

Charles Ford, *Mozart. 2012. Sexuality and the Enlightenment in Mozart's Figaro, Don Giovanni and Così fan tutte*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate. 336 pp. ISBN 978-0754668893

Keith Johnston

Volume 32, numéro 1-2, 2012

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1018589ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018589ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes

ISSN

1911-0146 (imprimé)

1918-512X (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Johnston, K. (2012). Compte rendu de [Charles Ford, *Mozart. 2012. Sexuality and the Enlightenment in Mozart's Figaro, Don Giovanni and Così fan tutte*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate. 336 pp. ISBN 978-0754668893]. *Intersections*, 32(1-2), 250-253. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018589ar>

- Rosen, Charles. 2011. «Music and the Cold War». *The New York Review of Books* 58, n° 6, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/apr/07/music-and-cold-war>.
- Ross, Alex. 2007. *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Taruskin, Richard. 2010. *Oxford History of Western Music*, vol. IV «The Early Twentieth Century» et vol. V «The Late Twentieth Century». New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2009. «Afterword: Nicht blutbefleckt?». *Journal of Musicology* 26, n° 2: 274–84.
- Trottier, Danick. 2009. «Music, History, Autonomy, and Presentness: When Composers and Philosophers Cross Swords». *Intersections* 29, n° 1: 70–85.
- Wilson, Charles. 2004. «György Ligeti and the Rhetoric of Autonomy». *Twentieth-Century Music* 1, n° 1: 17.
- Xenakis, Iannis. 1955. «La crise de la musique sérielle». *Die Gravesaner Blätter* 1: 2–4.

JONATHAN GOLDMAN

Charles Ford, *Mozart*. 2012. *Sexuality and the Enlightenment in Mozart's Figaro, Don Giovanni and Così fan tutte*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate. 336 pp. ISBN 978-0754668893.

It has been one score and one since Edward Rothstein coined the term *new musicology* in the *New York Times* to describe a mode of scholarship that was transforming the discipline of music history. He noted then that scholars of the “new” persuasion were often interested in how a musical work “argues for a particular view of sexuality and power” (Rothstein 1991). Susan McClary’s epochal *Feminine Endings*, which was also published in 1991, became, of course, the flashpoint for the discipline’s debate about the propriety, rigour, and utility of a musicology grounded in “critical theory.” Twenty years on, McClary’s pioneering work has been celebrated with a special twentieth-anniversary issue of an academic journal and a Festschrift in her honour. What began as a somewhat acid debate has matured into a complex and nuanced field of inquiry. Fine ideas, like fine wines, as the cliché goes, get better with age.

Another work published that *annus mirabilis* of 1991 received generally less attention: Charles Ford’s *Così?: Sexual Politics in Mozart's Operas*. Ashgate has now published Ford’s second book on the subject, one that “builds upon and expands” (xiii) his 1991 effort. *Music, Sexuality and the Enlightenment in Mozart's Figaro, Don Giovanni and Così fan tutte* does so in rather modest ways. The monograph reorganizes and refines the argument of *Sexual Politics* rather than revises its content. In doing so, Ford reveals some insight about where the discipline of musicology has gone in the last twenty years. He also provides a worthwhile contribution to Mozart studies and eighteenth-century opera studies more generally.

The most profound difference between Ford's earlier work and this late edition is perhaps the softening of the polemical edge in his writing. The prose of *Sexual Politics* crackled with fire. It was an ambitious book, and its introduction was evangelical in its statement of purpose: "The literature that continues to accumulate around [Mozart's operas] rarely addresses the music directly, but only uses it to fetishize an antagonistic sexual morality. This book aims to relieve Mozart's operas of this, the affirmative function by which they are customarily demeaned, and to render their extraordinary beauty provocative" (9). How different in tone is Ford's new book, as it revisits the same theme: "This book interprets Mozart's music for [the operas] in terms of the ideas of their time, the Enlightenment, with particular reference to questions of sexual identity, desire and ethics" (3). Ford trades fevered zeal for restraint.

His first effort clearly aimed to provoke a debate about Mozart's operas; his new effort aims to enshrine his ideas and methods within the scholarly firmament. To that end, Ford begins each chapter with a clear statement of its purpose (in the first person). This helps the reader follow Ford's logic with greater clarity than his previous book, though one perhaps misses the former's breathless urgency.

To dispense with other matters of style: Ashgate has produced a handsome and well-edited monograph. The musical examples are tidily rendered and there were few typographical errors (*as* should be *an*, 47; The Countess is called "Fiordiligi," 98; Mozart scholar Edmund Goehring is named as "Edward," 5). This is significant, because Ford's 1991 book was riddled with so many mistakes and hand-drawn musical examples that it nearly soured its own argument on aesthetic grounds alone. Ashgate clearly believed that Ford's scholarship deserved more dignified packaging, and so we may now consider his ideas unencumbered.

Ford's main argument is that the harmonic and rhythmic structures of arias, duets, finales, and even recitatives instantiate philosophical notions of gender and sexuality during what he calls the "Anglo/Scottish-French Enlightenment." A great strength of the book is that this argument leads Ford into close readings of the music. He is not content merely to describe the intellectual environment that nurtured Mozart's musical mind. Rather, he invites the reader to savour the *terroir* of the music itself. Ford's guiding principle is that Enlightenment ideas inform the very basis of eighteenth-century musical thinking: the "sonata principle." As he suggests, "In Mozart's operas dominant modulation nearly always sounds dramatic representations of reason, dynamism and masculinity, whilst subdominant modulation sounds feelings, passivity and femininity" (20).

Informed by the Schenkerian concept of a foreground and middle-ground melody, and metrical concepts from Fred Lerdahl and Ray Jackendoff, Ford performs exegetical readings of select moments from the Da Ponte operas (and occasionally something from *Die Zauberflöte*). At their best, these interpretations invite the reader to listen again with fresh ears. Ford's explication of the middle-ground ironies of Fiordiligi's rondò "Per pieta," for example, made me run to the iPod. The high notes of Fiordiligi's melodic line in the opening

adagio, Ford explains, form a neighbour-note descent from G-sharp—and all expose “with eloquent musical irony ... those words which Fiordiligi most wishes to hide from herself” (124). Ford reminds us here of Mozart the brilliant musical psychologist. And this must be an unalloyed good.

The book is not single-minded, however, in its devotion to music. Much of the first third of the book is dedicated to an exposition of the Enlightenment values that the music supposedly embodies. Twenty years ago, reviewers mostly skipped over the summary of eighteenth-century philosophy in favour of Ford’s musical readings. Susan McClary concentrated on the second half of the book, which she suggested was “a virtuoso demonstration of how the music itself articulates the ideological themes of *Così fan tutte*.” Ford’s new book wishes to make the connections between these Enlightenment values and the music even more explicit by changing his term of choice for late eighteenth-century music. What was “Enlightenment music” (38) in 1991 is renamed “Enlightened music” in 2012—values and music are not merely coincident, but causal.

This change refocuses the book to concentrate on those Enlightenment values. Where Ford’s first book wanted to storm the Mozartean Bastille of conservative scholarship, this book’s main want is to credibly make the case that one can hear Enlightenment philosophy there in the music. A significant problem could have arisen because Ford’s interpretation of the Enlightenment has not undergone refinement in his twenty-year project. Now, as then, Ford relies heavily on the historian Peter Gay’s *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (1969). Gay’s unitary and essentially Newtonian interpretation of Enlightenment thought has of late been deemed, to quote Jonathan Israel, “mistaken” (2006, 310). So when Ford claims that “Newtonian empiricism was axiomatic” (12), it is difficult to unquestionably accept that all “*buffa* baritones and basses are products of the Anglo/Scottish-French Enlightenment” by virtue of their materialism (82). Ford’s reading of *Così*’s Don Alfonso in this light would benefit from the sensitive reappraisal offered by Edmund Goehring (2004).

But Ford is an intuitive historian. He rather cannily suggests that Mozart and Da Ponte may have been influenced by both a “Viennese middle-class *Aufklärung*” and the aristocratic “Enlightenment” movement (223). This is in keeping with recent historiographic trends that emphasize not one Enlightenment, but rather a varied collection of responses to new thought and scientific advancement.

Ford might have gone a step further by engaging with some of the excellent recent literature on the philosophical world of Mozart and Josephinian Vienna. The last twenty years have seen important studies by Nicholas Till (1993), Lidia Bramani (2005), and Derek Beales (2009). By attempting to form a crucial link between the abstraction of philosophy and the details of biography, Ford may have helped us to hear Mozart’s music in the “provocative” way he imagines. But readers will nevertheless find a fairly nuanced and informative summary of Enlightenment thought on the pages of Ford’s book. His insights from 1991 remain in good stead.

Has time, then, finally given Ford his due? McClary’s brand of musicology has aged rather well. Her contributions have been justly rewarded by a

generation of scholars who speak her name in reverential tones. But that generation—my generation—came of scholarly age with “cultural musicology” and so have a somewhat complicated relationship with it. We often take for granted the radical character of its methodology at the same time that we revere the tenacity of its first practitioners.

Twentieth anniversaries are therefore often double-edged swords. The revival of good art and scholarship of the past introduces such works to new audiences and bestows upon them their due recognition. At the same time, this revival often drains them of their revolutionary élan. Ford’s *Music, Sexuality and the Enlightenment* typifies this. His twenty-one-year argument has finally been assembled in the clear and tasteful way a scholarly monograph should be. But the years have also taken away much of Ford’s activist pluck. Whether you think that is an improvement will have much to do with whether you prefer a patiently aged Bourdeaux to a youthful Beaujolais Nouveau.

REFERENCES

- Beales, Derek. 2009. *Joseph II: Against the World, 1780–1790*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bramani, Lidia. 2005. *Mozart massone e rivoluzionario*. Milan: B. Mondadori.
- Ford, Charles. 1991. *Così?: Sexual Politics in Mozart’s Operas*. New York: Manchester University Press.
- . 2012. *Music, Sexuality and the Enlightenment in Mozart’s Figaro, Don Giovanni and Così fan tutte*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Gay, Peter. 1969. *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*. New York: Knopf.
- Goehring, Edmund J. 2004. *Three Modes of Perception in Mozart: The Philosophical, Pastoral, and Comic in Così fan tutte*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Israel, Jonathan. 2006. “Enlightenment! Which Enlightenment?” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67 (3): 523–45.
- McClary, Susan. 1991. *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 1992. Review of *Così? Sexual Politics in Mozart’s Operas* by Charles Ford. *Music & Letters* 73 (4): 591–93.
- Rothstein, Edward. 1991. “The Politics of Sharps and Flats.” *New York Times*, 17 November.
- Till, Nicholas. 1992. *Mozart and the Enlightenment: Truth, Virtue and Beauty in Mozart’s Operas*. London: Faber.
- Trans-Revista Transcultural de Música / Transcultural Music Review*. Special issue, “Celebrating the 20th Anniversary of *Feminine Endings*” 15 (2011).

KEITH JOHNSTON