

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2019 Le Nozze di Figaro, Overture

CHRIS LARGENT: Mozart! Ah, Mozart. Arguably one of the most popular and most talented composers of all time. But when it comes to three of his most famous operas, he didn't get there on his own. There was an Amy Poehler to his Tina Fey, an Ebb to his Kander, a Lennon to his McCartney. Enter, Lorenzo Da Ponte.

Lorenzo Da Ponte? Famed librettist? Worked with Mozart to create a trifecta of opera's greatest hits? If you're confused, you're not alone. But this man wrote the stories for some of Mozart's most famous operas;

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2017 Don Giovanni, Catalogue Aria

The Marriage of Figaro, *Così fan Tutte* and *Don Giovanni*. That's right, it wasn't ALL Mozart! One genius wrote the words, (Da Ponte, the librettist) while the other wrote the music (Mozart, the composer).

So, who was this Da Ponte guy? Well, his life was pretty operatic! His father converted the family from Judaism to Christianity when Da Ponte was 14, for economic reasons. This way, Da Ponte could also gain an education - if he became a priest. But, between multiple illegitimate children and even more relationships outside the cloth, this hopeless-romantic's relationship with the church was complicated. For example, after being charged with public indecency and abduction of a respectable woman, Da Ponte was kicked out of Venice, Italy's cultural hub of the late 1700s.

Enter another freelancer with potential... Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. A meeting in 1785 proved lucky for both. Mozart needed Da Ponte's talents to break into the opera buffa (comedic opera) while Da Ponte needed Mozart to bolster his problematic reputation. Thus, began a collaboration that would change opera forever.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2019 Le Nozze di Figaro, "Dove Sono"

In just 4 years, the pair created 3 of the most popular operas in history. Even though the two were seldom in the same city! But, in 1790 the King Joseph II of Austria died.

With his death, Da Ponte's job disappeared. And later that year, Mozart passed away at the young age of 35. One of opera's most fruitful partnerships had come and gone in the blink of an eye.

These shows are three of the most well-known pieces in history. They're produced constantly and have been for over 300 years. San Francisco Opera's new production of *The Marriage of Figaro* premiered in October of 2019. And despite his familiarity with this opera, the production left a profound impact on our Music Librarian, and North Stage Door producer, Michael Bragg.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2019 Le Nozze di Figaro, Overture

MICHAEL BRAGG: When I think of *The Marriage of Figaro*, mistaken identities, cheating husbands and heartbroken women are what make this opera entertaining. But the topics of class politics and gender roles are what make this opera interesting. San Francisco Opera's most recent production starred three black performers; Michael Sumuel as Figaro, Jeanine de Bique as Susanna, and Nicole Heaston as The Countess. And it's the first time in all my years working in opera that I've seen myself or my community actually represented on stage.

Growing up in a small town in Indiana I didn't get many chances to see or even hear opera. My love for this art form started when I decided to study music and make performing my career at the ripe old age of 18. I remember hearing Puccini's *La Boheme* for the first time and thinking, "This is what I want to spend my life doing." But I knew the journey to becoming an opera singer would be filled with struggle. At school, I was usually the only black person in my classes, and usually the ONE black person at auditions, and unless I was performing in *Porgy and Bess*, was most likely one of few if not the only person of color in a production. I began to wonder if there would ever be a time in my life that I would see myself reflected on stage in operas like *La Boheme*.

Fast forward to September 2019 and I'm watching a rehearsal of *The Marriage of Figaro* here at San Francisco Opera. The production is set in revolutionary America, and the artists who sang three of the lead roles, Figaro, Susanna, and The Countess

happen to be black. I cried for most of the first act, and let me tell you, there is absolutely nothing to cry about in the first act! I cried because I was happy. Happy to see myself and my community represented so beautifully on stage and seeing these beloved characters in this setting felt like I was watching a bit of my own history. I could see in Figaro, Susanna and The Countess prominent revolutionary black figures like Sally Hemmings, Peter Salem and Phyllis Wheatley. I remember getting home and immediately listening to the entire opera again. I had never in my life been so moved by a production.

The Mozart Da-Ponte Creative Team chose America as their setting because, as director Michael Cavanagh describes it, *The Marriage of Figaro*, like America, is the "great social experiment." And I interacted with this piece in a new way due in part to the American setting. What struck me was how easy it was to see and hear emotional journeys of all the characters and especially those characters in this production that looked like me. The struggle for these characters felt real. The obstacles they had to overcome in the opera were now so easily relatable to my own journey.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2019 Le Nozze di Figaro, "Se a caso Madama la notte ti chiama"

Take for example, the opening scene. Susanna tells Figaro that the Count is attempting to seduce her. But in our production, a black woman tells her black fiancée about how his white boss is harassing her, and suddenly an eighteenth-century story sounds like a modern-day discussion. And it wasn't only me who felt this way. Take Michael Sumuel, who played Figaro:

MICHAEL SUMUEL: So, to step into this opera, this role that I love so much with this same context and especially making it so relatable with the setting in America, post-Revolutionary War, I just thought, okay, this is going to be something different.

MICHAEL BRAGG: And like me, Michael Sumuel, and Nicole Heaston, our Countess, have time and time again experienced being the only person of color in the room

NICOLE HEASTON: I always had that experience of interacting with people from diverse backgrounds, so that was not foreign to me. But it is when you're going to a

job and you are The Only a majority of the time. I mean, it seems to be getting so much better now and people say, oh, why is that such a big deal? It's because literally every time you see an opera everyone is Caucasian. And they're always with someone that looks like them, that has a related background that they have. And then I come in and I'm like, oh, she's here. I'm an anomaly. I get the, oh, can I touch your hair? If you were with someone else who was black, they would not ask these questions. It is a lonely thing to be The Only onstage, you know, sometimes.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2019 Le Nozze di Figaro, "Se vuol ballare"

MICHAEL SUMUEL: I think this is a natural obstacle where you have to constantly prove yourself in a way, but when you're first starting out, you show up to a new company, you want to make sure you're at your absolute best representing yourself and as an African American your community well, as well as possible. So, you just understand there's certain ceilings, that many artists, especially artists of color, are constantly trying to break through. It's one thing for you to believe that you belong. It's another thing for you to stand on who you are and what you can present.

MICHAEL BRAGG: Representation is a powerful thing. It can change how you feel about yourself and how you interact with the people around you. Representation is not just about seeing someone that looks like you, it's validation. It's finally seeing a story which has not yet been presented, a voice which has not yet been heard. Nicole Heaston:

NICOLE HEASTON: I think the, the idea of casting, it just needs to be expanded.

MICHAEL BRAGG: Here's San Francisco Opera's Director of Diversity, Equity, and Community, Charles McNeal.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2019 The Marriage of Figaro, "Porgi Amor"

CHARLES MCNEAL: The way the casting happened, there's two approaches. When you think about diverse casting, right? One of them is colorblind. What that says is I do not see your ethnicity. I do not see you in all that you are. I don't see the

complexity. And the beauty of all that you bring, whether you're Italian or Jewish or, or Black, I don't see that. I just see the art. Well, the truth is we come as artists with our full selves.

MICHAEL BRAGG: If Nicole playing the Countess had been the only person of color, it would have been easy for me to suspend my belief and see the Countess as a white character, in a white world. But the minute more than one Person of Color is cast, it is something completely different, and transformative. That was my biggest revelation with this production. When I saw Nicole, Michael and Jeanine rehearse the Act II trio scene where the three plan to expose the Count, it felt like I was watching a real-life conversation between three black people. Figaro and Susanna may be talking about their white boss, but Rosina, our Countess, has a power more potent than that of the young couple - she's the Count's wife. And this joining of forces felt to me like a representation of the way black communities still have to navigate white spaces.

NICOLE HEASTON: We were on stage and we were doing that scene where Figaro is laying out the plan to Susanna and the Countess. And I just sat and I looked and I was like, hold up a minute. This has never happened as many Susanna's as I've sang as many Countesses, as I've sang, I have never been in this situation before. I had to snap myself out of it 'cause I was on stage and people were in the audience. It was kind of surreal.

MICHAEL BRAGG: For Michael, this was a moment to take a deep breath, and feel more comfortable in this community

MICHAEL SUMUEL: Yeah. I think what was healing and necessary, was just being around people that look like me in a workspace performing my, my favorite role, probably my favorite opera, with two other black singers, both of whom I know, in this very particular production, it seemed like I was seen you know, seen in a different way.

MICHAEL BRAGG: Nicole reflected on her experience...

NICOLE HEASTON: You know, it was funny. My reflection is probably not what you're going to think it was. My reflection literally was this is the way it should always be.

MICHAEL BRAGG: And it wasn't just the artists and performers who felt this shift, it was the audience as well. And one of them was Charles McNeal:

CHARLES MCNEAL: It felt like something new. They were cast because they were good artists. And at the same time, they were allowed to bring their full selves. And that was accepted. And that was beautiful.

MICHAEL BRAGG: As artists of color, we know what we're getting into. It's been a white, Euro-centric world. But one's talent and one's race are inseparable. So, we accept the challenges that come along with the business, but we still press on and work our hardest in order to keep building upon the changes we're seeing. I understood what I got myself into when I joined the opera world as a professional. But this is also the best way I could see to contribute to, and change the world I'm living in. Because I want everyone to love opera, as much as I do.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2019 Le Nozze di Figaro, Finale

MICHAEL SUMUEL: Coming to work every day was in a way therapeutic and kind of cathartic.

NICOLE HEASTON: I've done a ton of Figaro's and a ton of everything. I've never done a podcast talking about being a black singer on this stuff. Until you get one, two or three more people on stage, then it's like, we got to talk about it because it's a shocking thing. If you hire Jeanine and Michael, and then you call in Nicole, it is what it is. It shouldn't be a topic of conversation. It should be as normal as you hiring three white singers. And that's why, when I looked at it, I was like, wow, this is amazing. But this is the way it should always be.

CHARLES MCNEAL: Our past does not have to become our future and the origins do not have to dictate the evolution of something. The truth of matter is what we're

talking about is an art form that has this incredibly passionate way of using music to tell the human story. How much more engaging can it be if those stories become more diversified and that allow us, like Michael said, to see ourselves both on the stage, in the pit, and behind the scenes and in the audience.

MICHAEL BRAGG: For North Stage Door, I'm Michael Bragg.

CHRIS LARGENT: Thank you to Michael Bragg and all of his guests for their courage and insight. As Michael mentioned, *The Marriage of Figaro* is the beginning of our trilogy. But remember - Mozart and Da Ponte never intended for these operas to become a trilogy. So how did this idea come about? My colleagues Troy Smith and Jeremy Patfield have answered that very question for us. Here's Jeremy with more:

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2017 Don Giovanni, Act II Wedding

JEREMY PATFIELD: Throughout this episode, we refer to *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Così fan Tutte*, and *Don Giovanni* as the Mozart-Da Ponte Trilogy. But let's get it out of the way and restate that these operas are, of course, not a trilogy: they share no characters, they take place in different cities, and there's no intentional through-line. It's common in opera, as in film and theatre, to change the setting of existing works - moving them to a different place or time, often contemporary, in the hopes of seeing the piece in a new light.

Around 2015, San Francisco Opera General Director Matthew Shilvock and stage director Michael Cavanagh found themselves discussing an idea that had been in each of their heads for a while: setting the three Mozart-Da Ponte operas together in a single location, a single house. Here's Matthew Shilvock.

MATTHEW SHILVOCK: Well, the initiation of this trilogy of the Mozart operas is one of those wonderful symbiotic moments where the stars just aligned. We needed a new *Don Giovanni*. We needed a new *Marriage of Figaro*. And so, I sat down with Michael Cavanagh, and I explained that, you know, we had this conception of doing the Mozart Da Ponte trilogy as a trilogy. And he said, wow, that's kind of amazing

because I have long had in my head an idea for how you do that. And I just didn't know if anyone would ever ask me. We thought it would be this long and difficult process of trying to find the connections between them and so forth and then sort of ta-da there it was, Michael had already begun the process of thinking about that. So, yeah, it was a, it was meant to be certainly.

JEREMY PATFIELD: Here's Michael Cavanagh:

MICHAEL CAVANAGH: I was interested in the big thematic issues and what's really going on in terms of the exploration of what makes us human, and uh there's no better metaphor for us as a society than a household. So, I always thought, okay, wouldn't it be cool, they have a house and the house gets built during *Nozze di Figaro*. The house that it's sort of peak at zenith during *Così fan Tutte* and then it all goes terribly, terribly, terribly wrong in *Don Giovanni*. Wouldn't that be cool? So, you have it in the same house, but three different time periods.

JEREMY PATFIELD: As Michael and the design team began their conversations, they quickly arrived at a critical, contextual adaptation that would come to define this version of the trilogy: the house would be in America, with each opera taking place about 150 years apart. Figaro comes first, set as it was originally intended, near the end of the 18th century, just after the American Revolution.

MICHAEL CAVANAGH: This household is a metaphor for a society, a metaphor for a country, the United States of America started as an idea as a big grand social experiment. It would happen just before the time of the original setting of *Nozze di Figaro* right, and this is America as a place of possibility and hope and potential and all those things about the "beginnings". And so, it's the beginning of the house, the beginning of the nation, and the beginning of for these characters, their own hopes and dreams for themselves and each other. Fantastic, right? It all lines up beautifully. And we all got very excited about this.

JEREMY PATFIELD: Next up is *Così*, an opera which revolves around two wealthy couples and questions of their fidelity. In this production, set in the late 1930's.

MICHAEL CAVANAGH: So very shortly we had this idea that *Così* would be set in a country club, which is a sort of a playground for the rich and restless. At the same time that America is emerging out of, you know, out of The Depression and into, and onto the world stage in a huge way. And these characters are coming out of their entanglements and looking towards their future with huge choices to be made.

JEREMY PATFIELD: And, finally, for *Don Giovanni*, we jump ahead to the end of the 21st century.

MICHAEL CAVANAGH: The American nation, this idea under real threat and existential threat - there's a lot of people who think it's the end of this great social experiment, or could be if we're not careful - and the beautiful thing about setting operas in a near future setting is it becomes a cautionary tale. "Be careful about the choices you make, or you will end up like this."

JEREMY PATFIELD: At the time we're recording this, in 2021, the initial concept for the trilogy in 2015 seems a very long time ago. Here in the US, we've lived through two presidential elections that, no matter your personal ideology, were tumultuous and hugely consequential. We've witnessed the rise of broad social movements against sexual harassment and police brutality, and toward greater racial and gender equality. And of course, we've seen the world brought to a grinding halt by a deadly pandemic that continues to rage both here and around the globe. How do these enormous events and cultural changes affect our understanding of these pieces? Is life imitating art, or the other way around? Here's Matthew Shilvock:

MATTHEW SHILVOCK: One of the real cornerstones of our artistic vision for the company has been that art should really reflect the community in which it's happening. I think the lens through which we are viewing these pieces, this 300-year arc of a story that we're telling has suddenly got a lot more focused. In a way it speaks to the resilience of the idea of telling a grand societal arc on the stage. And it speaks to the value in looking at the sweep of that arc in terms of understanding where we have been, where we are and where we are heading as a society and how that ties back into the sort of the, the circular nature of some of these issues that society is grappling

with. And we can see ourselves in many more parts of this trilogy than we might have done even four or five years ago.

JEREMY PATFIELD: And Michael Cavanagh:

MICHAEL CAVANAGH: These big themes that do connect all three of the operas, the biggest theme of all being, what is, the powerful push and pull between my personal ambitions for me and my responsibilities for everyone else. Right. How my hopes, wishes and desires either line up or are in conflict with the greater good, like the people around me, not just in my personal relationships, but, my family situation and my society in general. The decisions, in *Don Giovanni*, I believe, where the central character is beholden only and utterly to himself, and only his personal desires matter to him. Because he's in a position of power and authority, everyone else kind of follows along and are afraid to confront him about that. And, it takes suddenly, as literally a superhuman effort to give him his comeuppance. It's, I mean, goodness, me, you don't have to look too far to find parallels for that in our world.

JEREMY PATFIELD: One of the notable characteristics of the opera *Don Giovanni* is that timeless, supernatural quality, the vagueness, and uncertainty around that ending. Cavanagh thinks of it almost as a distinct fourth part of this complete story – a tetralogy, rather than a trilogy.

MICHAEL CAVANAGH: Don't forget that there is this tiny little epilogue at the end of *Don Giovanni*, which is so very important when we talk about these big themes, because it does not go well for Giovanni and it does not go well for that society and this whole social experiment. What we are given then is an opportunity to start again, to reframe, to transform, to learn the lessons of these transformations; we can't go back to where we were. We have to define where we're going to go.

JEREMY PATFIELD: Can we go back to where we were? Would we want to? And if not, where are we going? Our grand ambition in presenting these universal pieces together in one unbroken arc is to prompt these questions, without binding ourselves or the audience to one answer.

MICHAEL CAVANAGH: But I actually think it's a strength of the creative process, to leave lots of open-ended questions. Our job as artists is not to provide people answers, especially pat ones and simplistic ones. But to pose the big questions about what it means to what it means to be true to yourself and true to everybody around you, what are your responsibilities to your society versus your responsibilities to yourself, during the only life you're ever going to have?

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2012 Così Fan Tutte, Finale

CHRIS LARGENT: And while each member of the Mozart-Da Ponte creative team has history with all three operas in our trilogy, a San Francisco Opera Assistant Stage Manager and North Stage Door producer didn't have the same kind of relationship with *Così fan Tutte*, until recently. Here's Rachel Garoon:

RACHEL GAROON: I have a confession to make. I've never worked on a Mozart opera.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2012 Così Fan Tutte, Overture

It's fairly uncommon for anyone even after a few years of working in the biz, to not at least have one encounter with Mozart. Add to the fact that until recently, I had never seen one of his and Da Ponte's most popular operas, *Così fan Tutte*, and I'm a regular old anomaly.

Truth be told, I had completely written the show off. I thought, "isn't that just one of the silly Mozart operas?" So, when I sat down to watch the show for the first time, I wasn't expecting much. Just a couple hours of Mozartian nonsense, wrapped up in a dizzying ensemble finale and everyone lives happily ever after.

Here's the premise of the show - and yes, I gave some characters nicknames, because it made things easier to follow - two heteronormative, upper class couples, Flora and Gus, and Dora and Frank, are engaged. The women are sisters. An acquaintance of the couples, Don Alfonso, tries to convince the men that all women are inherently unfaithful, including their fiancées. The men ardently refute his claim - their fiancées

are perfection personified, and they'll never cheat. To prove his point, Don Alfonso proposes a bet. If he can't show Frank and Gus that their fiancées are just like all other women, he'll pay top dollar. And vice versa – should the ladies prove to be unfaithful; the men will pay up. On the surface, it does seem silly. But as the curtain closed, I had more questions than clarity. So, I spoke to three experts in their field to talk about Mozart's deceptively silly *Così fan Tutte*.

For starters, it didn't take more than 30 seconds of *Così*'s overture before I made my first note; Mozart absolutely cannot write a dud. Here's Dr. Kristi Brown Montesano, chair of Music History at the Colburn Conservatory of Music in Los Angeles, and author of "Understanding the Women of Mozart's Operas"

RACHEL GAROON: DR. KRISTI BROWN-MONTESANO: This is a gorgeous score. I think it may be the prettiest, just continuously pretty Mozart. He was in a mood.

RACHEL GAROON: And here's Shawna Lucey, Director for San Francisco Opera:

SHAWNA LUCEY: Mozart will just talk to you like a person, like a human. He belongs to all of us, to every human from every walk of life, from every corner of the planet, he took something from the universe. I don't know, from the stars not to get too like woo woo or whatever and put it into music and it, and it truly quantifies the human existence.

RACHEL GAROON: I completely agree with both Dr. Brown and Shawna. The music is beautiful, starting on page one. And who's shocked? It's Mozart. But the story's characters focus on infidelity, and how both male and female partners eventually think the other will inevitably cheat – that it's inherent in their nature. There were so many moments when I wanted to be critical about the plot, but the music was so beautiful that, I'm ashamed to admit it, sometimes it felt like it was making up for the content. Here's Marriage and Family Therapist, Kathleen Schiltz:

KATHLEEN SCHILTZ: This is what I love about Mozart and, and what I've always loved about Mozart is I feel something when I listen to anything that he's written and I feel something about him and his story. I'm happy to be duped a little, with the music.

And I'm happy to notice that I feel almost, you know, maybe a little bit like the characters in the show.

RACHEL GAROON: Ok. So, I'm not alone.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2012 Così Fan Tutte, "Soave sia il vento"

Which brings me to my next note. What's the Don's deal?! Here's Shawna again:

SHAWNA LUCEY: It's these, outside forces that have kind of agendas that then they, they force on people.

RACHEL GAROON: And here's Kathleen:

KATHLEEN SCHILTZ: I felt like at the end, I understood that he was trying to say, don't get caught up in your emotions because they'll fail you and you need to turn to reason and you need to break your heart. I actually had this moment where I felt like, oh my gosh, is he saying, don't fall in love, choose it? Like, is he saying don't worry about your feelings so much, choose what you're going to do and know you will be happy in that choice? Because it changed my whole view of him.

RACHEL GAROON: Turns out, Don Alfonso is more complicated than I thought.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2012 Così fan Tutte, "E la fede delle femmine"

We've got the elements for a classic Mozartian plot - Don Alfonso has the men tell the women they are being called up to the army and pretend to sail off to war. Suddenly, in a seemingly impossible one-and-a-half-minute quick change, the men reappear disguised as Albanians, intent on wooing the sister of their fiancée (thus swapping partners). Don Alfonso recruits the sister's maid, Despina, to help steer the women toward their assigned Albanian, without telling her who the Albanians really are (the sister's fiancées in disguise). Pause the show for a second - I want to talk about Despina.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO'S 2012 Così fan Tutte, "Una donna a quindic'anni"

SHAWNA LUCEY: Mozart of course always had the wisest characters be of the lowest classes. And that is a great thing in the Mozart operas, because those characters are the ones we identify with. They are the heroes, they are the workers, and their wisdom and humor shines through in all of the operas.

RACHEL GAROON: Since Despina is the smartest person in the room, I was most disappointed not when the rug is pulled out from under the couples (although, we'll get to that), but when Despina is roped into Don Alfonso's plan.

DR. KRISTI BROWN-MONTESANO: Once she's brought into the ploy, partially by Don Alfonso, she doesn't know the whole situation. Right. He doesn't say we're going to trick the girls into falling in love with them so that I proved my point. He's like, they need to have fun and I have these friends. So, can you help me grease the wheels to make them have fun? Right? Without her Alfonso couldn't make it work because he can't get it close to them. So, she is the linchpin for the whole thing to work.

RACHEL GAROON: Just like Dr. Brown says, Don Alfonso's ploy relies on Despina's participation. Without Despina, the sisters may never have been coerced into cheating on their fiancées. She helps the men trick both sisters and in a classic final scene, the men reveal themselves, the women feel guilty, Don Alfonso flaunts his superiority and Despina feels jaded at having been manipulated.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2012 Così fan Tutte, "I uomini, i soldati"

KATHLEEN SCHILTZ: Well isn't that the most heartbreaking thing that if you'd have no Despina, do you have manipulation because ultimately using women to manipulate other women has been a tool of the patriarchy forever. I feel like again, there's these really modern and antiquated themes that still show us, you know, the heart and the unfortunate, broken heart of misogyny and sexism and how women and girls are treated in our, in our society and in the world.

RACHEL GAROON: Was I disappointed at what went on between the couples? Sure. But I was most heartbroken for Despina. Cards on the table, I did find *Così*'s commentary on gender and sexism, intentional or not, both interesting and troubling. Start with the title...

DR. KRISTI BROWN-MONTESANO: For listeners that is very specifically women “tutte”, if it was both it would be “tutti” the right and women act this way, they cheat on you basically. They're not trustworthy when it comes to matters of loyalty and faithfulness, they just forget it. It's not in their nature.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2012 Così Fan Tutte, “Per pietà, ben mio, perdona”

RACHEL GAROON: Did you know that *Così fan Tutte* is technically classified as a comedy? If so, do you still think it should be? I do, mostly because someone once told me that comedy is just tragedy, plus timing.

SHAWNA LUCEY: When we're producing something on stage, especially for opera, right. Because we're tasked with these great tragic tales. And as you said earlier, *Così fan Tutte*, there's some real sadness. It's not like a ha ha ha. You know, it's reminiscent of Shakespeare. Wow, this counts as a comedy only 'cause we get a wedding at the end.

RACHEL GAROON: Did I forget to mention? We end our story with a double marriage. It wouldn't be a Mozart-Da Ponte comedy without ridiculousness resulting in happily ever after.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2012 Così fan Tutte, Act II Chorus Scene

Even though I knew it was coming, I was still floored. By the ending, and by my naivete. *Così fan Tutte* is an allegory of so much - social experiments, gender roles, sexism, ageism, class. I'm ashamed that I didn't immediately question my own impulse to write the show off. Because look at everything I would've missed!

DR. KRISTI BROWN-MONTESANO: I just want the audience to feel like it's not always about turning your brain off and just enjoying beauty. If you want to do that, then put on your headphones, throw the libretto away and just sit back, and just listen and take it in that's if, if that's actually okay with me just 100% Mozart. But the minute you say, I'm going to stage this, I think you're responsible for it.

RACHEL GAROON: Say someone takes responsibility for it. And you can get a ticket. Here are some reasons why you should go, from a director:

SHAWNA LUCEY: Oh my God, it's so good. It is complicated comedy. But it's full of heart and soul.

RACHEL GAROON: A therapist...

KATHLEEN SCHILTZ: I think that we have to keep telling our stories. And we have to keep telling them so that we know that we are not alone and that we know that we have human experience that connects us.

RACHEL GAROON: And a musicologist.

DR. KRISTI BROWN-MONTESANO: Go in with your brain turned on, enjoy it all.

RACHEL GAROON: And I plan to. Call it fate, or a part of my contract, but I'll be working on my first Mozart opera this season. Can you guess which one?

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2012 Così fan Tutte, "Tutti accusan le donne...Così fan tutte"

CHRIS LARGENT: There's always something to learn about opera. For instance, did you know that Mozart was one of many composers who borrowed music from other operas for his own shows. For a musical quotation treasure hunt, here's Jeffery McMillan.

JEFFERY MCMILLAN: Think of that scene in Quentin Tarrantino's *Pulp Fiction*. You know the one, when Uma Thurman and John Travolta are dancing together in that

retro diner. Anyone can appreciate their moves and the fun of that moment, but if you know Saturday Night Fever, another Travolta classic with some spectacular dancing, well then you are going to see it differently - the director is elbowing us to get a joke. Because we are seeing John Travolta back on the dance floor. The idea of quoting something from pop culture has been around decades before *Pulp Fiction*, from Eurypides to Tarantino or Mozart to the Grateful Dead, imitation has been the sincerest - and cleverest - form of flattery.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2017 Don Giovanni, Act II Banquet scene

It's the banquet scene near the end of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. The opera's villainous title character is having dinner and his servant Leporello attends to him, sneaking a few bites of pheasant on the side. Meanwhile, the band plays on. For this relaxed, lightly comic episode--moments before the Don's past misdeeds catch up with him--the composer provides some curious table music:

MUSIC INSERT: SFO'S 2017 Don Giovanni, Act II Banquet scene

Did you hear that? Leporello says "bravi cosa rara". And the melody? Well Mozart has taken it from Martín y Soler's now forgotten but then quite fashionable opera, *Una Cosa Rara*. Next Mozart changes to another contemporary hit, this time by the composer Sarti. Listen for this (hummed line).

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2017 Don Giovanni, Act II Banquet Scene

This is followed by an excerpt from Mozart's own recent opera, *The Marriage of Figaro*:

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2017 Don Giovanni, Act II Banquet Scene

The musical reference to Figaro, along with Leporello's punch line of "Questa poi la conosco pur troppo" or "I know that tune too well", never fails to get a chuckle from the audience. But what is going on here? Why is Mozart serving up the operatic hit parade of 1787? Well, it's an inside joke—a wink—and if you know *The Marriage of*

Figaro, then you make the connection and wink back. The audience at the world premiere in Prague certainly got the joke, they knew Figaro and the other two operas quite well.

Opera is filled with subtle—and delicious—musical quotations like the ones heard in the banquet scene. Let's find a few more!

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2016 Madama Butterfly, "Dovunque al mondo"

That's an easy one. It's from the first act of Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*; an ironic quotation from our National Anthem to introduce Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton, in no uncertain musical terms, as the model American cad.

Puccini was one of the leading exponents of turn-of-the-century Italian verismo—that is, gritty realistic dramas propelled by tense and serious music. His works hardly seem like the place for tongue-in-cheek quotations a la Mozart. But Puccini had a flair for quoting other musical sources to make a point. In *La Rondine*, Puccini quotes from Richard Strauss's scandalous early opera, *Salome*.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2009 Salome, Final Scene

The quotation comes when one of Puccini's characters is describing his ideal woman, mentioning four classical beauties ending with Salome. At that point, the composer has the oboe player play a little snippet from Strauss' opera, *Salome*.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2007 Production of La Rondine, "La donna que conquista... Galatea, Berenice, Francesca, Salome"

Those three notes are a direct lift from Strauss. This reference to 'the other' most famous living composer of the 20th century is a playful gesture. Or is it? Perhaps Puccini is commenting on how an urbane German like Strauss could give expression to such a deeply unsettling character. Puccini doesn't tell us why he quotes Strauss' music in *La Rondine*, but that little Easter egg is in the opera for us, the audience, to discover and speculate about.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2015 Il Barbiere di Siviglia, Overture

Rossini is another composer who was especially clever about borrowing melodies from time to time. The trio “Zitti zitti piano piano” from the end of *The Barber of Seville*, is melodically identical to Simon’s aria at the beginning of *The Seasons*, a secular oratorio by Franz Josef Haydn. Thanks to our friends at Philharmonia Baroque, here’s an excerpt from *The Seasons*:

MUSIC INSERT: Philharmonia Baroque, Haydn's The Seasons, No. 4 Aria

Rossini knew the work well, having conducted it months before composing *Barber*. And so, on deadline to complete a new opera in just two weeks, he took Papa Haydn’s folksy, pastoral ode and sped it up! And now here is San Francisco Opera’s Bob Mollicone to isolate that phrase from Haydn:

MUSIC INSERT: Haydn's The Seasons, No. 4 Aria (on piano)

And, at Rossini’s new tempo:

MUSIC INSERT: Haydn's The Seasons, No. 4 Aria (sped up)

And, here’s “Zitti Zitti piano piano” from *The Barber*:

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2015 Il Barbiere di Siviglia: “Zitti zitti piano piano”

It’s not obvious, but if you’re looking at the two scores side by side, the resemblance is clear – they’re the same. This is a case where Rossini’s acceleration and exuberance have altered the original melody, not to mention forming a perfect high-energy climax for his new opera. Well played, Maestro!

Some of the most deft and witty musical-quoters are jazz musicians. They routinely draw on diverse musical sources as they create in the moment. Take the great American musician, Louis Armstrong. We know from interviews with Armstrong that

he loved listening to recordings of opera singers and occasionally he used little melodic phrases from opera in his improvised trumpet solos. Let's hear "New Orleans Stomp" which Armstrong recorded with clarinetist Johnny Dodds in 1927:

MUSIC INSERT: "New Orleans Stomp", 1926-27 Johnny Dodds & Louis Armstrong

Listen closely, because within that trumpet solo is a quote from this:

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2017 Rigoletto, "Bella figlia dell'amore"

So, what is going on here? Armstrong is improvising his trumpet line over a driving tempo, he unveils and builds from one idea to the next, including that dramatic rip up to that high note, and then... This bit right here:

MUSIC INSERT: "New Orleans Stomp", 1926-27 Johnny Dodds & Louis Armstrong

That was indeed a snippet from Verdi's *Rigoletto*, the line sung by the mezzo-soprano in the quartet at the end of the opera.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2017 Rigoletto, "Bella figlia del amore"

And here is that same phrase deep inside the famous quartet in *Rigoletto*, isolated on piano:

MUSIC INSERT: Rigoletto, "Bella figlia del amore" (on piano)

Now let's hear it at Armstrong's tempo:

MUSIC INSERT: Rigoletto, "Bella figlia del amore" (on piano, sped up)

Let's hear one more time Pops, Louis Armstrong, drawing from perhaps one of his favorite opera recordings, Verdi's *Rigoletto*, and weaving it into his improvisation.

MUSIC INSERT: "New Orleans Stomp", 1926-27 Johnny Dodds & Louis Armstrong

Like Louis Armstrong, The Grateful Dead were famous improvisers... and opera fans too. The Bay Area band made local news in 1985 when they postponed a few concerts in order to attend all four nights of San Francisco Opera's new production of Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung*. The band's interest in Wagner actually extended back to its earliest days. On July 16, 1966, while playing at San Francisco's Fillmore Auditorium, the Dead used Wotan's spear motif from the Ring as their intro to the old tune, "Viola Lee Blues". Here is the spear motive in the Ring:

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2018 Das Rheingold, Scene ii

It's one of the most memorable and frequently heard melodic themes in the entire 16 hours of The Ring Cycle. It also happens to be pretty rock n' roll!

MUSIC INSERT: The Grateful Dead - Viola Lee Blues (July 16, 1966)

Sometimes a brief musical quotation is all it takes for the artist to say, "I see you!" and we smile, and laugh, and applaud in response. But, is hearing the quote and "getting the joke" crucial to enjoying an opera like Mozart's *Don Giovanni*? The short answer is no, it's not essential. But the more we listen and make these connections, the closer we get to these composers and the craftiness in their works. Whether it's opera, jazz or film, unlocking these connections can be satisfying, especially when they require detective work in the form of some binge listening. With that perspective on musical quotations in opera, I'm Jeff McMillan.

CHRIS LARGENT: So, one could say that operas, just like Marvel movies, are filled with Easter eggs. A popular device for decades, Easter eggs are hidden messages or images in media. One of my favorite book series from childhood is full of them, and they're written by an author who could easily rival Da Ponte. Daniel Handler is the author of seven novels, including *Why We Broke Up*, *We Are Pirates*, *All The Dirty Parts* and, most recently, *Bottle Grove*. Under the pen name Lemony Snicket, he is responsible for the thirteen-volume *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. Our Executive Producer Molly McBride got to chat with this Bay-Area native about writing, music, opera, and his relationship with all three.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2019 Carmen, "Habanera"

MOLLY MCBRIDE: Daniel Handler, we are so happy to have you here at North Stage Door, you've got a connection to San Francisco Opera that runs deep.

DANIEL HANDLER: My parents were both huge opera buffs. They actually met at a performance at the San Francisco Opera. I was taken to opera from the time I was a really young child and we would go to Stern Grove and other, kind of bargain matinees. And I was also a member of the San Francisco Boys Chorus. I had a beautiful soprano voice and I performed at the San Francisco Boys Chorus in, I mean five or six operas.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2016 La Boheme, "Parpignol"

Yeah I was in *Tosca*. I was in *La Boheme*, I was in *Carmen*. I was in *La Gioconda*. I was in *Pique Dame*, *The Queen of Spades*. Whenever they needed a chorus of urchins, they would call the San Francisco Boys Chorus. *La Boheme* was hard I remember because we were in the first act at the beginning and at the end, and that was a long wait backstage if you're a young child. For years I would walk by and I would see young children, boys and girls playing soccer or something on that lawn, outside the opera. And I would know that they were waiting for the second act or the third act.

MOLLY MCBRIDE: So, what was your favorite of all those operas?

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2019 Carmen, Finale

DANIEL HANDLER: When I was little, before I was in the boys' chorus, my parents took me to see *Carmen* and I have a very clear memory of my mom taking my Fisher-Price figures and acting out the plot for me beforehand. And she and I still quote each other how she did the last part, which was, "You said, you'd be my girlfriend", which is the end of *Carmen*. If I'm not mistaken, I believe that was the original title as well, "You said you'd be my Girlfriend". I mean that was that kind of high drama I enjoyed.

MOLLY MCBRIDE: So, has opera had any influence on your work as a writer?

DANIEL HANDLER: Music has always been a part of my life, but I actually think that kind of the structure of operatic storytelling made a huge impression on me.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2017 Don Giovanni, Overture

Constant drama, long set pieces, right. Long buried secrets and confrontations and the way in which romantic love in the opera works more like a plot device than it does like love. Right. You probably don't see your own romantic relationships on stage of the opera very much. But the idea of I would do anything for this person, or I will not stop until I get revenge on this person, all those kinds of aspects of love that drive so many operas. I think that had a big impression on me too.

MOLLY MCBRIDE: Speaking of revenge and love in opera, I want to ask you a question as a writer, about the ending of an opera, *Don Giovanni*. *Don Giovanni* is unique in that it's kind of got two different endings. In the original production in Prague in 1787, there was an epilogue: after the predatory Don is dragged off to hell by the furies and the ghost of a man he murdered, there's this moralistic epilogue in which the characters all talk about what they will do now that the Don is gone. Then a year later, in Vienna, the show ended with the fiery demise of Giovanni, period, no epilogue. And to this day opera companies have to choose their ending. So, what are the elements that make for a good ending?

DANIEL HANDLER: I think an ending with too much closure is a little disappointing. I liked constructing something that, left these little questions, left this hunger for information at the end of it. When I've worked in theater in particular, I like to talk about the difference between mystery and confusion.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2017 Don Giovanni, Overture

That mystery is when you've been provided with some information, but you are intrigued and you want to carry through and a mystery can hold you along for a long time. Confusion is something that has to be resolved pretty quickly, otherwise you're

annoyed. And once you're annoyed, then kind of everything sours. I want to make sure I'm constructing a mystery rather than a confusion.

MOLLY MCBRIDE: What about epilogues that spell out the moral of the story? As kids, we're taught to analyze stories to find the moral.

DANIEL HANDLER: It's the formula to make you hate literature for the rest of your life, that's what it is. I mean, I think a fascination with the moral of the story has been a pernicious part of pedagogy for a long time. What you're told is that the point of the journey that you've been on is some little thing that you're going to make up at the end. And then the natural question is, well, why did I go on this journey? If all we needed to know was this thing, right? If the moral of the story is "we should be nicer to each other, because if we're mean to each other, there'll be pain and suffering" why don't you just write that on a piece of paper? It's not why anyone watches anything or reads anything or listens to anything. Nobody does it for the moral of the story.

MOLLY MCBRIDE: Historically censors and cultural morals have been factors in which ending was produced.

DANIEL HANDLER: I think censors get worried. There's a certain kind of person who would look at Don Giovanni and say, so let me get this straight. I get to have a wonderful, indulgent, selfish life where I never have to think about anybody. It's always presented as if it's for sexual pleasure, but it's clearly not about sexual pleasure for Don Giovanni. It's clearly about kind of power and manipulation and not getting caught. Right. And so, the whole thing is, so I do that and then I die? And so, we need to put this thing on it that tells you that, just to remind you shouldn't do that. And you know, most people are not conniving manipulative predators and why aren't they? It isn't because they didn't see *Don Giovanni*.

MOLLY MCBRIDE: Yeah, but then why are we interested in this story about a sexual predator?

DANIEL HANDLER: Yeah, that's interesting. This has always been hard to talk about and certainly in the cultural moment we're in, it's hard to talk about predatory men.

And part of that experience, I think, is thinking about the way that desire behaves. And that always seems to be what Don Giovanni is all about, right? Over and over and over, he's like not forgiven, but kind of given a break. And part of it is because the power that he wields but part of it is something else. We don't like him, but we keep inviting him to a party. And I think that, for me, is what resonates is because I think we all know people like that in real life. And yet as much as we want to see them punished. And as much as we would like them to stop the harm that they're causing, there's something also hypnotic about the way that that goes. And for me, that's what is at the heart of the opera.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2017 Don Giovanni, "La ci darem la mano"

I think mostly because Mozart's music is always seductive, right? If this was a Shostakovitch opera, we would know he was a scoundrel and the music would emphasize the deep harm that he's doing, but throughout the Mozart opera, because it's Mozart, we're kind of charmed all along, right. But I think that the makers of the opera are trying to put the harm that he's done and the seduction of desire and the way that those things overlap and don't make us comfortable when they're overlapping. Clearly there were many conversations about whether or not to put it in, not, not only when it was being created by it, but all along. I think, there's something that feels to me, like the story is trying to admit its own complications, right.

MOLLY MCBRIDE: So how could we end a production of *Don Giovanni*?

DANIEL HANDLER: In a perfect production, I think you would do the epilogue in the lobby. Right. You see him dragged off to hell and then you're all walking out. Oh, what a great show. And then you've got to the lobby and you think, wait, and everyone's quiet again.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2017 Don Giovanni, Epilogue Scene

Then there's the few minutes of the epilogue, wouldn't that be nice to kind of emphasize that one thing is over, but there's something kind of lingering about it.

MOLLY MCBRIDE: I love that. And it's also like, you know, you've physically moved and so have they.

DANIEL HANDLER: Yeah. You're in a different space. It would be nice. And now that you and I have become the artistic directors of the San Francisco Opera, we can finally have this dream come true.

CHRIS LARGENT: Daniel Handler isn't really our Artistic Director, but boy are we glad he was able to join us for our second episode. And thank you for joining us as well! I am so happy to report that our golden curtain will rise again on August 21st for the 2021-22 season.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2012 Così fan Tutte, Overture

The Mozart-Da Ponte trilogy continues onstage this November, with *Così fan Tutte*. Tune in next time for our third episode, where we'll introduce you to another show premiering at San Francisco Opera this fall - Beethoven's only opera - *Fidelio*.

North Stage Door is a production of San Francisco Opera.

Our production team includes Katherine Baltrush-Little, Michael Bragg, Chris Davis, Jodi Gage, Jeffery McMillan, Jeremy Patfield, Barbara Rominski, Troy Smith, Celine Strouts, and Kali Wilson.

Our sound designer and audio engineer is Tod Nixon.

Special thanks to Robert Mollicone, for tickling the ivories.

Our show was developed with help from Marisa Brink and Trey Costerisan.

Rachel Garoon is our coordinating producer.

Our Consulting Producer is Elena Park, and our Executive Producers are Molly McBride and Jen Good.

San Francisco Opera's Music Director is Eun Sun Kim; and our General Director is Matthew Shilvock.

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We would like to thank all of our labor organizations whose members, artists, and craftspeople bring our operas to life.

Special thanks to our guests, Daniel Handler, Nicole Heaston-Lane, Shawna Lucey, Dr. Kristi Brown-Montesano, Kathleen Schiltz and Michael Sumuel!

Thanks to Michael Cavanagh, Jane Cox, Constance Hoffman, and Erhard Rom for talking to us about their concept for SFO's Mozart-Da Ponte Trilogy.

For more on this and other episodes, visit our website at sfoopera.com, and type "North Stage Door" into our search box.

We want to hear from you! If you have something you want to ask the North Stage Door team, follow the survey link on our website.

I'm your host, Chris Largent - I look forward to meeting you next time at the North Stage Door!