

*Billboard*

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The Classical Score  
By Steve Smith

### **DIVA FEVER:**

One glance at the *Billboard* charts is all it takes to determine that vocal recitals reign supreme in today's classical marketplace: **Cecila Bartoli, Renée Fleming, and Salvatore Licitra** are all currently riding high on the Top Classical chart, while **Russell Watson, Mario Frangoulis,** and the unstoppable juggernaut that is **Andrea Bocelli** dominate the Top Classical Crossover chart. Of course, all of the artists mentioned are on major labels that boast the resources necessary to transform a singer into a household name. Given a solid concept, however, independent labels are equally capable of offering compelling vocal recitals. Case in point: *Divas of Mozart's Day*, a delightful and illuminating disc by soprano **Patrice Michaels**, newly issued on the always adventurous Chicago-based label Cedille.

A professor of voice and opera at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wis., Michaels is a familiar name to Cedille enthusiasts. She has participated in 11 recordings in as many years of association with the label, which is distributed by Long Island City, N.Y.-based Qualiton. Michaels' recorded repertoire has ranged from **Vivaldi** and **Lully** to **Menotti** and **Argento**; *Songs of the Classical Age*, issued in 1999, demonstrated her affinity with the music of Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, and their contemporaries. A serendipitous academic appointment led to the concept for the even more ambitious *Divas*.

"**Dorothea Link**, who was our historian on the project, happened to be hired into the institution where I teach," Michaels explains. Link, a Canadian musicologist, made headlines worldwide in 1999 for positively identifying a previously unattributed recitative as being the work of Mozart. Michaels soon learned that Link had a particular passion for the singers of **the Viennese Imperial Court Opera of Emperor Joseph II**, the company for which Mozart composed his greatest works. Michaels says, "When I saw the breadth of information that she had – along with a collection of scores on microfilm – I thought, 'This is the project I've been waiting for.'"

Link and Michaels created a concert program of music that would have been sung by five of the leading singers of Mozart's day: **Catarina Cavalieri**, who created the role of Constanze in *The Marriage of Figaro*; **Nancy Storace**, the first Susanna in *Figaro*; **Adriana Ferrarese del Bene**, the first to sing *Fiordiligi* in *Così fan tutte*; **Luisa Laschi Mombelli**, the first Countess in *Figaro*; and **Louise Villeneuve**, who created the role of Dorabella in *Così*. Each singer represented by at least one aria by Mozart – several of them "insertion arias" meant to be interpolated into works by other composers, including "Vado, ma dove?" (paired here for the first time on disc with "Ahí cosa veggio," the corresponding recitative that Link had identified). The program also includes fascinating

and worthy selections by Mozart's contemporaries, including **Antonio Salieri** and **Vicente Martín y Soler**.

Link firmly believed that by offering several selections composed for each singers, each individual vocal personality could be reconstructed. Michaels' own feeling is that while the music might indicated something about the singers, it reveals even more about the flexibility expected of singers in general during the period. "I have four different selections for Nancy, and she sings very differently in [Mozart aria] 'Chi'io mi scordi di te' than in [Martin song] 'Dolce mi parve un di,'" Michaels explains. "Likewise, Luisa's music is really difference when she's a comic character than when she's a serious one."

Once the repertoire was selected, Cedille's **James Ginsberg** stepped in to help meet the project's extensive demands. "We realized that with all this completely unknown repertoire, the only way to get the rehearsal time needed to make it work would be to schedule a performance," Ginsberg says. He timed a public concert and recording sessions to coincide with a Chicago Opera Theater production of Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, making use of the same orchestra and collaborating with Northwestern University to mount and promote the concert. The strategy paid off handsomely: "Even though it was held on a bitterly cold day in February, the start of the concert had to be delayed for 20 minutes because the walk-up line for tickets was so long!" Happily, thanks to Ginsberg's efforts, listeners can now appreciate Michaels' winning performance without braving those Chicago winds.