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MUSIC DISCS

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Divas of Mozart's Day: Patrice Michaels and the Classical Arts Orchestra  
[Cedille Records]

by Mary Kunz

This recording, by soprano Patrice Michaels and the Classical Arts Orchestra, presents us with a bouquet of relatively little-known Mozart arias, as well as few by his contemporaries. Even more importantly, though, it paints a picture of a musical age.

With her rich voice and incredible range of inflections, Michaels revives the spirits of five prima donnas who figured in Mozart's life in Vienna. These include Salieri's girlfriend, Catarina Cavalieri (the first Constanze in "The Abduction from the Seraglio"); Luisa Laschi Mombelli (the first Countess Almaviva in "Figaro"); Louise Villeneuve and Adriana Ferrarese del Bene (the first Dorabella and Fiordiligi in "Cois Fan Tutte"); and, most intriguingly, Nancy Storace, the Englishwoman who was the first Susanna. Did Mozart have an affair with Storace? Listening to the ardent concert aria he wrote for her, including a piano part for himself; it's fun to speculate.

It's even more fun, though, to compare Mozart's music with the music of his contemporaries. They don't measure up. They wrote pleasant stuff, all right. But it's nothing like the end of the aria included from Mozart's "Davidde penitente," when the music takes an odd tonal turn that makes a listener feel as if he's on the Wild Mouse. Or the moment in the concert aria when we first hear the piano (a thin, authentic forte-piano, in this case, played by conductor Stephen Alltop). Poor Salieri didn't stand a chance. To hear this disc is to appreciate Mozart's genius all over again.