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# W. A. Mozart

## *Così fan tutte*

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## 5 *Così fan tutte, or 'La Partie carrée': the eighteenth-century context of a theatrical subject*

The privilege of enjoying stage works long after the eras that produced them comes at a considerable cost. As historical artefacts, they can never be as fresh to a modern public as they were to one contemporary with their creation. An audience's comprehension – and consequently enjoyment – suffer not only when vocabulary or concepts treated in an old play or opera are lost to history, but also when they survive with definitions or connotations that have evolved through time. The gradual winnowing of the theatrical repertory also distorts the picture: we attribute unique value to surviving pieces, or features of them, which may or may not be representative of their times. In an effort to gain some perspective on *Così fan tutte* – a most intriguing and disturbing survivor from the Viennese opera buffa repertory, in Chapter 4 we surveyed some of the more proximate sources on which its librettist likely drew. One might easily expand the circle outwards to include any number of plays satirizing Mesmerism, operas featuring exchanges of partners, or even works concerning the relations of soldiers and women.<sup>1</sup> (J. M. R. Lenz's *Die Soldaten* of 1775 presents an especially grim picture of the latter subject matter, with a remorseless realism that stands in considerable contrast to the artificiality of Da Ponte's *Così*.) In the present chapter we will examine a fairly small number of contemporary writings, chosen for the light they shed on the question of how the society of 1790s Vienna (and of the 'republic of letters') might have fitted *Così fan tutte* into its moral and philosophical universe.

### Philosophers and *philosophes*

In describing his several productions of *Così fan tutte*, director Jonathan Miller has dismissed the usual presentation of Don Alfonso as an 'old cynic'.

I have always seen him as a genuine eighteenth-century philosopher, a mixture of Diderot and Voltaire, and this means that the opera then becomes an experiment with human nature. In the first scene, to show him as a philosopher and not a joker, I had him appear at a table covered with books and classical references – the drawings of Sir William Hamilton's Neapolitan Collections, some of Galvani's early experiments on animal electricity, and there might be a mesmeric tub in his room. He is interested in all these scientific and intellectual developments of the Enlightenment. The view that ultimately all human beings are the same because all individuals partake in the nature of Man is an eighteenth-century idea. It follows that if there is any escape from a basic human nature it is achieved only by acknowledging those parts of oneself that cannot be altered.<sup>2</sup>

There is much in the libretto to support such an interpretation, even if Alfonso does often sugar the pill of his lessons with humour. He speaks explicitly of proofs and experimentation (II/9: 'Vo che faccio mo qualche altra esperienza'), and his comments on the inevitability and unpredictability of desire, regardless of any vows, have counterparts in the writings of several eighteenth-century *philosophes* (see below). But Miller's portrayal of Alfonso as an experimental social-scientist makes both too much and too little of his part in the drama. Though it is from him that the officers await their orders in the charade, Despina is the actual instigator of the Mesmerian cure:

Alf.: E come far vuoi perchè ritornino  
Or che partiti sono, e che li sentano  
E tentare si lascino  
Queste tue bestioline?

Des.: A me lasciate  
La briga di condur tutta la macchina.

(I/13: Alf.: And how do you propose to make them return, now that they have gone, and to make these two creatures of yours hear and be tempted by them? Des.: Leave to me the trouble of conducting the whole plot.)

At the same time, Miller's depiction leaves out other important aspects of 'philosophy', which to an eighteenth-century audience would have been just as evident in the character of Alfonso.

In Da Ponte's time the term 'philosopher' did not always have the same scientific or academic connotations it now does. Portrayals of philosophers on the stage were varied indeed: as sage or recluse (e.g., *Il filosofo di campagna*, a *dramma giocoso* by Goldoni from 1754), as misogynist (Hilverding's ballet *Le Philosophe amoureux*, 1758),<sup>3</sup> as an actual Enlightenment *philosophe* (Palissot's comedy *Les Philosophes*, 1760), or as a lover disguised as an ancient Greek

philosopher (Paisiello's opera *I filosofi immaginari*, 1779), to take just a few examples. The revised Richelet *Dictionnaire* of 1775 gives as its primary definition of philosophy 'love of wisdom' or 'clear and distinct knowledge of things natural and divine', but other senses of the word are given as well, including 'firmness and loftiness of mind by which one puts oneself above the accidents of life and the false opinions of the world'.<sup>4</sup> It is precisely this trait which so distinguishes Alfonso from his young friends, and which moves him to explain to them that '... in ogni cosa / Ci vuol filosofia' (philosophy is necessary in all things), after both fiancées have proven unfaithful. A 'philosophical' attitude implied a forgiving nature, as one sees at the end of *Così*, and also in an anecdote from the youth of Da Ponte's friend Giacomo Casanova, at the time newly arrived in Paris. Having just made an enormous faux pas, the embarrassed Casanova apologizes profusely. But the offended party simply laughs it off, demonstrating what Casanova called 'the practical and natural philosophy of which the French make such a noble use for the happiness of life, under the appearance of frivolity!'<sup>5</sup> As we have seen in Chapter 4, Da Ponte was well acquainted with the exploration of this sort of philosophy – particularly with regard to jealousy – in the works of the French playwright Beaumarchais.

Alfonso's talk of 'esperienza' connotes not only experiments, but also real life experience of the sort that had given him the 'gray hairs' of which he speaks in his first words in the opera, and in this sense too he can be called a 'philosopher'. But during the 'philosophical' eighteenth century the term 'philosopher' took on yet another meaning: 'one who by his libertine spirit places himself above the duties and obligations of civil and Christian life', according to the above-cited dictionary. Booksellers and readers alike referred to a broad category of 'livres philosophiques' encompassing works deemed politically subversive, blasphemous or pornographic in varying degrees. (Sade made the erotic connection explicit, in his *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* of 1795.) If the subject matter of *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* tended towards these first two descriptions, respectively, the preliminary version of Da Ponte's libretto for *Così fan tutte* bordered on being 'philosophical' in the latter sense, with Guglielmo's mildly obscene mention of 'qualche altro capitale' in 'Rivolgete a lui lo sguardo'; even the final libretto still contained all but the last word of an obscene rhyme (see Synopsis, II/8). The conjunction in *Così* of Alfonso's talk of 'filosofia', Despina's commendations of a libertine lifestyle, and Guglielmo's off-colour

provocations made for a broad target, for those suspicious of philosophy's encroachments on traditional morality.

If we put aside for the moment the more secondary aspects of philosophy in *Così*, there remains a core of ideas on love, fidelity and enlightenment for which models can readily be found in the writings of eighteenth-century *philosophes*. The entire opera is premised on Rousseau's notion that experience precedes understanding. Alfonso cannot simply tell the soldiers that women are inconstant, or the sisters that they know precious little about love. If they are to truly learn his lessons, they must experience the pain that comes from being undecieved of their initial notions. The cruelty for which Don Alfonso has so often been criticized is the same as that of the tutor in Rousseau's *Émile, ou De l'éducation*, whose pedagogy amounts to 'a minutely organized and vigilantly executed conspiracy'.<sup>6</sup> His deceptions can only be revealed at a moment when his pupil is sufficiently mature and experienced to appreciate the reasons for them. As Jonathan Miller, Nicholas Till and others have noted, Alfonso seems also to know his Diderot, in whose works the promises of lovers are repeatedly mocked:

The first vows sworn by two creatures of flesh and blood were made at the foot of a rock that was crumbling to dust; they called as witness to their constancy a heaven which never stays the same for one moment; everything within them and around them was changing, and they thought their hearts were exempt from vicissitudes. Children!<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, before her first aria Despina dismisses her mistress's talk of fidelity, saying, 'Come now! The days of telling such tales to children are past!' It is Despina, not Alfonso, who presents the most complete 'philosophy' of love in *Così fan tutte*. The creed she recites just before the first finale is a mixture of proverbial folk-wisdom and current 'naturalist' philosophy, probably learnt second-hand. The taking of a second lover, she declares, is not merely prudence, but a 'law of nature'.

... amor cos'è?

Piacere, comodo, gusto,

Gioia, divertimento,

Passatempo, allegria: non è più amore

Se incomodo diventa:

Se invece di piacer nuoce e tormenta.

(I/13: What is love? Pleasure, convenience, taste, joy, diversion, pastime, enjoyment: it is no longer love if it becomes inconvenient, if instead of being pleasant it harms and causes pain.)

Thus would Sade declare that virtue becomes a vice when it conflicts with the laws of nature.<sup>8</sup> Despina picks up the thread of her casuistic discourse on love at the beginning of the next act, explaining that an infidelity is harmless if no one finds out about it.

Though Despina helps devise the patently transparent ruses of Alfonso's plot, she is also taken in by it: 'the trickster tricked', as in many a folk tradition, and numerous comic operas as well.<sup>9</sup> Her deep disappointment upon learning that the Albanians are in fact the original lovers, and on seeing the willingness of the sisters to return to their forgiving fiancés, demonstrates the ultimate hollowness of her libertinism. In any case, even at the height of the Josephinian liberalism, it would have been most unusual for a philosophy as licentious as hers to go unchallenged at the dénouement of a work for the stage.

The conflicting claims of passion, reason and honour on the human heart were central concerns of eighteenth-century opera, but only because these had long figured among the essential topics of European literature. At the beginning of Canto 11 of *Orlando furioso*, for instance, as Ruggero put out of mind his beloved Bradamante and pursued the more available Angelica, Ariosto had commented:

Quantunque debil freno a mezzo In mid career the rider oft restrains  
il corso  
animoso destrier spesso raccogla, The fiery courser's speed with gentle  
reins;  
raro è però che di ragione il But seldom reason's curb will hold  
morso confin'd  
libidinosa furia a dietro Th' unruly passions of an amorous  
volga... mind.

Nor did writers need to await the discovery of Tahiti in order to concern themselves with the relative merits of 'civilised' and 'natural' models of love. From Antiquity through the Renaissance and beyond, the pastoral tradition is replete with dialogues in which examples from nature are adduced in support of either constancy or infidelity. Had Diderot needed a model, he could have found one close at hand in the contest of suitors – a flighty Frenchman, jealous Spaniard and 'innocent' native – in the entrée 'Les Sauvages' in Fuzelier and Rameau's *opéra-ballet Les Indes galantes* of 1735, or in the parody of it by Favart. The difference is that in *Così* the game is pursued much further, by contemporary protagonists with whom an audience could identify more readily.

### Pezzl on love and Enlightenment

As a cosmopolitan city and the capital of an empire, Vienna provided a ready market for guide books describing its monuments and the customs and occupations of its inhabitants. One such guide had been published in 1770 by Joseph Weiskern, one of the leading playwrights for the city's German theatre. Another, the *Skizze von Wien* (Sketch of Vienna) by Johann Pezzl, a brother Mason from Mozart's own lodge, appeared in instalments between 1786 and 1790: precisely the same span of years of the composer's collaboration with Da Ponte. Pezzl was an enthusiastic supporter of Emperor Joseph's wide-ranging reforms; this is clear not only from comments in his *Skizze*, but also from a 'philosophical' novel he had published in 1783, a copy of which is listed in the inventory of books in Mozart's possession upon his death.<sup>10</sup> In the *Skizze von Wien* Pezzl is at pains to distinguish between the 'true Enlightenment', into which it was necessary to be initiated, and the 'nonsensical clamourings... during the last decade (more or less) concerning the word "Enlightenment"', by the hordes of writers emboldened by Joseph's easing of censorship.<sup>11</sup> Most of these pamphleteers had understood and digested the notions of the *philosophes* only imperfectly, and Pezzl has to admit that the larger part of the Viennese public was still at the initial stage of giving up its old prejudices. Here he is speaking mainly of the lower orders of society; aristocrats, who constituted a substantial portion of the Burgtheater audience, and who in any case were generally well-travelled, had had no difficulty in procuring the writings of the French *philosophes* even at the height of Maria Theresia's censorship.

Pezzl's discussions of love and philosophy are intertwined to a certain extent, and though optimistic elsewhere with regard to the progress of Enlightenment locally, in his chapters 'On love', 'On gallantry' and 'On marriage' he shows a cynicism nearly equal to that of Despina. The city's cultivated bachelors, he says, 'have taken as their creed in the dogma of love the oracular pronouncement of the wise Buffon.'

'O Love!' exclaims this great philosopher, 'O Love! . . . Why are you responsible for the happy condition of all beasts and the unhappiness of mankind? . . . This is so', answers the philosopher himself, 'because only the physical part of this passion is good; because the moral component . . . is good for nothing, etc.'

Who feels strong enough to contradict the great philosopher?<sup>12</sup>

At the beginning of the century, Pezzl relates, Viennese of all classes still fell madly in love, and until a decade or so previously (i.e. about 1775), some flickerings of such passions were still to be found in the novels of the *Sturm und Drang*; but

this paroxysm, too, is now past. In any case it was never able to take root in Vienna, or in any large city where one possessed knowledge of the world and its manners [Welkenntnis und Lebensart].<sup>13</sup>

The wise modern lover, Pezzl says, moves on to a new beauty before boredom sets in. True love was not entirely dead in Vienna, he says, it was just confined to the middle and lower classes. Even the lesser nobility generally married for reasons of financial or social standing. Since these intentions are quite open, and the bride fully realizes that matters turn not on her person, but on an important matter of secondary interest, she entertains no illusions about her husband's true affections and is in no wise disappointed in her expectations. She marries him because by doing so she can become a matron, live more easily and be mistress of the house. . . but now she has the choice of a lover who will provide compensation for her husband's bored indifference.<sup>14</sup>

Pezzl's representation of love and marriage in Vienna, if accurate, has possible implications for the genesis and reception of *Così fan tutte*. Da Ponte and Mozart could be fairly sure that the Burgtheater public would have quickly seen through the 'paroxysms' of the Ferrarese sisters' grief and the 'wild outbursts of passion' on the part of their suitors, and smiled knowingly as Alfonso scoffed at the lovers' 'smorfie del secolo passato'. And, to judge by Pezzl's account, the spectators would have been able to predict long before the dénouement that the original lovers would reunite.

It is incontrovertibly boring and monotonous, the way love, eternal love, is chewed over in all our comedies, and by straight and crooked paths the play always has to end in a wedding. But on top of that it is even more intolerable that all this business of love and marriage is represented in a completely false and perverted manner. The theatre should be the mirror of life: How falsely it reflects!<sup>15</sup>

Da Ponte was perfectly aware how expected was the wedding at the end of every comedy, even playing upon this expectation in the second-act finale of *Le nozze di Figaro*:

{Sus., Eh via, chetati, balordo,  
{Cnt.sa: La burletta ha da finir.  
Fig.: Per finirla lietamente  
E all'usanza teatrale,

Un'azion matrimoniale  
Le farem ora seguir.

{Sus., Cnt.sa: Come now, be quiet, you blockhead, this comedy's got to come to an end. Fig.: In order to finish it happily, and according to theatrical practice, we'll proceed to the marriage ceremony.)

But it was Da Ponte's intention in *Così fan tutte* neither merely to retail to his audience the usual collection of clichés on love, nor to mock them with the same wry sarcasm as does Pezzl in his *Skizze*. Drawing on sources far older than his own century, and showing rather more optimism than Pezzl, Da Ponte used his libretto as a tool in the further enlightenment of his Viennese public. By showing them the real sufferings of a Fiordiligi wracked by guilt, and the redeeming possibility of forgiveness, he encouraged them to consider a richer emotional existence than the sensualist lives many of them were currently living. But the extent to which this message was the one actually taken away by spectators was dependent also on Mozart's music, which necessarily altered the emphases, tone and even comprehensibility of Da Ponte's poetry.

#### Casanova: '...così son tutte'

Da Ponte wrote the libretto to *Così fan tutte* with a specific Viennese audience in mind, whose theatrical preferences and experiences were well known to him. But no matter how much he tried to accommodate this audience's expectations, it was inevitable that his text would also betray his own Venetian background, in ways small and large. (The presence of Albanian noblemen would have aroused far less curiosity in that Adriatic port than in the Austrian capital, for instance.) In view of the opera's central preoccupation with questions of fidelity and betrayal, it would seem worthwhile to turn to the writings of that other notorious Venetian and libertine, Giacomo Casanova, to see how they might resonate with the language and subject matter of *Così*. Casanova is an particularly apt touchstone, in that he was a friend of Da Ponte, an occasional visitor to Vienna and its spectacles, and even tangentially involved with the shaping of the text of *Don Giovanni*.<sup>16</sup>

Casanova's memoirs show him constantly under the spell of fictions both literary and theatrical. Like Da Ponte, he had read *Orlando furioso* 'a hundred times', 'knew it by heart' and made it a

guiding force in his life.<sup>17</sup> He was wont to refer to a situation he found himself in as a 'scène vraiment dramatique', or as a 'pièce [qui] touchait au dénouement' – not surprisingly, given that many of his friends and lovers came from theatrical circles. Indeed, the pages of his memoirs include numerous locutions that might easily have been taken from the libretto of *Così*. So sure is he, on one of the many occasions when he wagers on the virtue (or otherwise) of a woman, that he states his willingness to stake 'a hundred sequins, and a thousand, if you wish' (cf. I/1: *Alf.*: Cento zecchini. *Gugl.*: E mille, se volete).<sup>18</sup> Recounting an actress's protestations of outrage at his suggestion that her favours might be bought, he reverts to his native tongue and comments 'but I knew what really to think, for *così son tutte*'.<sup>19</sup> These and similar episodes in Casanova's memoirs (of which there are many), do much to remove the stain of 'inverisimilitude' from the plot of *Così*.

More importantly, in his memoirs Casanova gives voice to several of the same ideas on love as do the characters in *Così fan tutte*. He is more inclined to Despina's point of view than Alfonso's, despite the efforts of his father-figure, the very Alfonso-like 'Monsieur' (Matteo Giovanni) Bragadin. At one point the Venetian senator arranges a lesson by which he hopes to cure the young Casanova of gambling, but his pupil calls the demonstration 'too empirical', adding that 'I so feared his remedies that I preferred being sick to getting well by making use of them'.<sup>20</sup> In discussing his amorous affairs, Casanova is prone to the same worldly cynicism one finds in the speeches of Despina and in Pezzl's *Skizze*. A prudent husband will not wish to ask his wife if she is a virgin, he says, for he can never be sure of the truth.<sup>21</sup> Far from condemning two Parisian noblemen who trade wives, Casanova explains the arrangement 'according to the laws of gravitation'.<sup>22</sup> And in one of his frequent displays of casuistry, he justifies his infidelity to a current *immorata* by noting that she is shut up in a convent and will never find out.<sup>23</sup> One of Casanova's more prolonged bursts of philosophizing concerns precisely the same issue as Alfonso's bet:

If, when I hear certain women call perfidious the men whom they accuse of inconstancy, I would have heard them assert that these men were planning to deceive them when they made a promise of eternal fidelity, I would say that they were right, and I would gladly join my complaints to theirs; but none of them can, since in general, at the instant when one falls in love, one only promises that which the heart dictates, and consequently their lamentations only excite in me the need to laugh. Alas! we love without consulting reason, and cease to love without its becoming any more involved than before.<sup>24</sup>

All but the last sentence of this speech might easily be put in the mouth of Don Alfonso. But whereas Casanova merely laments the irrationality of desire, Alfonso – and by the end of the opera, all the characters – realize that one may lessen the ill effects of this irrationality by ceasing to cherish illusions, and by trusting in societal bonds to provide the stability that is not to be expected from human affections alone.

Libertine philosophy is espoused with similar frankness in Choderlos de Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782), whose protagonists coolly manipulate the affections of others in a manner suggestive of Da Ponte's Alfonso and Despina. Here, too, the game backfires, but the sufferings of the Marquise de Merteuil – constituting a sort of divine punishment for her sins – are of a very different order from those of Fiordiligi. And at the close of the novel's final letter, Mme de Volanges's declaration that reason is 'unable in the first place to prevent our misfortunes, [and] is even less equal to consoling us for them',<sup>25</sup> offers a moral diametrically opposed to that of *Così*.

### *Parties carrées*

Not only the supposed immorality of *Così fan tutte*, but also the exaggerated symmetry of its plot has prevented many persons from taking the opera seriously. Aleksandr Ulybyshev, in his 1843 biography of Mozart, wrote that

The foursome [partie quarrée] joins up, advances, mixes, and unjoins with such regularity and symmetry, that the *ad hoc* scenes resemble rather well the figures of a contredanse.<sup>26</sup>

Ulybyshev's use of the expression 'partie carrée' was not neutral, for already in the eighteenth century this term for an outing by two couples had acquired licentious connotations – as one can sense from the ambiguous crossing of gazes in Watteau's painting of that title. Implicit in the biographer's criticism is the notion that the artifice and symmetry of Da Ponte's libretto precluded the serious exploration of psychological issues; Ulybyshev states explicitly that these features were incompatible with 'dramatic truth'. Much the same has been said of Goethe's novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (Elective affinities) of 1809, in which predictions, coincidences and symmetries operate by a sort of human chemistry as two married couples meet, separate and realign, with disastrous results. In a manner reminiscent of *Così fan tutte*, the novel had a troubled



reception throughout the nineteenth century, not fully coming into its own until recent decades. It is not even out of the question that Da Ponte and Mozart's opera was in the back of Goethe's mind as he wrote his novel, as he had been responsible for the Weimar premiere of *Così* in 1797, and for keeping it in the repertory long afterward. If so, then the novel is at least indirect evidence that Goethe appreciated full well the profundity of sentiment that lay beneath the opera's frivolous exterior.

Throughout *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* Goethe's narrative devices loudly call attention to themselves (as do Da Ponte's in *Così*), putting the issue of infidelity before the reader, and even in the mouths of the protagonists, well in advance of any actual betrayals. In the opening pages the principal couple, Eduard (originally named Otto) and Charlotte, discuss the number of persons the new moss hut in their garden might comfortably accommodate – four, they decide, in a self-conscious way that makes portentous the introduction of a second couple (the Captain and Ottilie) immediately afterward. In both opera and novel the names of the characters are endowed with almost talismanic significance: in their origins in Ariosto, in the one case, in their basis in the same (symmetrical) name Otto in the other.<sup>27</sup> There is even something of an Alfonso-figure in *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, a wise old friend named Mittler ('mediator'), who acts as a catalyst at several points in the story. As in many a demonstration comedy, the title word 'Wahlverwandtschaften' is conspicuously introduced into the discussion. Responding to the Captain's use of the word to describe the spontaneous realignment of elements in a chemical reaction, Charlotte unwittingly predicts her own future affair with him, in so doing echoing Despina's talk of an amorous 'legge di natura' and Alfonso's of a 'necessità del core':

... here I would see not a choice, but rather a necessity of nature, and hardly even this: for in the end it is perhaps simply a matter of opportunity. Opportunity makes relationships, as it does thieves; and if one is speaking of natural bodies, then it seems to me that the choice lies solely in the hands of the chemist who brings them together. Once they are together, then God help them!<sup>28</sup>

And as in Pezzl's *Skizze*, the theatre's falsely optimistic picture of life is attacked as dangerously misleading:

In the theatre we see a marriage as the final goal of a wish delayed by various obstacles through several acts, and in the moment that it is attained, the curtain falls, and the momentary satisfaction echoes on in us. In the world it is otherwise; there one goes on playing out of view, and when the curtain goes up again, one would not want to see or hear any of it.<sup>29</sup>

Beaumarchais, in his Revolutionary-era play *La Mère coupable*, had once again raised the curtain on the characters of *Le Barbier de Séville* and *Le Mariage de Figaro*, and revealed a number of dark consequences of their earlier actions. One might equally well ask how the lovers of *Così fan tutte* would fare, if examined in the same way.

The speech of the stonemason – a peripheral character – is perhaps the passage most laden with significance in all of Goethe's novel. As he lays the cornerstone for the new forest cottage, a project principally of the two characters drifting into adultery, the mason draws an analogy between the mortar he applies with his trowel, and the bonds of matrimony:

We could lay this cornerstone . . . without further ado, for it rests firmly by its own weight. But even here lime and mortar should not be lacking, for just as people who are naturally inclined towards one another are bound together even better when cemented by the law, thus also stones whose shapes already match are united even better by this binding power. . . .<sup>30</sup>

The moral is lost on the protagonists, whose unhappy fates ultimately stand as an object lesson to the reader. The novel ends with a final, ironic symmetry, as Charlotte decides that the vault in which her husband and his lover Ottilie are buried will not hold any further remains – a reflection of the scene in the *Mooshütte* at the very beginning of the story, where she had similarly calculated the capacity of a small space. The artifice used here is very much like that employed throughout *Così fan tutte*, but in a context of sentimentality quite foreign to Da Ponte's aesthetic.

With much the same advocacy of reason and order (though with hardly a trace of humour), in *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* Goethe navigated the same shoals of trust and desire as had Da Ponte and Mozart in *Così fan tutte*. The formalism exhibited by this novel demonstrates the lingering appeal of Enlightenment ideals for at least some who had come to maturity during the Age of Reason. One senses this also in a much humbler literary work of the early nineteenth century, a dialogue in the *Theatralischer Guckkasten* (Theatrical peep-show) of 1807, by the Viennese actor, playwright and feuilletonist Joachim Perinet. Though he himself wrote exclusively for the city's German theatres, starting in the year of Mozart's death, Perinet expresses nostalgia for the golden age of Vienna's foreign stages, using as mouthpieces 'The Man' and 'Clown' ('Bajazzo', from the Italian *pagliaccio*):

Der Mann: Jetzt sehen Sie hier Glucks Alcest' und Iphigenie  
Mozart in seiner Blüthe, das Hauptgenie.

Bajazzo: Seinen Don Juan, Così fan tutti [sic] und Figaro,  
Ach! ich wollte die Zeiten wären noch so. . .

(*The Man*: Now you see here Gluck's *Alceste* and *Iphigénie*,  
Mozart in his prime, the chief genius. His *Don Giovanni*, *Così fan*  
*tutte* and *Figaro*, / *Clown*: Ah! I wish the times were still like  
that. . .)<sup>31</sup>

As the Josephinian era receded ever farther into the past, the general public found it increasingly difficult to relate to the rigorous symmetry, lighthearted philosophizing and general farcicality of *Così fan tutte*. Productions of the opera consequently became less frequent, and more prone to distortion. Yet Mozart had so well transmuted into musical terms Da Ponte's fundamental sympathy for human frailty, that open-minded listeners did not fail to be captivated by the work. In more recent times, better acquaintance with the poetic and musical conventions of Mozart's time, and with the rest of his operas, has allowed one to see more specifically *how* Mozart and Da Ponte achieved what they did. But as Bajazzo sensed, the times in which such a work as *Così* might be created are long past.

## 6 The musical dramaturgy of the opera

### Overall structure

As was seen in Chapter 4, Da Ponte's substitution of 'femmine' for 'amanti' in the Metastasian phoenix-quatrain skewed the symmetry of the accusation. Though Despina, echoing Ariosto's Rinaldo (43:49), tells her mistresses that the men, too, would find solace in other arms if given the chance, there is no demonstration of male inconstancy equivalent to the test the women are put through. One may attribute this to the poet's misogyny, or to his wish to avoid the repetitions that had marred Casti's *Grotta di Trofonio*, but in any case the decision had crucial repercussions for the structure and working-out of *Così*. Alfonso's contention that all women – 'gio-vani, vecchie, e belle, e brutte' – are potentially faithless, inspired Mozart to find musical analogues for the lovers' similarities, and for their differences. This did not escape the notice of Constanze Mozart. When asked her opinion of *Così fan tutte* by Vincent Novello in 1829, she

remarked that in 'Di scrivermi' (which I [Novello] guessed was one of his great favourites) you could actually fancy the sobs and tears of the performers – [she] also noticed the extraordinary *difference* of the melodies he has assigned to the various characters and the wonderful appropriateness of them.<sup>1</sup>

Given Da Ponte's intention to show that seductions attempted on women of differing characters would have the same result, his distribution of pieces in the opera is a logical one (see Table 6.1).

The singers' traditional rights to a certain number of sufficiently varied arias (here, one in each act) were respected,<sup>2</sup> but even so, the predominance of ensembles is striking. Furthermore, within each act, the arias for the four lovers come quite late; it is as if the creators were determined to deny the protagonists the usual operatic opportunities for reflection until after they have become ensnared in