

Early Music America

Spring 2003, Volume 9, Number 1

Divas of Mozart's Day

Music by Mozart, Righini, Salieri, Soler, Storace and Cimarosa
Patrice Michaels, soprano; Classical Arts Orchestra, Stephen Alltop,
conductor and fortepianist
Cedille Records CDR 900000 064
76:15 mins.

By Craig Zeichner

The opera *buffa* company founded by the Emperor Joseph II in 1783 included some high-priced Italian singers and members of the Emperor's *singspiel* troupe. The *buffa* company attracted "A list" composers of the day, including Vicente Martín y Soler (1754-1806), Antonio Salieri (1750-1791), and a young fellow named Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791). Five *prime donne* of the company—each of whom premiered a key Mozart soprano role—were the beneficiaries of these composers. This recording, based on a concept by musicologist Dorothea Link, documents the unique qualities of their voices.

Soprano Patrice Michaels, a consistently excellent singer who brings tremendous technique, taste, and intelligence to each aria, makes this program a joy. Whether it's Salieri's torturous "Wenn dem Adler das Gefieder" written for Caterina Cavalieri (1755-1801), or the peppery *rondo* of a rarely performed aria for Susanna from Mozart's *Nozze di Figaro*, Michaels triumphs. She has top notes aplenty, dead-on pitch, and her articulation (she sings in Italian, German, and English) is dry-martini crisp.

The Classical Arts Orchestra under the direction of Stephen Alltop provides more than support; Alltop has a great sense of theater and shapes every aria as if it's the most important thing ever written. There are so many striking moments but few better than the lovely clarinet introduction that gives Michaels a *concertante*-like caress in Vincenzo Righini's (1756-1812) "Per pietà, deh, ricercate." Since Michaels and the small but superior Cedille label don't have a massive publicity machine, this recording might slip under your radar. Don't let it.