

## City Opera Company Offers a Fitting Tribute to Mozart

Written by Abbie Dombrock

Tuesday, 17 January 2006 18:00

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Over the weekend, the City Opera Company of the Quad Cities presented several events celebrating the musical genius (and the 250th birthday) of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. The opera *Così fan tutte* and the Mozart Gala Concert integrated delicate ballet, raucous theatre, talented chamber orchestra, and a cast of soloists, who together gave us a taste of what Mozart did best: pleasing his audiences. During his short life, he wrote more than 600 pieces, many at the request of and to please others. The pieces presented were varied: from slapstick comedy to a memorial to a sacred part of the mass. But we still experienced only a fraction of the variety of music Mozart composed over his lifetime.

An opera *buffa* (comic opera written in Italian), *Così fan tutte* (or “They’re all like that”) was written at the suggestion of Emperor Joseph II. The same emperor motivated Mozart to write his first opera at the age of 12. Unlike his first attempt, which ended in chaos after the performers revolted against being directed by the youngster,

*Così fan tutte*

was successfully performed in one of the most popular theatres in Vienna. Later, theatres refused to present the opera for almost 150 years because it was thought risqué.

Librettist Lorenzo da Ponte presents a story of love and fidelity, themes that have tested hearts for hundreds of years. In an emotional storm of passion, wretchedness, and ridiculousness, *Così fan tutte*

demonstrates Mozart’s ability to combine these time-tested concerns with comic relief in a way that appeals to even the most skeptical audience members.

Once I got over the improbability of all these events happening in a single day, the plot was absorbing. The sage Don Alfonso proves to his two younger friends, Ferrando and Guglielmo, that all women will be unfaithful if given the chance. He bets that their lovers, Fiordiligi and Dorabella, will give their hearts to other men after only one day. After pretending to go to war, the men disguise themselves (badly) as foreigners and try to woo the other’s girlfriend. Spurred on by their servant, Despina, the two women give in. When they find out they’ve been tricked, they ask for forgiveness, and all ends well.

Lighthearted and sometimes silly, the presentation of *Così fan tutte* on Friday at St. Ambrose’s Galvin Fine Arts Center was the most fun I’ve had at an opera. Over-the-top facial expressions,

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smart staging, a good set, and clever interpretation made this a joy to watch. Within the first minute of the production both leading male characters had removed their pants. They were merely changing their clothes, but the sight of the men in nothing but boxers, a dress shirt, and a pair of socks gesturing emphatically with racquetball racquets was a telling beginning to the evening. Later, the ladies' servant appears disguised as a doctor, transformed with curly wig, top hat, and handlebar mustache. Consulting her "doctor" bag, she pulls out sundry tools including a hammer, wrench, and pliers before finding the odd magnet with which she cures the seemingly poisoned Ferrando and Guglielmo. Innumerable instances of physical and situational comedy occurred on-stage, and the actors were convincing in their portrayals.

Each performer contributed incredible vocal talent, made even more impressive by the fact that they were gallivanting about the stage as they sang. Their voices were powerful and complemented each other well, but I was especially impressed with soprano Suzanne Ramo. She played Fiordiligi, convincing us that it's perfectly natural to waver from steadfast love for her former lover to a willingness to marry her new lover – all within the space of a few scenes.

Mozart loved to write opera and was obviously talented at writing the opera *buffa*. But his musical mind was overflowing with symphonies, masses, chamber music, cantatas, dances, marches – you get the idea.

On Saturday night, we heard just a few of these more serious pieces at the Mozart Gala at the Capitol Theatre in downtown Davenport. The evening began with the overture to *Così fan tutte*, the instrumental introduction that had kicked off the previous night's performance. Next, soprano soloist Angela Hand performed *Exsultate Jubilate*

. A beautifully serious piece, the motet was one of Mozart's earlier compositions, written in 1773 when he was seven. Hand's voice had so much vibrato at the beginning that it was difficult to tell which note she was actually singing, but, by the end of the piece, she became more comfortable and nailed each note with ease.

Next, performers from Ballet Quad Cities danced to *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, a piece some surmise was a memorial to his father. Whimsically choreographed, the dancers gracefully portrayed a group of excited girls playing at a slumber party. The City Opera Company orchestra ended the evening with *Symphony No. 40 in G Minor*

. I felt the wind section of this ensemble was the highlight, although the entire group adequately performed the piece.

The pieces played this weekend were just a taste of what Mozart accomplished during his lifetime. His ability to please even the most exacting members of royalty, clergy, and the masses is probably what immortalized him and brings his music to our ears today.

If you missed last weekend's events, you can catch the Quad City Symphony Orchestra's chamber concert at 8 p.m. on January 21 at The Outing Club in Davenport. Also a celebration of Mozart's 250th birthday, the event will feature *String Quartet in D, Concerto for Flute, Harp, & Orchestra*, and *Serenade in C Minor for Winds*.

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The City Opera Company should be lauded for its effort to bring a slice of Mozart to the people of the Quad Cities. Both performances, and the two social events hosted by the Abbey Hotel, allowed those who love to surround themselves with art to honor Mozart, who dedicated his life to sharing the experience of music.