



**MAGPIES  
& MOJO**


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WICHTEL**

The Trump show  
goes on and on

**ANNABEL  
LANGBEIN**

Recipes for  
a Sunday  
kind of love

A photograph of two women, Hanna Hipp and Emma Pearson, standing together. Hanna Hipp is on the left, wearing a shimmering, sleeveless, light-colored dress. Emma Pearson is on the right, wearing a dark, halter-neck dress and a large, ornate bracelet. They are both looking towards the camera. The background is dark and textured, possibly a wall or a backdrop.

# THE OPERA

Hanna Hipp and Emma Pearson: new-gen divas reshaping the story

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# SEDUCTION, SCANDAL & THE SISTERHOOD

**N**o question, it's a dick move. Two best friends, engaged to sisters, take a bet to test their fiancées' fidelity. Pretending they've been called off to war, they return in disguise and set about seducing each other's lover. So who, exactly, is cheating on who?

Just the title of Mozart's satirical love story *Così fan tutte*, which roughly translates as "All women are like that", is enough to get your hackles rising. But a revamped NZ Opera production, helmed by acclaimed Australian director Lindy Hume and conducted by Natalie Murray Beale (who coached Cate Blanchett in *Tár*) is taking a different spin.

"All women are like what?" says Matakana-based soprano Emma Pearson, who plays the sincere and more dutiful sister, Fiordiligi. "Even in

Opera has been described as the most misogynistic art form — 'extravagantly cruel' to its female characters. Two new-generation divas tell **Joanna Wane** how women are reshaping the story.

Mozart's time, I think women would have said, 'Excuse me?'"

Pearson and Polish mezzo-soprano Hanna Hipp, who's flown over from London to sing the role of impulsive Dorabella, are in their second week of rehearsals when *Canvas* catches up with them. How the tangled storyline will ultimately be resolved, they say, has not yet been decided.

EP: I have my theory. It's like Cluedo!

HH: The three productions I've done before were all directed by men and sometimes I feel they don't nail the aspect that women are being portrayed quite cruelly. In one, there was even an indication of violence towards me [as Dorabella] — not being forgiven but really punished and held responsible. But I feel that the men are also responsible. I mean,

who makes a bet like this? So I've always struggled a bit with the piece. I think with Lindy, we have the opportunity to break from convention. From day one, the whole rehearsal process has been about discussion. Being given space to develop as characters helps portray us as women in a more modern way. And although it was written in 1790, the text is very modern. All of the characters are flawed.

EP: Lorenzo da Ponte, who wrote the libretto, gives us the opportunity to tell the story of two very multi-faceted women. It's very cleverly worded and Fiordiligi shows her turmoil with the almost psychological torment she goes through.

Opera has been described as "extravagantly cruel" to its heroines, who are controlled by men and often delivered violent deaths. What would you say to critics who think it's misogynistic and outdated?

EP: I'd say they haven't been to the opera lately, because we're moving with society. Sometimes there are racial problems [in the libretto] that can't be



Opera stars Emma Pearson, left, and Hanna Hipp star in a new female-led production of Mozart's *Così fan tutte*.

PHOTOS / BABICHE MARTENS

may be a woman too. Often the female character is the title role and it's your face on the poster. You're paid more than the men in the room. And it's been happening since Mozart's time that women were employed to do something other than put up their legs.

When we first meet the sisters, they're reading *Pride and Prejudice*, which immediately suggests the love quadrangle is in for a less traditional twist. What can you tell us about Fiordiligi and Dorabella?

EP: Fiordiligi has lived her life happily within the four sides of a square. Then that square is blown apart when her lover is sent away to war, and the option of having a new love doesn't fit the doctrine she's been raised with. People she starts to trust tell her that everything she believed before was repressed and conservative and not letting her grow. Despina [the maid] hands us two books to read, as if to say, "Get your head out of *Dolly* magazine."

HH: It's not said in the libretto but I feel that I'm the younger sister. Even in the music, I'm always the one who's parroting her — because she's older but maybe I also want to be more heard, which sometimes goes with being the younger child. Especially in Act One, I take things very dramatically and don't handle the situation very well. I'm sobbing — the first aria is almost like a hyperventilation. But then I'm first to step over the boundary, tempting my sister as well. I'm very liberated sexually in this piece and although we haven't staged the ending, I feel it won't be possible to go back to my previous love.

Emma, you played Fiordiligi 20 years ago in your first professional role. What was your take on it then compared to now?

EP: In those early days, I had my own opinion about whether someone was correct or incorrect about their life choices and who they chose for a lover. My Fiordiligi was very stropky. She was angry until she was seduced and then happy to be back with her first lover at the end of the show. Now, I've been through all sorts of relationships. And the shame Fiordiligi feels, I've experienced that too, and can add it subtly to my performance.

In the early 2000s, things hadn't progressed much with the #MeToo movement. Slap and tickle and all that sort of thing was still widely used. There was a bit more ham. And there were no intimacy co-ordinators in those days. I've worked before with Jennifer Ward-Lealand [the intimacy co-ordinator on *Così fan tutte*] and what I really love is that we stick to the choreography. A move can be quite passionate, but it's the same move every time.

HH: It's a dance, really.

EP: There have been so many times where people have said, "I never let that actor touch me there, and he was just feeling his artistic need to do that on the night." That's when you say, "Sorry, no, stick to the choreography" and then everyone's safe. You're in control. It's the same with stage combat when you're fighting with a knife. You don't improvise.

HH: It's wonderful that this kind of presence is more and more obvious in the rehearsal rooms in opera, because I think we have all experienced people going a little bit too far in the moment.

I've just done a production in Copenhagen of *A Handmaid's Tale*, playing Offred, and it was a necessity because of the extreme scenes I had to play — including rape, a gynaecologist examining me, plus sex on stage. But even in more subtle, seductive moments, you have to establish that connection and trust with your partner on stage. Even if you know them as colleagues, there's great

benefit in having the time to explore where our limits are.

Do either of you have sisters of your own?

EP: Let's talk about Rebecca Fleur Pearson, my older sister. A real leader, head girl at high school, dux every year and all the boys wanted her to be their girlfriend. A very successful human being across the board. [A mother of three, she works as a lung transplant physician in Sydney.]

Did you try to lead her astray?

EP: I wanted to be like her! I was Dorabella.

HH: I don't have a sister, but I'm surrounded by beautiful women and feel so blessed to have them in my life, and also to draw from them in the roles where I get to play a woman. As a mezzo-soprano, normally I play male characters — trouser roles. When I'm a teenage boy, I use my younger brother as a role model. He's always my inspiration. I remember him being quite quirky and awkward, as boys are at that age.

What do you prefer — a good laugh or a good cry?

HH: If I'm watching, I would definitely go with tragedy, to be moved. Most of my trouser roles are there to make audiences smile and laugh. With *Così fan tutte*, we say it's a commedia dell'arte, but there's a lot of darkness in it as well. A lot of tragedy that with every decision you make, whether it's the right one or not, comes pain.

Performing in *A Handmaid's Tale* must have been gruelling.

HH: A very rewarding project but very hard. It's a succession of scenes as they are in Atwood's novel and as Offred, I never went off-stage. It was written in the late 1990s so it's not entirely new but with the political climate around the world when we were doing the piece ... Iran was kicking off and me, as a Pole, with the political situation and women's rights in my country under threat ... for the first time, I really felt that art has a voice and can create change. I had a very strong sense of the mission of it. But I feel that somewhere along the way my soul did suffer because it's such a heavy piece.

What's next for you, Emma?

EP: I've got a lovely little gig in Australia with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra and [American jazz trumpeter] Wynton Marsalis, who's written a piece called *All Rise*, which is a kind of jazz/gospel mass. The year finishes with Handel's opera *Rinaldo* for four weeks with Pinchgut Opera in Sydney. And something's just popped up with Victorian Opera in Melbourne, a brand-new opera with a part that's been written for me.

That must be the ultimate compliment! Hanna, you moved to the UK in 2008 — how's life in post-Brexit London?

HH: It's a challenging time. I always thought art and music thrive best when they're collaborative and international, and don't close their borders on anyone. What really saddens me is that I chose the UK because I felt it was very open, and I owe it so much. I did all my opera training there. I'm married to a Brit. I still love it, but things have changed so dramatically within such a short period of time.

Poland has been so impacted by the war in Ukraine, taking in more than a million refugees. Are you proud of the way your home country has responded?

HH: Absolutely, we're on the forefront of it. And yes, we've stepped up. But we have a very far-right government in place. It's something I struggle with because I have loved ones there, and little girls in the family, and I want them to have the best possible future. So I'm a strong advocate for women's rights. And we have to constantly fight for them and never fall asleep because it's very easy to lose them. ●



PHOTOS SHOT ON LOCATION AT QT AUCKLAND. CLOTHES FROM KNUJEFERMANIN HAIR & MAKEUP BY KARINA SANASARYAN.



● NZ Opera's new production of *Così fan tutte* plays Auckland May 31-June 4, Wellington June 14-18 and Christchurch June 28-July 2. For details, see [nzopera.com](http://nzopera.com)

changed and that's an issue. But when it comes to gender, I think there's room for rethinking it.

HH: It's about having a modern lens switched on, even if it's a matter of tweaking the text sometimes. *The Magic Flute* with Monostatos [the "wicked Moor"] is racially inadequate to today's time. Also Verdi's *Otello* and blackening a performer's face, which was a practice up to a very recent point. We have progressed and therefore the art form needs to do the same.

EP: Mozart is from the Enlightenment, a time when there was not only talk that the working classes could have power, but also that women could have power. And then we get thrown back to more conservative ways of thinking. [While *Così fan tutte* didn't offend Viennese society at the time, it was considered immoral and scandalous in the 19th and early 20th centuries.]

One of the things I love about opera as a woman is that it's an area of life where I feel women are treated really well. Women get the centre stage, they get the last bow next to the conductor, who