

The Arizona Republic

Original Divas Get Their Due

By Kenneth LaFave

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Oh, those divas.

The girls with golden throats did more to drive the writing of operas than we care to admit. Did Mozart compose purely for the stage in the abstract, for his characters and their needs?

Well, yes, actually, he did. But now and then, he was forced to face the fiscal facts and write an aria to fit the singer more than the subject. The singers were box office.

Soprano Patrice Michaels (formerly Patrice Michaels Bedi), along with Chicago's Classical Arts Orchestra and conductor Stephen Alltop, has put together a compact disc that salutes *Divas of Mozart's Day* (on the Cedille label) with performances of 13 arias and duets by Mozart, Salieri, Martin y Soler, Cimarosa and others. For Michaels' lucid and open singing, warm but always sharply defined, and for the freshness of its concept as well as the newness of the repertoire, it's our *Arizona Republic-KBAQ* Classical CD of the Week.

Among the divas represented are Nancy Storace, the English-born soprano who was the first Susanna in Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*; Adriana Ferrarese del Bene, the first Fiordiligi in Mozart's *Così fan tutte*; and Louise Villeneuve, who was *Così's* first Dorabella.

The selections include numerous substitute arias and even arias inserted by one composer into another composer's opera. Several are first recordings, including a bravura piece written by Salieri for an opera called *La cifra*. Most unusual of this unusual bunch: the world première of an accompanied recitative, written to open an aria by Cimarosa that was itself inserted into the opera of yet a third composer, Guglielmi. Opera is an imperfect art.