



## SEEN AND HEARD INTERNATIONAL OPERA REVIEW

***Così fan tutte***: at the Estonian National Opera, 17.10.2009 (Premiere)(GF)

Directed by Walter Sutcliffe  
 Set designer: Liina Keevallik  
 Lighting designer: Neeme Jõe

Cast:

Aile Asszonyi – Fiordiligi  
 Helen Lokuta – Dorabella  
 Rauno Elp – Guglielmo  
 Oliver Kuusik – Ferrando  
 Mart Laur – Don Alfonso  
 Kristina Vähi – Despina

Estonian National Opera Chorus and Orchestra / Arvo Volmer

*Così fan tutte* is possibly Mozart's subtlest opera – at least musically, opinions are divided when it comes to the libretto. The overture with its transparent strings and gently conversational woodwind sets the tone, and throughout the score abounds with delicate orchestral colours. Also the vocal writing is marvellously sensitive and Mozart cleverly matches the voices in the many ensembles, none more magical than the trio *Soave sia il vento*.

I have heard Arvo Volmer on a number of occasions but never in Mozart. His handling of the overture at once made it clear that he is equally at home in 18<sup>th</sup> century repertoire as he has turned out to be in Wagner and Verdi as well as in contemporary music. The lightness was there from the outset and his choice of tempos seemed ideal. Maybe in a larger and more resonant house he might have slowed down a bit but the slightly dry acoustics in the beautiful Estonian National Opera House is perfect for Mozart.

Walter Sutcliffe and Liina Keevallik have chosen to present the different scenes as a number of paintings of various sizes. For scenes with several characters in action the full width of the stage was used and the lower gold frame of the painting then became a threshold, on which the characters could stand, sit and even lie down and sometimes in a solo a singer could climb over it onto the bare front stage – leaving the picture and approaching the audience to convey his/her message more personally. In the final ensemble, when everything is sorted out, the whole ensemble stepped out, as if saying: 'Here we are. Now it's over!' Just as often, however, the size of the frame was just reduced to fit just one singer and even once or twice showing only a portrait. The idea is brilliant and the concept worked splendidly. There is no attempt to modernize the opera. Sets and costumes are late 18<sup>th</sup> century and very beautiful.



*Così fan tutte* is of course a comedy – and a witty one at that. All those 18<sup>th</sup> century conventions with disguises and mistaken identities may seem rather silly today, and I know people who refuse to see Mozart operas for that reason. But as long as one accepts these conventions *Così* is elegant and very often moving entertainment and for those with less sophisticated taste there are some quite burlesque scenes, not least when Despina is disguised as doctor in the first act and as notary in the marriage scene in act II. But there is elegance and a certain distance in the acting also here and Kristina Vähi doesn't overplay the farce. All along the line the acting is stylish but there are scenes that cry out for slapstick treatment and then they really let their hair down. The scene where the Albanians pretend to commit suicide by eating arsenic is just one example.

Also vocally the premiere ensemble was very good, though a couple of the singers took some time to warm up. Rauno Elp's voice is arguably too heavy for Guglielmo but he made a convincing portrait of Fiordiligi's lover and crowned his achievement with a fine reading of the aria *Donne miei*. His colleague Ferrando requires a flexible lyric voice and Oliver Kuusik found the right melting tone for *Un'aura amorosa* and was marvellously sensitive in the duet *Fra gli amplessi*. There Aile Asszonyi confirmed what she had already demonstrated throughout the performance: that she is a brilliant Mozart singer. Perhaps her greatest moment this evening was the aria *Per pietà*. Helen Lokuta is a singer I have admired in a number of performances at the Estonian National Opera and she was a splendid Dorabella, although she uncharacteristically sounded a bit worn a couple of times.

Kristina Vähi was a charming Despina, rather plucky and singing with glittering elegance. As the wirepuller Don Alfonso Mart Laur managed to be scheming and cynical while at the same time standing out as a rather humane person. 'I taught you a lesson, but it was for your own good', he seemed to say.

A couple of years ago I reviewed the new Stockholm production of *Così fan tutte* (see [review](#)). I was overwhelmed then and the whole performance still lingers very clearly in my memory. That was in many ways a revolutionary production. The Estonian National Opera's new production is much closer to the original concept. I rarely turn down a production for that reason and this is a very attractive, innovative and well executed rendering of this controversial but immortal masterpiece.

### ***Göran Forsling***

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