

St. Petersburg Opera excels in pacing and performance in Mozart's 'Cosi Fan Tutte'

By [John Fleming](#), Times Performing Arts Critic

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ST. PETERSBURG — It's conventional to mock the absurdity of the plot of *Cosi Fan Tutte*, the Mozart opera whose title is translated as "Women are like that." But that is in the abstract. In a strong performance, the libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte is surprisingly involving, give or take a few ludicrous details (Albanians?).

Mostly the opera is persuasive because of Mozart's penetrating music, but the libretto may also be da Ponte's best (and he also wrote *Don Giovanni* and *Le Nozze di Figaro*). It combines a madcap farce on the attraction between men and women with a touching farewell to innocence.

St. Petersburg Opera excelled Friday in the first of three performances this weekend of *Cosi Fan Tutte* at the Palladium Theater. Right from the brisk pacing of the overture under artistic director Mark Sforzini, the orchestra and singers had a sure grasp of the masterful score, a huge swath of complex music as the evening clocked in around three hours, including an intermission.

Nothing against the three male principals, but the three women have the best of it in *Cosi Fan Tutte*. Fiordiligi and Dorabella, the society sisters from Ferrara, go through quite a transformation when their boyfriends, Ferrando and Guglielmo, take a bet from their pal Don Alfonso to leave town and return in disguise as mustachioed Albanians. Each tries to seduce the opposite partner to prove or disprove Alfonso's premise on the faithlessness of women. Then there's Despina, the sisters' scene-stealing maid.

As Fiordiligi, Cassandra Black was dazzling in coloratura arias such as *Come scoglio* (Like a rock). Toby Newman's Dorabella had the winsome allure of one of the hapless young heroines in the movies of Eric Rohmer, the great French director who died last week, and she blended beautifully with Black in *Soave sia il vento* (May the wind be gentle). Michelle Seipel was a delight as the vivacious, cynical Despina, scoffing in her aria, "Do you expect men to be faithful?"

Benjamin Bunsold and Steven LaBrie were suitably matey in bonding as Ferrando and Guglielmo, respectively. Bunsold is not an especially warm tenor, but he brought passionate delicacy to *Un'aura amorosa* (A breath of love). Benjamin LeClair's Alfonso schooled the lovers with oily manipulateness.

Cosi Fan Tutte was directed by American Stage producing artistic director Todd Olson, and the cast benefited from his theatrical savvy by acting believably while letting their singing work its magic. Scott Cooper's set solved the Palladium's problematic space by placing the action on a platform, elevated at the back, that surrounded the orchestra. Not only was the structure attractive in a minimalistic sort of way, but it also served well the spying aspects of the story, as when Guglielmo watched in agony from the back as Ferrando and Fiordiligi made love on the staircase.

Costume designer Michael Della Penna had fun with the sisters' flamboyant outfits that captured their status as empty-headed, bright young things.

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'Cosi Fan Tutte'

St. Petersburg Opera Company performs the Mozart opera in Italian with English supertitles at the Palladium Theater. 2 p.m. today. \$20-\$61.50. (727) 822-3590; stpeteopera.org.

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