

St. Petersburg Opera presents *Così fan tutte*

By Tampa Performing Arts Examiner, Jessica Cross

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The St. Petersburg Opera Company presented a phenomenal production of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* this past weekend, running January 15th through the 17th. Saturday night's performance was well worth braving the rain for. *Così fan tutte*, or *The School for Lovers*, was typical Mozart. It was lively, light music with slyly humorous sexual innuendo interjected throughout.

The first act began with Ferrando, played by Brian Kuhl, and Guglielmo, played by Steven LaBrie, extolling the eternal fidelity and beauty of their respective fiancées, Dorabella and Fiordiligi, to their friend Don Alfonso, played by Benjamin LeClair. Reminiscent of Verdi's *Rigoletto*, where the duke sings of the fickleness of women, Don Alfonso lays a wager that the ladies' faithfulness will waver if the gentlemen are "called away" to war. Much humor ensues when the gentlemen "leave" and sneak back, disguised as Albanians. Then they begin wooing the others fiancé to test her love and fidelity. Mr. LeClair played the perfect vaudeville like villain, lurking around corners and enlisting the ladies' servant Despina, played by Michelle Seipel, in his scheme. He had a strong and hypnotizing voice. However, the ladies shone even more with their beautiful singing and comedic staging.

The fiancées, two sisters, begin the second act listening to Despina relating the inconstancy of men and telling them they should enjoy themselves with the Albanians. Dorabella, played by Toby Newman, and Fiordiligi, played by Perri Montane, decide that there is no harm in a light flirtation with the Albanians. The gentlemen get more than they bargained for when first one and then the other lady succumbs to their charms. The final scene begins with a charade double wedding where all is finally revealed to the ladies. All is forgiven and Don Alfonso gives his final advice, saying to overcome a situation like this only made future troubles laughable and easily forgotten.

Each of the ladies sang separately, together, and interwoven with the gentlemen with style and laughter. Although Ms. Montane was a bit flat on her high notes in act one, she rallied and sang beautifully before intermission. Her duets with Ms. Newman were so lovely they brought tears to the eyes of many in the audience. Ms. Newman had the entire audience laughing continuously from falling up the stairs to hang onto her departing love's leg to learning coquetry from Ms. Seipel. She has such a clear voice and amazing range that it gave listeners delightful shivers. But Ms. Seipel almost stole the show with her wonderful singing, incredibly expressive face, and her ability to fire off in rapid Italian like she was born to it.

Mark Sforzini was the conductor and artistic director for the production. Not only did he conduct the orchestra, but the singers took his cues as well. The small orchestra filled the hall with flawlessly executed music at his direction. He is to be commended along with the musicians and singers for such a well done presentation of Mozart.

The best part of the evening was the intimate atmosphere of the Palladium where the *Così fan tutte* showed. It is a small venue, but the acoustics and the present company made it cozy indeed. The St. Petersburg Opera Company is presenting *Carmen* June 4-6 at the Palladium. After such a pleasurable evening seeing *Così fan tutte*, *Carmen* will be a treat to see.



Benjamin Bunsold, Toby Newman, Cassandra Black, Steven LaBrie, Benjamin LeClair Photo by Keith Arsenault



Benjamin LeClair and Michelle Seipel Photo by Alberta Pizzolato



Cassandra Black and Toby Newman Photo by Alberta Pizzolato