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Theater Evaluation

When the name of Mozart is communicated, one's thoughts are apt to summon images of complex instrumental or orchestral compositions -- nothing more -- which does a great disservice to the scope of Mozart's work. Consequently, beginners to the fine arts (this writer included) are also apt to be surprised that Mozart was the musical genius behind three of librettist Lorenzo da Ponte's most celebrated operas, one of which was *Cosí fan tutte* (Schwarm and Cantoni)*.* This particular opera, which first premiered in the late 18th century, was presented at BJU's Rodeheaver Auditorium, on a beautiful **proscenium stage** (**fourth wall**),on March 13, 2020, by the prestigious BJU Division of Music, in collaboration with the Department of Theatre and the Division of Art and Design (Cosí). Its **house**, which has a twenty-six hundred seating capacity, constructed in **rake** formation, appeared filled, at least at the **orchestra level**, with an audience composed primarily of friends, faculty, and students of BJU. *Cosí,* is the last of three da Ponte operas of which Mozart was the composer, the others being, *Don Giovanni* and *The Marriage of Figaro*. Not only are all three operas written in Italian, all are of the same genre, *opere buffe* (Cosí). *Cosí's* interest and relevance are founded in its timeless themes, which explore aspects of long-distant relationships having to do with faithfulness and commitment. The timelessness of the themes is evidenced in the BJU production, which con-temporized the setting and costumes, while adhering to the original music and Italian lyrics -- no small feat, under the guided direction of vocal coach Shellie Beeman. The themes of *Cosí* unfold in a story of two soldiers, seemingly called away to service, which leave behind their fiancés, whose commitment is then put to the test. The success and tone of the story, and thus the entire production, rest upon the performance of two characters, that of the well-meaning but meddlesome, Don Alfonso, who promotes and directs the test, and his able accomplice, Despina, the maid.

In this production of *Cosí,* the character of Don Alfonso is played by Johnathan Swaffer. This particular character is key as its interpretation can change the tone of the play from a light-hearted delivery to a more serious, cynical, and dramatic delivery. Swaffer's convincing performance keeps the opera family-friendly, as "Don Alfonso" is more an on-the-ball, well organized, older family relation that wants a good long term outcome for all involved, rather than a sinister, cynical bachelor trying to make a point and win a bet. Swaffer's exaggerated, comical gestures keep the audience at ease, which assures an enjoyable experience. His bass voice is more kindly-manager than menacing-subversive agent. Despina, played by Victoria Richards, is a good choice in casting, as she is able to seamlessly play-off of Swaffer's comic cues and still communicate her personal motive as being more than just a partner-in-crime. In addition, Richards's soprano voice teams solidly with Swaffer's bass both are able to fill the sizable venue with ease.

*Cosí* is an Italian opera and the likelihood of a European audience, which frequents the opera, understanding Italian is much greater than in the States. The audience for this production has to choose whether to enjoy the performances without interruption and not understanding particulars, or reading the subtitle screen to get an idea of what is being said. This is highly distractive and evidently the cost of keeping true to the authenticity of the opera.

On a more positive note, the formation of the performance areas enhance the audience experience. The **orchestra**, situated in a **pit**, does not overwhelm the voices of the actors. There is a nice balance in the music and lyrics. The change in scenes in Rodeheaver is aided not so much by **fly lofts**, but by a rotating stage, which allows seamless scene transition. Also, the contour curtains block the backstage equipment so that the audience enjoys the contemporary setting and the performances with few distractions.

According to historical critiques of *Cosí,* the opera was not well received because its central theme is that women are inherently unfaithful and lack the ability to commit (Cosí). Without sound Biblical-grounding and a commitment to Jesus Christ, this view is generally true of both sexes. Jeffrey Stegall, the direction/designer of this production, asks the audience to "[i]magine that Don Alfonso is not the cynical old bachelor of Mozart's story but rather a wise friend who recognizes that the two couples are sorely mismatched. His intentions are noble." Stegall's wisely-written, brief communication is perfect for a Christ-centered attendee, in that by clarifying the motive of the protagonist in this production, the audience is able to reconcile, what would otherwise be misunderstood as a cynical, yet typical cultural experience.

This production of *Cosí* is exceptional, as it is performed at a professional level completely by BJU students -- a great feat, in and of itself. In a world that lacks true family-friendly entertainment, this production further confirms that BJU sets the bar high for high-quality entertainment which does not disappoint.

Works Cited

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