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May 19, 2025



Olivia Boen as Fiordiligi in Yuval Sharon's new AI-themed production of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* at Detroit Opera.

Photo by Austin T. Richey / DetroitOpera

What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to love? Can robots feel the way humans feel? Will machines and artificial intelligence surpass us? At Detroit Opera, on April 5th, 11th, and 13th, 2025, Yuval Sharon's unconventional re-imagining of *Così fan tutte* explored answers to these questions and delighted audiences in the process.

The opera was a wild ride, cinematic in scope, awash in color, and elevated by world-class performances against the backdrop of sets that thoughtfully blended traditional and futuristic design – a truly remarkable feat honoring the spirit of Detroit through subtle nods to the city's musical and automotive heritage. With wit and intelligence, the show transported the audience through time and space from 18th century Vienna, where the opera premiered on January 26th, 1790 to this production's debut in 21st century Detroit.

Sharon’s productions are often characterized by a dialogue with the place holding the performance – from *Twilight: Gods* in 2020 (an adaptation of Richard Wagner’s *Twilight of the Gods* performed in the Detroit Opera Parking Lot) to John Cage’s experimental piece based on chance and improvisation, *Europerras 3 & 4* in 2024 (staged at Detroit’s Gem Theater). In *Così fan tutte*, Sharon engaged with Detroit’s industrial past through references to automation and assembly lines. The performance also incorporated electronic music, bringing together diverse art forms and blurring the boundary between highbrow and lowbrow distinctions.



Yuval Sharon’s new production of Mozart’s *Così fan tutte* at Detroit Opera re-envision the lovers as automatons. Pictured, from left: Thomas Lehman as Guglielmo, Edward Parks as Don Alfonso, and Joshua Blue as Ferrando. Photo by Austin T. Richey / Detroit Opera

During Mozart’s time, opera was a popular art form with mass appeal. Mozart’s operas challenged the conventions of his time by giving central, complex roles—with arguably the most beautiful arias—to characters outside the ruling class. Notable examples include the peasant Zerlina in *Don Giovanni*, the servant Susanna in *The Marriage of Figaro*, or the servant Despina in *Così fan tutte*. *The Magic Flute*, considered by some as one of best operas of all time, is an abstract, esoteric work whose meaning is contested to this day. There is, however, general agreement that the opera depicts a symbolic struggle between the forces of light and darkness. It is the result of great intellectual maturity, but retains the innocence and playfulness of a children’s story—a work only a genius can produce. And like many works of genius, it is fraught with ambiguity and contradictions while remaining coherent.

Mozart re-shaped the operatic form. His work was avant-garde. As Yuval Sharon put it during the Opera Talk preceding the opening night performance of *Così fan tutte* at Detroit Opera on April 5, 2025, he “was a punk” whose irreverence was legendary. A musical prodigy from the age of six and a prolific composer, by the time he died in 1791 at 35, he had composed over 600 works including symphonies, choral compositions, pieces for chamber music, and 22 operas. *Così fan tutte* was one of his last operas, completed and performed in 1790.

Would Mozart have wanted his operas to remain in a time capsule and staged the way they were staged in the late 18th century? Or would he have wanted to see his operas evolve, reflect, and engage with the *zeitgeist*? Given the composer’s predilection for innovation, it is easy to imagine that he would relish clever endeavors to modernize his work, including this visionary production.

Yuval Sharon had many questions in mind when he decided to stage a contemporary rendering of *Così fan tutte* at Detroit Opera; a fundamental one was: What can this work help us understand about our time? The answer led to a reframing of the story or *libretto* and reshaping of the characters, with unexpected twists and turns in Act II that included a reckoning with the existential threat and promise of artificial intelligence. It was a stretch, but it worked.

Great care was taken not to “spoil” anything for the audience so they could enjoy the drama as it unfolded. To this end, no synopsis for Act II was provided in the program book, which is quite unusual for an 18th-century opera production where a synopsis typically serves as a helpful reminder for everyone – from novices to seasoned operagoers.

Così fan tutte is a comic opera (*opera buffa*) in two acts with six main protagonists: Don Alfonso, Fiordiligi, Dorabella, Ferrando, Guglielmo, and Despina. In traditional productions, Don Alfonso is an old philosopher who enlists the help of the cunning maid-servant Despina to trick young lovers into infidelity. The lovers in question are two couples: Fiordiligi and Guglielmo; and Dorabella and Ferrando.

Don Alfonso is skeptical when Ferrando and Guglielmo tell him they have complete faith in their fiancées, Dorabella and Fiordiligi. Their love is so pure and strong that infidelity is completely out of the question. However, Don Alfonso believes women are by their nature prone to cheat (hence, the title of the opera; roughly translated, *così fan tutte* means “that’s what women do”). He sets out to prove Ferrando and Guglielmo wrong by concocting a mad cap love experiment in love whereby the young officers go undercover to test their fiancées’ fidelity. The games begin when they tell their fiancées they have been called up for military duty and must leave immediately, which is utterly false. Then, Ferrando and Guglielmo return in disguise to woo Dorabella and Fiordiligi while their “real” fiancés are away. If Ferrando and Guglielmo succeed in tricking Dorabella and Fiordiligi to be unfaithful, Don Alfonso will be proven right and if they fail, true love wins.



Yuval Sharon's new production of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* at Detroit Opera re-envisioned the lovers as automatons. Standing, from left: Thomas Lehman, Ann Toomey, and Joshua Blue. Seated, from left: Emily Fons and Olivia Boen. Photo by Austin T. Richey / Detroit Opera

Detroit Opera's version stuck to the original plot, but in a way that combined romantic comedy with science fiction. Engagement with artificial intelligence anchored the story and characters in the 21st century. Don Alfonso retained his cynicism, but was transformed from a philosopher into the CEO of Soul Sync, a tech start-up specialized in building AI companions for humans. The other characters became Soul Sync AI companion prototypes undergoing lab testing. Ferrando and Guglielmo were advanced AI models and the most life-like while Dorabella and Fiordiligi, as rudimentary AI models, were more robot-like.

A hybrid set design with digital screens as the backdrop created depth of infinite proportions and acted as a bridge between worlds and epochs. Video filmed at the University of Michigan robotics laboratory served to contextualize the AI concept as well as showcase the versatility and comedic timing of the performers; they were incredible singers, but also wonderful actors, which took their musical performances to the next level.

By effortlessly executing choreographed robotic movements, mezzo-soprano Emily Fons and soprano Olivia Boen lent credibility to their roles as AI models, Dorabella and Fiordiligi. Their ability to seamlessly blend intricate choreography with singing and acting earn them the “triple threat” moniker. Together with Ferrando and Guglielmo, played by Joshua Blue and Thomas Lehman, the couples represent the innocence and playfulness of young love. While the ladies are unassuming, the gentlemen are charming – their masculinity is unconsciously performative.



Olivia Boen as Fiordiligi and Emily Fons as Dorabella in Yuval Sharon's new AI-themed production of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* at Detroit Opera.
Photo by Austin T.Richey / Detroit Opera

In contrast, Don Alfonso, played by baritone Edward Parks, and Despina, played by mezzo-soprano Ann Toomey, represent experience and a more pragmatic, somewhat skeptical, but no less playful, approach to love. Parks, who premiered the titular role in Mason Bates' *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* in 2017, was the perfect choice to play a tech mogul obsessed with developing and selling the ideal AI companion. Toomey's portrayal of the mischievous and deliciously manipulative Despina was nothing short of spectacular. The versatility of the ensemble cast was remarkable.

However, what made this version of *Così fan tutte* most compelling was the way it drew attention to the limits of artificial intelligence. Removing the human element from the equation in love or in a performance removes the mystery and magic from the experience. When Despina sings “*Una donna a quindici anni*” (an aria that explains Despina's take on love, namely that every young woman needs to understand that “love” is ultimately about using one's charms to control men), Toomey's natural voice is altered electronically for short intervals as Don Alfonso demonstrates the bespoke features of his AI model/companion. It's a comic scene that serves to underscore the difference between artificial and authentic with the human voice flexing its superiority; where it is much richer, round, and conveys emotion, the electronic one is jarring, metallic with a flattening effect on the genuine human feeling expressed.



Yuval Sharon's new AI-themed production of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* at Detroit Opera, with Ann Toomey as Despina (left) and Edward Parks as Don Alfonso. Photo by Austin T. Richey / Detroit Opera

In another move classical music purists might see as sacrilege, Sharon re-worked Act II to include Q&A sessions with tech executive Don Alfonso where potential customers, played by very capable actors, asked big questions that can be summed up with one: Can an AI companion solve loneliness? The Q&A was a transgressive act that blurred the boundary between performers and audience members. Both were projected onto the giant screen behind Don Alfonso in perhaps what might have been the first “kiss cam” moment in an opera where audience members became part of the opera. Intentional or not, it was a lovely touch that clearly expressed the artistic director’s objective to give opera back to the people. The connection with the audience was palpable as evidenced by peals of laughter that punctuated the performance.

The opera concludes with Despina standing in front of an army of AI companions as she makes a final pronouncement: “it’s our turn now”. AI robots may have taken over the stage but Detroit Opera, under Yuval Sharon’s direction, has redesigned a 400-year-old art form for the modern era. In an age of waning attention spans, holding the keen interest of thousands of spectators for four hours is an outstanding achievement.



Curtain call at the opening night of Yuval Sharon’s new AI-themed production of Mozart’s *Così fan tutte* at Detroit Opera.

Photo by Roopa Chauhan

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