with her father's assistant, Fidelio), as being on an inferior level of seriousness and importance. But the scene, like most things in opera, is a hybrid of elements that do not, because they cannot, blend; this produces a kind of volatility and tension that Beethoven throughout the opera is trying to represent. It derives at the outset from the incompatibility of desires and hopes: Jaquino's wanting at last to be alone with Marzelline, her pushing him away, Fidelio's interrupting their spat with insistent knocking. Each character has a conception of time that is different and doesn't mesh with those of the others; time is urgency for the eager young swain, hope for Marzelline, and, in Fidelio's case, anticipating and waiting. What is most symbolically freighted in the scene is Fidelio's first appearance, described meticulously by Beethoven: dressed as a young man, Fidelio carries a box of provisions on her back, a letter box on one arm, and, on her other arm, a collection of chains. We see the character, who is furnishing supplies and nourishment in the present, but also her encumbrances, which represent to her—as well as to her husband and perhaps the other prisoners—punishments brought on by past behavior.

Rocco's appearance gives Beethoven an opportunity to tie together the four characters of the opening sequence using a canon at the octave, also instigated by the second-act canon of *Così fan tutte*. The idea of the canon is similar in both works, a sort of *discordia concors* in which the characters express their incompatible sentiments in a rigorous, albeit meditative and even scholastic, form. "Mir ist so wunderbar" is significant for another reason, which takes us to Beethoven's problematic of representation in the

opera and the kind of irreconcilability I mentioned earlier as hampering, and certainly rendering difficult, the affirmations he seems to be trying to make in this last version of his only opera. His choice of Bouilly's *Léonore, ou L'amour conjugal* as a story to set to music provided him, of course, with an entirely predictable rescue plot, in which wrongs are righted and the prisoners made free. One of the things we respond to in *Fidelio*, more in the last version than in the earlier versions, is the force and the authority with which one form of power is dislodged and a new, or at least much more acceptable, one is established in its place. Pizarro, the tempestuously bloody-minded tyrant, is replaced by Don Fernando, emissary of light and truth. No reason or logic is given for this salutary change except that it emanates from an offstage source of goodness and justice, concealed from and inaccessible to Florestan, Leonore, Pizarro, and the rest. Fernando makes clear to us that he has been dispatched by the monarch and is therefore a deputy, or substitute. In any event, unlike Don Alfonso, Fernando is supposed to produce a definitively salutary change in the turbulence of the social world depicted by Mozart as well as by Beethoven.

But Beethoven is not finally successful in convincing himself, or for that matter his attentive auditors, that the world of *Così* is so easily dispelled. Far from being stilled, the various doubts and uncertainties he experienced with *Fidelio* remain lodged at its heart, making the opera something more problematic, and interesting, than the simple paean to liberation and marital fidelity it is usually performed as. In part this ambiguity is an aspect of Beethoven's peculiar working through of affirmation and slump so characteristic of his other middle-period works, like the Fifth Symphony. But it is also the effect of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* gnawing away like a worm inside the sick rose, a destabilizing force that does not stop bothering, if not infecting and undermining, the imposing structure of *Fidelio*.

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