

Sisters

Henrietta Bredin

*Sisters, sisters,
There were never such devoted sisters.
Lord help the mister who comes between
me and my sister –
And lord help the sister who comes between
me and my man.*

Characteristically sharp lyrics by Irving Berlin from *White Christmas*, sung by Rosemary Clooney and Vera-Ellen (dubbed in her case) sporting matching powder-blue outfits with ostrich-feather fans, while casting knowing glances at the already smitten duo of Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye. It doesn't take much of a stretch of the imagination to transfer those sentiments to Dorabella and Fiordiligi in *Così fan tutte*. Like many sisters, they are loving, sharing, caring and deeply, fiercely competitive. Each is out to prove that her beloved is the best, the most handsome, the most devoted, and that their own respective passions for them are the most epic and enduring. Which of course makes it all the more devastating when those feelings are meddled with, turned upside down and inside out and exposed as false.

Operatic sisters are mostly set up as contrasting characters, frequently with contrasting voices, one mezzo and one soprano. Bookish Tatyana versus light-hearted Olga in *Eugene Onegin*; maternal Charlotte and girlish Sophie in *Werther*; Richard Strauss's obsessively vengeful Elektra opposed to the timid Chrysothemis. In *Così*, the two sisters' characters are more clearly differentiated than those of Ferrando and Guglielmo. Dorabella is the most florid in her despair over her lover's departure but succumbs sooner to the advances of his mysterious Albanian replacement. Fiordiligi's anguish goes deeper than her sister's, her resistance is stronger but her ultimate capitulation probably more complete.

In literature, these contrasts between sisters abound. Jane Austen, who had a particularly close relationship with her own sister, Cassandra, is exceptionally good at depicting this. Lizzie and Jane Bennet, out of earshot of their relentlessly matchmaking mother, discuss their new neighbour, Mr Bingley, Jane in raptures: 'He is just what a young man ought to be; sensible, good humoured, lively, and I never saw such happy manners! So much ease, with such perfect good breeding!' and Lizzie wryly pragmatic: 'He



Left: Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell
Below left: Olivia de Havilland and Joan Fontaine;
Vera-Ellen and Rosemary Clooney in *White Christmas*
Above: Emma Thompson and Kate Winslet as Elinor and Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility*
Below: Elsa and Anna in *Frozen* (Alamy)

is also handsome, which a young man ought likewise to be, if he possibly can. His character is thereby complete.' In *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor's feelings, like Fiordiligi's, run deep, while Marianne's transports of poetic excitement over falling leaves are not dissimilar to some of Dorabella's more purple effusions. George Eliot, in *Middlemarch*, is very good on the unspoken thought processes between sisters: 'As Celia bent over the paper, Dorothea put her cheek against her sister's arm caressingly. Celia understood the action. Dorothea saw that she had been in the wrong, and Celia pardoned her. Since they could remember, there had been a mixture of criticism and awe in the attitude of Celia's mind towards her elder sister. The younger had always worn a yoke; but is there any yoked creature without its private opinions?'

For a younger generation the chief role models as sisters – indeed singing sisters – would appear to be Elsa and Anna from Disney's *Frozen*. The baffling nature of their sibling relationship, all iced emotion, isolation and self-sacrifice dictated by unruly magical powers hardly bears close examination.

The love-hate sibling relationship should not be underestimated. 'Sisters are a defence against life's cruel circumstances', said Nancy Mitford, in surprisingly sententious mode. 'Sisters are life's cruel circumstances', responded her sister Jessica. An opinion with which Olivia de Havilland might have agreed when her sister Joan Fontaine won the Oscar that she was convinced would be going to her. They did not speak for the next decade. As the writer Linda Sunshine put it: 'If you don't understand how a woman could both love her sister dearly and want to wring her neck at the same time, then you were probably an only child.' And as Frances Spalding writes, rather more elegantly, of Virginia Woolf and her sister Vanessa Bell: 'if their relationship was, from childhood, based on an exchange of natural affection and unforced admiration, it was also veined with antagonism and fortified by mutual need.'



Words and music

As Mozart put it, 'The best thing of all is when a good composer, who understands the stage and is talented enough to make sound suggestions, meets an able poet, that true phoenix.' (The image of this rare bird was to reappear in the opening scene of the Mozart/Da Ponte *Così fan tutte*, when Ferrando and Guglielmo parry their praises for their sweethearts.) Mozart was absolutely clear in his mind about the importance of a properly shaped text: 'An opera is sure of success when the plot is well worked out, the words written solely for the music and not shoved in here and there to suit some miserable rhyme (which, God knows, never enhances the value of any theatrical performance, be it what it may, but rather detracts from it) – I mean, words or even entire verses which ruin the composer's whole idea. Verses are indeed the most indispensable element for music – but rhymes – solely for the sake of rhyming – the most detrimental.'

Jane Glover, *Mozart's Women*, 2005