

Why Mozart's Operas Have Become Classics: Research of Recent Productions at Major Opera Houses Worldwide

Junying Guo

Music and Arts Studies, Faculty of Arts, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, Zhejiang 321004, China

Abstract: Drawing on performance data from major opera houses worldwide between 2023 and 2026, this paper systematically examines contemporary productions of Mozart's four core operas—*The Magic Flute*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte*—and summarises common trends in recent productions across dimensions such as adaptation strategies, stage language and thematic interpretation. The research reveals that contemporary Mozart productions manifest in four primary forms: modern transpositions, critical reinterpretations, avant-garde experimental versions, and fantastical visual interpretations. Regardless of stylistic differences, all versions adhere to the unshakeable premise of preserving Mozart's music in its entirety. This phenomenon highlights the unique coexistence of textual openness and musical drama in Mozart's operas; it is precisely this structure that endows these works with enduring vitality on the contemporary stage.

Keywords: Mozart, Opera Performance, Contemporary Production, Stage Interpretation, Classics.

1. Introduction

Mozart was one of the most representative composers of the 18th-century Viennese Classical school, and one of the most significant creators of musical drama in the history of Western opera.[1] Compared to his contemporaries, Mozart not only inherited the light-hearted and humorous tradition of Italian comic opera but also imbued it with deeper characterisation and dramatic expression; his comic operas have thus become classics that endure to this day. Within the performance landscape of Western classical music, Mozart's operas have long occupied a central position. Entering the 21st century, performance data from major opera houses worldwide continues to corroborate this assessment. From the Vienna State Opera to the Metropolitan Opera in New York, from the Royal Opera House in London to La Scala in Milan, Mozart's operas remain an indispensable fixture of every season's repertoire.[2] In particular, between 2023 and 2026, several leading opera houses have successively launched new productions of Mozart's major operas.

However, 'classic' is not a static label. The contemporary performing arts world's enthusiasm for Mozart is not merely reflected in the replication of 18th-century performance practices. On the contrary, the most acclaimed Mozart productions in recent years have often been the boldest reinterpretations of the original works: transposing the stories to modern cities, replacing aristocratic salons with reality TV shows, placing the orchestra in full view of the audience, and substituting traditional scenery with fully animated visuals, amongst other innovations.

This phenomenon raises a central question worthy of in-depth exploration. Behind these stylistically diverse contemporary interpretations, what textual qualities do Mozart's operas possess that enable them to retain such powerful vitality on stage within virtually any directorial framework? This paper aims to systematically review major global productions from recent years to identify common trends in contemporary Mozart productions, and thereby explore the essential characteristics of Mozart's operas

revealed by these trends.[3]

The scope of this study covers Mozart productions staged between 2023 and 2026 by major international opera institutions, including the Vienna State Opera, the Metropolitan Opera in New York, the Royal Opera House, La Scala in Milan, the Komische Oper Berlin, and the Opéra de Paris, with a particular focus on four core works: *The Magic Flute*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte*. [4]

2. Overview of Global Performances and Productions in Recent Years

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Mozart's operas have continued to occupy a central position in the world's major opera houses. Statistics on the frequency of performances reveal that *The Magic Flute*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte* are the four most frequently staged operas, featuring almost permanently in the regular seasons of leading international opera institutions. Institutions such as the Vienna State Opera, the Metropolitan Opera in New York, the Royal Opera House, the Opéra de Paris and the Komische Oper Berlin have all continued to restage these works or launch new productions.[5]

Among them, the Vienna State Opera, as a key centre of the Mozart tradition, will retain *The Magic Flute*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Così fan tutte* and *Don Giovanni* on its programme, and will launch a new production of *The Magic Flute* directed by Barbora Horáková in 2025, followed by a new production of *La clemenza di Tito* in 2026. [6] This demonstrates that Mozart's operas continue to enjoy a high degree of stability within the German-Austrian opera tradition.

The Metropolitan Opera in New York, meanwhile, is characterised by the coexistence of classic productions and contemporary directorial interpretations. In the 2024/25 season, the Met is reviving Simon McBurney's production of *The Magic Flute*, whilst continuing to stage Richard Eyre's *The Marriage of Figaro*, and expanding its international reach through broadcast formats such as Live in HD. The Royal Opera House, meanwhile, continues to retain core repertoire

such as *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Così fan tutte*, *The Magic Flute* and *Don Giovanni*, whilst continually reinterpreting these works through the lens of new directors.[7]

In recent years, the staging of Mozart's operas has moved beyond traditional productions, gradually giving rise to a variety of parallel directorial styles. Based on the characteristics of major productions in recent years, these can be broadly categorised into four types: the classical version, the modern version, the dark version and the avant-garde version.

2.1. The Classical Version: A Continuation of 18th-Century Dramatic Tradition

Classical productions typically emphasise the preservation of the historical period's atmosphere and the dramatic logic of the original work. Such versions often retain traditional visual elements such as 18th-century costumes, aristocratic estates or mythical settings, whilst minimising the director's reinterpretation of the work.

For example, the Metropolitan Opera's long-running revival of Richard Eyre's *The Marriage of Figaro* largely retains the traditional aristocratic estate setting and 18th-century stage atmosphere. The director's focus is not on reconstructing character relationships, but rather on highlighting the dramatic quality of Mozart's music itself through stable stage direction and vocal performance. Similarly, the Royal Opera House's long-running revival of David McVicar's *The Magic Flute* also retains the traditional mythical setting and Enlightenment allegorical structure.[8]

Although productions of this type are relatively conservative in their visual language, their strength lies in their ability to present Mozart's music and the dramatic structure itself to the fullest extent; consequently, they remain a stable fixture in international opera houses.

2.2. Modern Adaptations: Transforming 18th-Century Drama into Contemporary Social Narratives

Modern adaptations have become the most common approach to reinterpreting Mozart's operas in recent years. Such productions typically do not alter the music or the main plot structure, but rather, by shifting the historical setting, transpose the 18th-century relationships into a modern social context.

The Vienna State Opera's 2025 production of *The Magic Flute* by Barbora Horáková exhibits a distinct modernist tendency. The temple and fairy-tale spaces of the traditional *Magic Flute* are replaced by realistic settings such as a haunted house, a classroom and a nursery, whilst the focus of the work shifts from a mystical allegory to the characters' personal growth and psychological experiences.[9]

Similarly, Evgeny Titov's production of *The Marriage of Figaro* at the Munich State Opera transforms the Count's estate into a modern cannabis farm, using contemporary entertainment culture to amplify the original's sense of class absurdity.[10] Meanwhile, the Metropolitan Opera's long-running production of *Così fan tutte* by Phelim McDermott sets the plot in a retro amusement park, rendering the original test of love more akin to the emotional games of modern consumer society.

The defining feature of such productions is that they alter the work's historical setting rather than its dramatic framework. Mozart's original character relationships and musical structure remain intact, but their social implications

are reinterpreted as issues that modern audiences can directly relate to.

2.3. The 'Dark' Version: A Reinterpretation of Character Ethics and Power Dynamics

Whereas modern adaptations primarily alter the historical backdrop, the 'dark' version places greater emphasis on a reinterpretation of the characters' ethical frameworks.

In the traditional *Don Giovanni*, the protagonist often possesses a certain dangerous charm and is even regarded as a symbol of unbridled desire. However, Ivo van Hove's production of *Don Giovanni*, revived by the Opéra de Paris and the Metropolitan Opera, has thoroughly erased this romanticised image. In this version, Don Giovanni resembles a violent man and a power-wielding figure in modern society, with his acts of seduction explicitly portrayed as oppression and violation.[11] Similarly, in Lotte de Beer's production of *The Marriage of Figaro* at the Volksoper Wien, the director no longer treats the Count's pursuit of Susanna as a traditional comic plot device, but instead reinterprets the characters' relationships through the lens of sexual power and structural oppression.

This type of production demonstrates that 21st-century reinterpretations of Mozart's operas are becoming increasingly embedded within the ethical debates of modern society.

2.4. Avant-garde Productions: Deconstructing the Very Form of the Operatic Stage

The most significant feature of avant-garde productions lies in the fact that they alter not merely the historical setting, but the very mode of presentation of the opera itself.

Simon McBurney's production of *The Magic Flute* is a prime example. Through live sound effects, real-time projections and the orchestra taking to the stage, this version continually shatters the 'illusory space' created by traditional opera. The audience can see directly how the opera is being created, thereby making the 'stage mechanics' themselves part of the performance. The production of *The Magic Flute* by the Komische Oper Berlin, co-created by Barrie Kosky and the 1927 Theatre, goes a step further by eliminating traditional stage sets, transforming the entire opera into a style reminiscent of black-and-white silent films and animated films. The performers appear to be immersed in an early 20th-century cartoon world, with a visual language entirely detached from 18th-century operatic tradition. Meanwhile, the UK National Opera's production of *The Marriage of Figaro* by Joe Hill-Gibbins employs a minimalist white space, retaining only a few doors and a minimal number of props, thereby focusing the audience's attention on the relationships between the characters themselves.[12]

These avant-garde productions demonstrate that 21st-century directors are no longer content merely to retell Mozart's stories, but are beginning to rethink the very nature of opera.

2.5. The Reimagining of Classic Works

A review of recent performances at major international opera houses reveals that the reason Mozart's operas continue to occupy a central position on the global opera stage in the 21st century is not merely due to their historical status as classics, but more importantly because these works possess an extraordinary capacity for modern adaptation.[13] Whether at the Vienna State Opera, the Metropolitan Opera,

the Royal Opera House, or institutions such as the Komische Oper Berlin and the Opéra de Paris, a distinct tendency towards reinterpretation has been evident in Mozart productions in recent years. Directors are no longer content with simply recreating 18th-century stage traditions; instead, they seek to re-situate Mozart's operas within a contemporary social context, re-establishing a connection with modern audiences' emotional experiences, ethical perspectives and social issues.[14]

This re-creation does not imply a complete subversion of the original work. Although different directors continually alter the works' historical setting, spatial structure, visual

style and even the ethical positioning of the characters-for example, transforming the mythical space of *The Magic Flute* into a modern psychological space, converting the aristocratic estate of *The Marriage of Figaro* into a scene of modern consumer society, or reshaping the 'dissolute nobleman' in *Don Giovanni* into a modern violent male-these productions almost invariably retain the most essential elements of Mozart's operas. namely the musical structure, the main character relationships, and the dramatic plot framework. In other words, what modern directors truly alter is often the manner in which the work is interpreted, rather than the work itself.[15]

Table 1. Performance History of Mozart's Four Operas

Opera	Theatre / Performance Times	Director's Cut	Type
"The Magic Flute"	Vienna State Opera(2025)	Barbora Horáková	Modern
"The Magic Flute"	The Metropolitan Opera in New York(2024/25 Revival)	Simon McBurney	Pioneer Edition
"The Magic Flute"	Berlin Opera House(Premiered in 2012, global tour in 2025)	Barrie Kosky / 1927	Pioneer Edition
"The Magic Flute"	Royal Opera House (premiered in 2012, revival in 2026/27)	David McVicar	Classic
"The Magic Flute"	The Metropolitan Opera, New York (long-running festival performances)	Julie Taymor(English)	Classic/Home
"The Marriage of Figaro"	The Metropolitan Opera, New York (2024/25)	Richard Eyre	Classic
"The Marriage of Figaro"	Munich State Opera(2023)	Evgeny Titov	Modern
"The Marriage of Figaro"	English National Opera(2025Revival)	Joe Hill-Gibbins	Pioneer Edition
"The Marriage of Figaro"	Vienna Folk Opera(2025)	Lotte de Beer	Dark
"Don Giovanni"	Paris Opera (premiere in 2019) / Metropolitan Opera (2023, 2025)	Ivo van Hove	Dark
"Don Giovanni"	Royal Opera House (long-running revival)	Kasper Holten	Modern
"Don Giovanni"	Salzburg Festival (long-running classic production)	Romeo Castellucci	Pioneer/Dark
"A Woman's Heart"	Royal Opera House (2024 revival)	Jan Philipp Gloger	Pioneer +Modern
"A Woman's Heart"	La Scala, Milan (2025)	Robert Carsen	Modern
"A Woman's Heart"	Metropolitan Opera (long-running revival)	Phelim McDermott	Modern

3. Why Mozart's Operas Are Classics: Textual Openness and Musical Authority

3.1. Textual Openness

The librettos of Mozart's four core operas are highly open-ended; the fundamental reason for this lies in the fact that they deal with the most fundamental and enduring themes of human experience. The characters in Mozart's works are not merely stereotypical figures, but individuals with complex desires, emotional conflicts and social relationships. Power, desire, loyalty, deceit, class and gender. These themes are timeless and can therefore be reactivated within any historical context. For instance, the oppression of power in *The Marriage of Figaro*, the desire and violence in *Don Giovanni*, the doubts regarding the authenticity of love in *Così fan tutte*, and the questions of growth, order and enlightenment in *The Magic Flute* remain, in fact, subjects of ongoing discussion in modern society.

It is precisely this universality at the thematic level that makes Mozart's operas a mirror of extraordinary inclusivity. Directors of every era can reflect the most pressing social issues of their time within them, without distorting the fundamental logic of the original work. Thus, the openness of the text is the first source of Mozart's operas' enduring vitality.[16]

3.2. The Authority of the Music

If the openness of the text explains why directors can alter almost everything, then the authority of the music explains why no one truly dares to tamper with it. Mozart's music is not merely an accompaniment to the opera's narrative; it is the core vehicle of meaning and an active participant in the progression of the plot. In Mozart's operas, the characters' deepest psychological states, the genuine emotions concealed beneath their masks, the hidden tensions within superficial reconciliations, and the melancholic core beneath the comic façade are all most fully revealed through the music. The following analysis examines the specific sources of this musical authority across three levels: ensembles, arias and finales.

3.2.1. Ensembles: Simultaneously Presenting Multiple Distinct Psychological States

One of Mozart's most significant contributions to the history of opera is his revolutionary use of ensemble passages. He had multiple characters sing simultaneously, each expressing entirely different-and even contradictory-emotions, whilst using the music to drive the plot forward. All of this occurs at the same moment, within the same musical framework. This was unprecedented in the 18th century, and even today remains irreplaceable by any stage adaptation.

The 'Letter Duet' (Sull'aria) in Act III of *The Marriage of*

Figaro-a duet in which the Countess dictates and Susanna transcribes-appears on the surface to be a light-hearted scene of two women conspiring to deceive the Count. Yet Mozart's musical layers extend far beyond this.[17] The two vocal parts take turns leading and echoing one another, weaving a sense of intimacy that allows the audience to feel both the warmth of the women's alliance and the bitterness underlying their plan for revenge. This is something that neither the text nor the performance alone could achieve. Regardless of how the production is adapted, the very existence of this music constitutes the most precise musical depiction of how women support one another within power structures; any contemporary director can only work within the framework of this music, rather than transcend it.

The trio 'Soave sia il vento' in *La Traviata* is another irreplaceable example. As the two male protagonists prepare to set off to war, the three voices-two men and a woman-bid them farewell amidst music of extreme tranquillity. Here, Mozart employs a sudden harmonic shift: beneath the seemingly serene melodic line, the lower voice repeatedly introduces passing tones in a distant key, hinting at the falseness of this calm. The men's farewell is feigned, the woman's reluctance is genuine, and the three voices singing 'wishes' in unison constitutes one of the most ingeniously crafted ironies in the history of opera. This passage is never omitted in any production, for it succeeds in giving voice to both deception and genuine emotion simultaneously.[18]

The writing of the trios in *Don Giovanni* is equally distinctive. *Don Giovanni* straddles the worlds of comedy and tragedy, able to switch styles at will to achieve his ends, whilst Mozart's final ensemble brings together a diverse cast of characters, propelling the plot to its climax without interrupting the dramatic flow.[19] The finale of Act I features three dance pieces with distinct rhythms performed simultaneously on stage: the minuet, the contredanse and the German dance. Characters from three distinct social classes, with three rhythms running in parallel yet in perfect harmony, form a perfect musical metaphor for the class structure of 18th-century Europe; the music itself conveys the entire narrative.

3.2.2. Arias: Irreplicable Psychological Portraits

Mozart endowed every character, including minor figures, with an independent musical personality. His arias are not platforms for vocal virtuosity, but precise portraits of the characters' psyches. Motifs pass between the voices, reflecting the constant shifts in emotional stance and the hidden inner tensions.

The Queen of the Night's second aria in *The Magic Flute*, 'The flames of vengeance burn within me' (Der Hölle Rache), is one of the most technically demanding and instantly recognisable passages in the history of Western opera. Mozart portrays the Queen of the Night's fury through rapid ascending scales and highly demanding coloratura. Yet this fury is not mere screaming; the music's intricate structure itself reveals her to be a clear-headed woman in control of her power, her madness being a calculated act.[20]

The Countess's two arias in *The Marriage of Figaro*. 'Porgi, amor' in Act II and 'Dove sono' in Act III are Mozart's most tender portrayals of the inner world of a woman whose hopes have been dashed. The former conveys profound sorrow through simple, restrained lines, whilst the latter, following a long phrase recalling past happiness, suddenly shifts into a rapid expression of resolve.

Leporello's 'Catalogue Aria' (Madamina, il catalogo) in

Don Giovanni, which lists his master's conquests, navigates the fine line between witty satire and genuine absurdity. Through leaping melodies and precise shifts in tone, Mozart transforms a cold, clinical list of statistics into a powerful comic indictment of patriarchal society. In van Hove's production, *Don Giovanni* is a ruthless modern machine of power, yet when Leporello sings this catalogue, the absurdity inherent in Mozart's music-where the comic and the terrifying coexist-still pierces through any contemporary framework to strike the audience directly.

3.2.3. Harmonic Language: Melancholy Behind the Laughter

One of the techniques in which Mozart most impresses later composers is his ability to use harmony to create emotional complexity within a comic context. In *Così fan tutte*, sudden harmonic shifts into distant keys recur to emphasise emotional uncertainty; in *Don Giovanni*, the intrusion of minor keys brings the malice and danger in comic scenes to the surface, imbuing so-called light-hearted moments with a sense of latent menace.[21]

This harmonic complexity is one of the core traits that distinguishes Mozart from all his contemporaries. His comedies are never merely comedies, and his tragedies never merely tragedies; the music maintains a perpetual tension between the narrative and emotional levels, rendering any singular moral interpretation overly simplistic.[22] This is precisely why contemporary directors, however radical their stance, cannot find straightforward support in the music when reinterpreting these works. Mozart's harmonies themselves reject single answers.

3.3. Structural Symmetry: A Vessel Suitable for Contemporary Directors' Conceptual Experiments

The dramatic structure of Mozart's Da Ponte trilogy, particularly in *Così fan tutte*, exhibits a high degree of geometric symmetry.[23] Two pairs of lovers, two instances of disguise, two instances of seduction, two instances of wavering, and two instances of reconciliation (or lack thereof). This symmetry constitutes both the intrinsic logic of the text and an ideal vessel for contemporary directors to conduct conceptual experiments. The structural stability ensures that, no matter how a director manipulates individual elements, the overall framework will not collapse. A 'play-within-a-play' narrative framework can be superimposed upon this symmetrical structure, or it can be embedded within the voyeuristic logic of reality television.[24]

4. Conclusion

Through a systematic review and comparative analysis of productions of Mozart's core operas at major opera houses worldwide between 2023 and 2026, this paper reveals four primary forms of contemporary Mozart productions: the classical version, the modern version, the dark version and the avant-garde version. These four forms do not merely represent differences in stylistic preference; rather, they reflect how directors from different eras and cultural contexts respond in their own ways to the same question: what do Mozart's operas mean for the present day? The fact that this question continues to be raised demonstrates that Mozart's operas have not become a historical legacy to be venerated, but remain living texts engaged in a genuine dialogue with contemporary society.

The fundamental reason this ongoing dialogue is possible lies in the coexistence of the openness of Mozart's operatic texts and the authority of his music. The openness of the text allows each era to project its most pressing issues--power, gender, deceit, class--onto them without distortion. The authority of the music, meanwhile, ensures that no matter how radical the adaptation, the profound human complexity at the heart of Mozart's music always constitutes an insurmountable baseline. It is precisely the coexistence and tension between these two forces that endows these four operas with enduring vitality on the contemporary stage.

Mozart's operas are considered classics not because they belong to some untouchable historical pantheon, but precisely because they are resilient enough to withstand the full force of questioning from every era. They are also rich enough to allow every such inquiry to find an echo within the music that transcends itself. In this sense, a classic is not an endpoint, but a perpetual beginning.

References

- [1] Cherlin, M. (2017). *Varieties of musical irony from Mozart to Mahler*. Cambridge University Press.
- [2] Abert, H., & Spencer, S. (2007). *W. A. Mozart*. Yale University Press.
- [3] Sadie, S. (2007). *Mozart: The early years 1756–1781*. OUP Oxford.
- [4] Eisen, C. (1991–1997). *Mozart studies 1–2*. Clarendon Press.
- [5] Deutsch, O. E. (1965). *Mozart: A documentary biography*. London.
- [6] Jahn, O. (2013). *Life of Mozart* (P. D. Townsend, Trans.). Cambridge.
- [7] Landon, H. C. R., & Mitchell, D. (1956). *The Mozart companion*.
- [8] Eisen, C., & Keefe, S. P. (2006). *The Cambridge Mozart encyclopedia*. Cambridge University Press.
- [9] Landon, H. C. R. (1989). *Mozart: The golden years*. Thames and Hudson.
- [10] Einstein, A. (1945). *Mozart, his character, his work*. Oxford University Press.
- [11] Clive, P. (1993). *Mozart and his circle*. New Haven.
- [12] Stafford, W. (2003). The evolution of Mozartian biography. In S. P. Keefe (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Mozart* (pp. 200–212). Cambridge University Press.
- [13] Bauer, W. A., Deutsch, O. E., & Eibl, J. H. (Eds.). *Mozart: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen*.
- [14] Stock, K. F., Heiling, R., & Stock, M. (2006). *Mozart bibliographies* (2nd enlarged ed.). K. G. Saur.
- [15] Anderson, E. (1985). *The letters of Mozart and his family*. London.
- [16] Eisen, C. (2006). *Mozart: A life in letters*. London.
- [17] Anderson, E. (1997). *The letters of Mozart and his family*. Macmillan Reference Limited.
- [18] Mann, W. (1977). *The operas of Mozart*. New York.
- [19] Dent, E. J. (1947). *Mozart's operas: A critical study*. Oxford.
- [20] Steptoe, A. (1988). *The Mozart-Da Ponte operas*. Oxford.
- [21] Hertz, D. (1990). *Mozart's operas*. Berkeley.
- [22] Nagel, I. (1991). *Autonomy and mercy: Reflections on Mozart's operas*. Harvard University Press.
- [23] Hunter, M., & Webster, J. (1997). *Opera buffa in Mozart's Vienna*. Cambridge University Press.
- [24] Rushton, J. (1994). *Mozart*. In *The new Grove dictionary of opera* (Vol. 3). London.