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Bostonist Q&A: Hillary Ditmars, Boston Youth Symphony



Così fan tutte

By Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte

Performed by the Boston Youth Symphony

Musical Direction by Federico Cortese

Performed in Italian, with subtitles

Sunday, 3 p.m.

Sanders Theatre, Harvard University

[Ticket information](#)

On Sunday, the 119 members of the Boston Youth Symphony, joined by a cast of operatic talent, will perform a semi-staged production of Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, a comedic work that tackles the question of fidelity among lovers and first

premiered in 1790. The production, in development since August, is not only a massive creative undertaking -- it serves as the first full opera performed by the BYS in its 50-year history.

BYS violinist and section leader Hillary Ditmars, 17, has been performing as a member of the Boston Youth Symphony Orchestras (the organization that features four youth orchestras, including the BYS) for a decade. The Westford resident, a violinist for 13 years, recently spoke with Bostonist about the process of taking on Mozart's opera and what any unsuspecting audience members should expect when they enter Harvard's Sanders Theatre on Sunday afternoon.

What were your thoughts upon hearing that the BYS was set to tackle an opera? Was excitement laced with any nerves? Why or why not?

Almost every year since I joined the BYS, we have performed one act of, or selections from, a Mozart opera. This year was the first we've attempted to perform an opera in its entirety, which is something I'd always wanted to experience, so upon hearing the repertoire plan for this year I was incredibly excited. Putting together a full Mozart opera is a daunting task, but I wouldn't say I was nervous -- honestly, my first thought was, "I'm really glad I didn't graduate before this happened!"

Read the full interview after the jump! Photo of Hillary Detmars by Michael Lutch.

How long has the preparation process been for *Così fan tutte*? What has the process been like?

The BYS started working on *Così* at camp in August, although at that point in the process we didn't do much except read through our respective acts (we're split into two chamber orchestras: one-half of is playing on Act I, the other Act II). On any given Sunday since August, we've spent at least a little time on *Così*: our rehearsals run from 12:30 to 5:45, with three sections of roughly an hour and half each, and we've spent at least one section on rehearsal on the Mozart almost every week. Since our last concert in October, we've been spending more time on *Così* every Sunday.

What do you think of the material? How does this rank for you in terms of Mozart's work? Is there a particular aspect of the opera that stands out for you and, if so, why?

Mozart's music is all brilliant, but of everything he composed, I am especially drawn to opera. I think that the

combination of story-telling, the rush of accompanying fabulous singers, and generally excellent orchestral writing makes Mozart's operas really shine, at least in my mind. Playing a Mozart opera is incredibly difficult, both physically and mentally, because it requires constant focus; but in the end, this is incredibly rewarding. *Così* is certainly no exception to any of this.

Where would this work rank for you, in comparison to the other work you've done with the BYS?

I've always loved working with singers in an orchestral setting, especially playing Mozart. Being a part of a full-fledged operatic production has been really incredible, because I've gotten so much experience in this type of performance, which differs from playing standard orchestral repertoire. Also, it's been especially rewarding to work on *Così* in its entirety, because we've all gotten a good idea of the plot and scope of the work. I've played a lot of amazing music with the BYSO -- if I had to pick a favorite so far, it would probably be a toss-up between Verdi's *Messa da Requiem* in 2005 and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony last October -- but *Così* is definitely close to the top of the list.

What are you feeling when you are performing with the BYS before an audience? Is it a rush of adrenaline? A blur because you're focused on the task at hand? What goes through your mind?

I don't typically get stage fright anymore, but ironically, if I am nervous it's usually for an orchestral performance versus a solo one. I know that sounds odd -- safety in numbers, after all -- but being a section leader is a huge responsibility, and requires constant focus. Basically, I know that if I make a mistake, it will not only affect me but my section too, which is all the more reason to be totally on top of my game. It's a huge thrill, though, performing such fantastic music with an amazing conductor like Fed. Usually, our performances go by pretty quickly for me, because I start out focused, and that focus draws me into the music.

What should an audience member know about what they're in for before he or she arrives for the performance?

Quite simply, *Così* is a long opera! It's physically exhausting for us to sit through, and none of us are playing for more than half of the performance. So it would be good to come with that in mind. Not to say that the performance will be boring, by any stretch -- an opera is a story, a play and music combined, two of the primary and timeless forms of entertainment. Since *Così* is sung in Italian, though, I think it's important to realize that it may be hard to follow the opera unless you have an idea of the synopsis -- and that's what program notes are for!

What are you going to want to do down the road, post-BYS? What are your future plans?


I am hoping to pursue a combination of music and academics in both college and beyond. I am especially interested in psychology, and while it's only an idea at this point, I am trying to think of a way to combine music and psych in a career. It's also been my dream for years to play in a string quartet, because I really love chamber music, even more than orchestral or solo playing. No matter what I end up doing down the road, though, I know I'll be involved in some way with the musical world.


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