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Auckland Opera Studio's *Così fan tutte* makes for an ebullient and moving evening

Sunday
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Mercury Theatre, Auckland
Così fan tutte
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Così fan tutte (Mozart)
Auckland Opera Studio
Patrice Wilson, Director
Auckland Chamber
Orchestra
Peter Scholes, Conductor
Madeleine Pierard, Soprano: Fiordiligi

Anna Pierard, Mezzo-soprano: Dorabella

Kawiti Waetford, Baritone: Guglielmo

Tom Atkins, Tenor: Ferrando

Barbara Graham, Soprano: Despina

Joel Amosa, Bass-baritone: Don Alfonso

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Auckland Opera Studio's offering this year was an ebullient rendition of Mozart's immortal comedy *Così fan tutte*. The recitatives were mostly replaced by English dialogue, though the accompanied recitatives were maintained. No composer makes more of recitative than Mozart so it was a shame to lose them, but the cast delivered the dialogue clearly and it contributed to a fast-paced, thrilling show. More than most operas, *Così fan tutte* really does benefit from a young, good-looking cast who all just happen to be very promising singers. This production also did without a chorus, which meant we got the orchestral part only where chorus was called for. "Al fato dan legge" and "Ah, lo veggio" were omitted.

The key idea behind this production seemed to be Don Alfonso as a puppet-master controlling the strings of the rest of the cast. Periodically, the singers' bodies would go limp as though Alfonso's direction had been briefly removed. This reinforced their status as mere pawns in Don Alfonso's game. As a result, the women and men seemed to be victims to an equal degree – Ferrando's "Tradito, schernito" was as much an emotional highpoint as Fiordiligi's "Per pietà". The ending suggested reconciliation between the lovers, but the movements here were again very stylized, as though their free will had once again been removed by their shadowy puppet-master. Having real sisters as Fiordiligi and Dorabella could have been seen as a bit of a gimmick, but Madeleine and Anna Pierard had a wonderfully natural dynamic whenever they were on stage together, giggling and whispering together and producing almost identical expressions of exaggerated anguish.

The set was bare bones, consisting of a white archway centre stage and a number of doorways on the sides. It was difficult to discern a particular time period, with top hats and tails on stage alongside mobile phones and tablets. The ladies donned gas masks when faced with their suitors taking poison (lifting them hurriedly when they needed to sing) and the mens disguises involved taking off their top hats and tails and replacing them with coloured hats and neckerchiefs.

Madeleine Pierard was a stunning Fiordiligi, even in tone throughout her range and singing with moving pathos. The voice has an appealing flickering vibrato and she can flood the hall with her thrilling high notes. Particularly praiseworthy was her conquest of the difficult coloratura demands in "Come scoglio". This contrasted with the gently floated initial phrases of the great rondo "Per pietà". In addition, she made the most of Fiordiligi's struggle between duty and passion; the confusion and subsequent relenting in "Fra gli amplessi" were truly spellbinding. Anna Pierard impressed less, though her warm mezzo is a good fit for the role. The tone can turn a bit sour in the upper register (especially in the extremes of "Smanie implacabili"), but she was at her best when in duet with her sister, offering a perfect vocal blend. She is a natural stage animal and her transition between woe and erotic surrender was very funny.

Tom Atkins, playing Ferrando, had a little bleat in his voice in the opening numbers but this cleared in time for a superbly phrased account of "Un'aura amorosa", sung with golden tone. He also made a decent stab at the ridiculous coloratura in the Act I finale. His stage presence

was a tad wooden and in this, he was shown up by Guglielmo, Kawiti Waetford. Waetford dominated the stage with his comedic facial expressions and unforced comic acting. He really came into his own vocally in a wonderfully sung and choreographed “Donne mie”, his light, warm baritone ideally suited to this difficult aria. He was generally well-balanced with Atkins, only occasionally overpowering him in the ensembles.

Joel Aмосa as the all-important Don Alfonso blended well in the ensembles, though his tone was a little dry when singing on his own. He seemed aloof and distant on stage, but this was probably necessitated by the production’s approach. I’m not usually a fan of the “funny voice” doctor and notary impersonations but Barbara Graham really made these work, draining her voice of vibrato for the wheezy notary. As the squeaky-voiced doctor, she was clearly very excited about showing off her magnet (here a defibrillator), taking a couple of whole phrases up an octave! Throughout she showed great humour, her light bell-like tone very pleasing indeed.

The Auckland Chamber Orchestra acquitted themselves well, with speeds on the fast side. There was some lovely horn playing during “Per pietà” and much spirited woodwind playing throughout. Conductor Peter Scholes did an admirable job of keeping the textures clear, never allowing the vocal lines to become muddled in the great ensemble ending Act I. All in all, a superb performance of Mozart’s masterpiece, distinguished especially by the healthy voices and natural acting of its young cast.

Submitted by **Simon Holden** on 12th November 2012 

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