



The Listener's Gallery

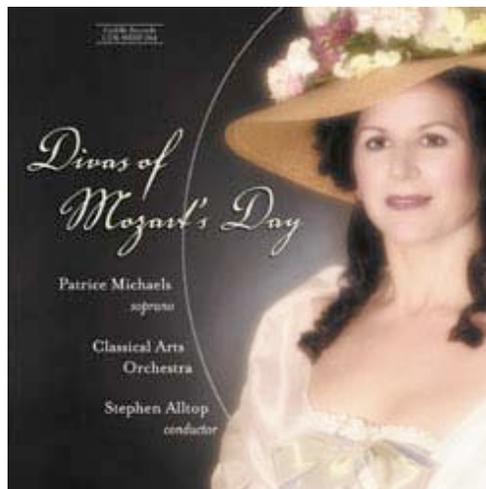
*Divas of Mozart's Day*

Patrice Michaels, soprano; Peter Van de Graff, bass-baritone; Classical Arts Orchestra; Stephen Alltop, conductor.

Cedille CDR 90000 064; 76:15

Sculptors and painters leave behind them tangible evidence of their talents, as do novelists and poets. Composers leave the legacy of the music they have written. Performers are not quite so fortunate. Certainly major musicians have at least some of their performances preserved in audio and/or video recordings that are increasingly stunning in their clarity. But for every performance that is preserved, hundreds if not thousands are lost except in the memories of those who experienced them at the time. Turn back three or four generations and one is at the mercy of recording technology in its primitive infancy, barely able to give even the faintest sense of what a given performer was really like. Step further back in time and there is only silence, save for the written testimony of a few eye witnesses. Fortunately, we also can be brought into the presence of great performers if we can hear music that was written expressly for them and for their unique abilities. Catarina Cavalieri, for instance, died one hundred years before the first significant recordings of vocal music were made, meaning that we will never be able to hear the actual sound of her voice. And yet, we can listen to "Martern aller Arten" — the fiendishly difficult aria that Mozart wrote for her in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* — and be given at least a glimpse of what this extraordinary singer was capable of doing.

This recital highlights five important sopranos from the late eighteenth century and tells the story of how their excellence inspired Mozart and several of his



less-known contemporaries. The superb liner notes by Dorothea Link introduce us to each singer, conveying both helpful information as well as the occasional tidbit of entertaining gossip. (One of the singers, for example, was rumored to be the mistress of Antonio Salieri.) Dr. Link then offers complete and insightful explanations of each aria, which is particularly helpful given the obscurity of this repertoire. Complete texts and translations are included as well. The most important information missing from the notes is a sense of how often these arias and operas have been performed since their premieres over two hundred years ago. For example, when was the last time that an opera company mounted a production of Salieri's *Der Raufgangkehrer* since its initial production in 1781? It would be interesting to know.

Half of these arias have never been recorded before, and most of the others are exceedingly rare. The best-known music in this recital is "Al desio di chi t'adora," which Mozart wrote as a more ornate alternative to Susanna's "Deh vieni non tardar" in the fourth act of *Le nozze di Figaro*. The aria has been recorded several times, and it generated considerable discussion when Cecilia Bartoli insisted on performing it in the Metropolitan Opera's most recent production of the opera. The prevailing opinion among both audience members and critics was that the alternate aria was no match for the sublime original that is supplanted. What many forgot is that there was historic precedence for making such a change when the talents of the singer performing Susanna were more suited for coloratura than for long lyrical line. Such a circumstance is what led Mozart to compose the alternate for a *Figaro* revival in 1789, when coloratura soprano Adriana Ferrarese del Bene (the first Fiordiligi in *Così*) ascended to the role of Susanna. Mozart correctly believed that the gifts of his new Susanna would be ill-served by "Deh

vieni” and was willing to remove that radiant masterpiece in favor of something better suited to Ferrarese’s skills. The result was an aria that may not belong with Mozart’s best, but is still a finely crafted work that should be judged on its own merits.

The remaining Mozart music on this disk is considerably rarer. One aria derives from an oratorio, *Davidde penitente*, which Mozart assembled out of excerpts from his Mass in C minor and which he supplemented with several new arias. The soprano for whom “Tra l’oscura ombre funeste” was composed, Caterina Cavalieri, had already been the inspiration for “Mi trade” and “Martern aller Arten,” and one catches all sorts of hints of those two showpieces in this uneven but exciting aria. Another Mozart rarity included here is a duet that he composed for the first Vienna production of *Don Giovanni*. Michaels is joined here by Chicago baritone Peter Van de Graff, who is in decent but not quite perfect voice. Even rarer is an accompanied recitative just discovered in 1999. The finest and most unique music to be found in this recital, however, is a fascinating and charming concert aria, “Non temer, amato bene,” which Mozart composed for yet another of our five divas, English soprano Nancy Storage, on the occasion of her farewell recital in Vienna before returning to her native England. The beauty of this piece lies both in Mozart’s skillful writing for the voice and in the inclusion of a challenging obbligato part for fortepiano, which the composer himself played for the work’s first performance.

There are other composers represented on this disc, but none of them comes close to Mozart in consistency of execution or in freshness of ideas. In other words their obscurity would seem to be at least somewhat justified. But there is plenty to enjoy in these rarities, even if the technical hurdles often seem like “Much Ado about Nothing.” Antonio Salieri’s “Wenn dem Adler das Gefieder” from *Der Rauchfangkehrer* is identified in the notes as something of a model for “Martern aller Arten,” but one wishes that the music was as interesting as it is difficult. A light-hearted rondo from Salieri’s *La grotta di Trofonio* is far more entertaining and memorable, even in its relative simplicity. An aria by Englishman Stephen Storace is similarly entertaining, and leads one to hope that more of his music will come to light and be recorded. (Storace’s sister

Nancy is among the five divas celebrated here.) Perhaps the best music on this disc that isn’t written by Mozart would be the two arias composed by Spanish composer Vincent Martin y Soler. His gift for melody is considerable and his music has none of the forced quality from which some of these other works suffer.

Fascinating as it is to encounter such unfamiliar repertoire, it could all be quite a tedious affair if it weren’t for the consistently stunning singing of soprano Patrice Michaels. This recital is a tour de force in every sense, and Michaels demonstrates remarkable assurance in the face of every technical challenge. But Michaels does more than surmount difficulties; she also manages to be expressive even while contending with almost inhumane technical hurdles. Part of the credit for this must be given to conductor Stephen Alltop, who keeps a strong sense of order and precision and yet allows a sense of spontaneous freshness to predominate. The musicians of the Classical Arts Orchestra respond beautifully and offer the kind of graceful accompaniment that adds much but does not draw attention to itself. But make no mistake, Patrice Michaels is the major attraction, and one hopes that there will be many more times to encounter this very special singer and her spectacular skills.

— Gregory Berg

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