

MOZART SOCIETY OF AMERICA
Recording Review
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Divas of Mozart's Day

Patrice Michaels, Soprano; Classical Arts Orchestra, Stephen Alltop,
Conductor and Fortepianist.
Cedille Records compact disk (CDR 90000 064), c.2002.

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In a letter of 28 February 1778, Mozart observed, "I like an aria to fit a singer as perfectly as a well-made suit of clothes" (*The Letters of Mozart and His Family*, ed. and trans. Emily Anderson, 3d ed. [1980], 497). He willingly catered to his singers, emphasizing their strengths while concealing their weaknesses. Among the many revelations prompted by the recording under review here is the realization that this oft-cited tailoring simile applies with equal force to Mozart's contemporaries who wrote for the Viennese stage during that golden decade, 1781-1790.

Divas of Mozart's Day realizes Dorothea Link's concept of retrieving seemingly lost voices, a concept explored earlier in Patricia Lewy Gidwitz, "Vocal Profiles of For Mozart Sopranos (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1991). Through a selection of arias fashioned specifically for them, Link creates vocal profiles. Portraying five ladies who premiered major Mozart characters, soprano Patrice Michaels sings thirteen roles in all, the fruit of six composers and five librettists. So unfamiliar is this repertoire that seven of the selections, either wholly or in part, are designated "world premiere recording." Overall, a powerful unity of purpose guides this exciting, well-planned, and beautifully executed project.

Initiating the recording with Catarina Cavalieri, the first Constanze, Michaels sings "Tra l'oscure ombre funeste," the soprano aria that Mozart included in the oratorio *Davidde penitente*, K. 469 (1785). Scored for flute, oboes, bassoons, horns and strings, this impressive two-tempo aria memorably displays Cavalieri's famously "agile throat." Two more arias follow: the two-tempo "Per pietà, deh ricercate," from Vincenzo Righini's *L'incontro inaspettato* (1785), with its lush clarinet *obbligato*; and "Wenn dem Adler das Gefieder," Nannette's martial, heavily scored C major aria

from Antonio Salieri's *Der Rauchfangkehrer* (1781). A thrilling number of size, power, and vocal brilliance, it is a worthy forerunner of Constanze's "Martern aller Arten" from *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*.

Four arias combine to yield a comprehensive vocal profile of the vivacious Nancy (Anna) Storace, the first Susanna. The sequence opens with the expansive *scena con rondó* which Mozart composed for the diva's farewell concert of 23 February 1787. "Ch'io mi acordi di te/ Non temer, amato bene," K. 505 (1787), on a text earlier inserted in the Viennese version of *Idomeneo*. Scored for clarinets, bassoons, horns, and strings, this magnificent parting gift includes a fortepiano *obbligato* for Mozart. Then follows Lilla's lyrical aria, "Dolce mi parvi un di." From Vicente Martín y Soler's enormously successful *Una cosa rara* (1786): Ofelia's sparkling "minuetto" tune, "La ra la, che filosofo buffon," from Salieri's *La grotta di Trofonio* (1785: bass-baritone Peter Van De Graaff participates in the *buffa* recitatives); and, illustrating the mileage a composer could extract from a good catchy tune, "How Mistaken Is the Lover," originally an insertion aria by Stephen Storace (with Italian text), here recycled for inclusion in his *The Doctor and the Apothecary* (1788).

Two numbers serve to profile Adriana Ferrarese del Bene, the first Fiordiligi. First comes "Al desio di chi t'adora." K. 577, the rondò for Susanna which replaced "Deh vieni non tardar" for the Viennese revival (1789) of *Le nozze di Figaro*. Richly scored for basset horns, bassoons, horns and strings, this composition not only emphasizes Ferrarese's considerable vocal skills (while concealing her equally considerable acting limitations); it also foreshadows *Così fan tutte*. Further, as John Rice notes, because Mozart had been somewhat restrained by the limitations imposed by an existing role, Salieri was ideally positioned to exploit the talents of his diva more fully in Eurilla's recitative and rondò from *La cifra* (1790), "Alfin son sola... Sola e mesta fra tormenti" (*Antonio Salieri and Viennese Opera*, 1998, pp. 484-85). See, for example, the stupendous vocal leaps at the words "Campi e selve risuonar." (Not included on the disk is the third link in this chain, Mozart's "Per pietá, ben mio, perdona," from *Così*.)

Like Ferrarese, the charming Luisa Laschi Mombelli, the first Countess, is represented by two numbers, beginning with Zerlina and Leporello's recitative and duettino, "Restati quá... Per queste tue manine," K. 540b, composed for the Viennese production (1788) of *Don Giovanni*. In this purely *buffa* comic duet, the knife-wielding Zerlina ties Leporello (Van

De Graaff) to a chair. To demonstrate Laschi's puckish side, Link chooses Amore's lyrical, small-scale aria, "Serenio raggio," from Martín y Soler's *L'arbore di Diana* (1787), which includes an echo-dialogue in triplets between voice and oboe.

Last but certainly not least is the first Dorabella, Louise Villeneuve, who also is profiled by two selections. The first is an accompanied recitative, "Ahi cosa veggio" (see below for the thorny issue of attribution), and aria for Madama Lucilla, "Vado, ma dove?" (K. 583), a substitution piece for Martín y Soler's *Il burbero di buon cuore* (1789). Warmly scored for clarinets, bassoons, horns, and strings, this two-tempo aria moves, somewhat unusually, from a faster tempo to a slower one to reinforce a realization that has just struck the heroine. Concluding the disk is "No caro, fa coraggio," another *accompagnato* attributed by some to Mozart. It leads into Madama Vertunna's "Quanto è grave il mio tormento," an aria composed by Domenico Cimarosa for insertion into Pietro Alessandro Guglielmi's *La quakera spiritosa* (Viennese version, 1790).

Not only are these unfamiliar selections extraordinarily beautiful; they also are magnificently performed (access to UCLA Music Library holdings for eight of these numbers assisted me greatly in preparing the following paragraphs). Before Patrice Michaels sings a note, conductor Stephen Alltop and the orchestra personnel, using period instruments, establish an exemplary level of ensemble playing with their dynamic, clean, crisply articulated rendition of the solemn introduction to "Tra l'oscure ombre funeste." In later excerpts, Alltop's fortepiano playing, whether in the noble "Non temer, amato bene," K. 505, or in the hurly-burly of comic *recitativo semplice*, amounts to yet another revelation.

The singer must face the considerable challenge of portraying five divas. That she succeeds so well is a tribute to her vocal accomplishments, intelligence, and sensitivity to text. Always passionately engaged, Michaels runs the expressive gamut, from innocence to sophistication, from noble pathos to pure *buffa* delivered with explosive comic energy. The word that best describes her vocal technique in general is "security": security throughout the range; security in enormous vocal leaps and in sinuous chromatic lines; security in the *messa di voce* and in the gradual crescendo; rhythmic security; and equal ease negotiating *recitativo semplice* or *accompagnato*, sustained legato lines, or elaborate *fioritura*.

More specifically, these performances echo the instructions of Mozart's contemporary, the celebrated vocal pedagogue Johann Adam Hiller (Suzanne J. Beicken, trans. and ed., *Treatise on Vocal Performance and Ornamentation by Johann Adam Hiller* [1780], 2001). Michaels simply fulfills Hiller's first dictum—"Correct speech is half the road to good singing" (p.66)—her declamation articulating meaning in language through punctuation, meter, and accent. Her execution of the so-called "Essential Ornaments" (notated appoggiaturas, turns, trills) amounts to a clinic, as do her placement and execution of "Arbitrary Ornaments" (added appoggiaturas, turns, and the like) and the more elaborate *passaggi* (circling figures, filling in the tones between separate notes). Wisely, Michaels leaves the purely *buffa* numbers unembellished; she adds little to the already florid "Wenn dem Adler das Gefieder." However, when improvised embellishment is appropriate, listeners will encounter delightful adornments applied in moderation. Never do additions obscure the number's melodic profile. Rather, as Hiller instructed, "all musical ornaments are essentially accents and actually should be used to emphasize certain notes and syllables (p. 72). Ever subservient to the music, Michaels's *passaggi* enliven and enhance the vocal line, invariably matching the piece's style and prevailing affect. To be noted especially is the embellishment practice evident at the return of thematic material in the slow sections of rondòs (see among others, K. 505 and K. 577). Hiller had much to say about cadenzas, which must not appear too frequently or be too long. For a thrilling aural manifestation of a single-breath cadenza based upon the chief affect and the main character of the aria, see the close of "Tra l'oscure ombre funeste."

Four further performance points deserve mention. First, in "Wenn dem Adler das Gefieder," Michaels adds an especially nice rhythmic touch when she adjusts the even eighths of her line (at Salieri's final setting of "Operisten! Fürcht mein Siegfried") to conform more closely with the dotted figures in the violins. Second, concerning the always vexing subject of tempo, Michaels and Alltop are to be commended for their choices in general. Specifically, for "Ch'io mi scordi di te?" (the recitative portion of K. 505), they improve upon the reading found in the *NMA* (II:7/3, ed. Stefan Kunze, p. 176). Having begun *Andantino*, the tempo changes, not surprisingly, to *Allegro assai* for the words "Venga la morte." The performers restore an *Andante* tempo at the text "Ma, ch'io possa," that is, four measures before the direction printed in the *NMA*. Third, roundly to be applauded in the realm of articulation is Michael's execution of the ubiquitous two-note descending figure: a subtle emphasis of the first note

and a smooth connection to the second note, followed by a clean release and a little empty space. Such conscientious articulation serves admirably to refresh ears long desensitized by thoughtlessly imposed legato. Finally, listeners following the 1984 facsimile edition of Salier's *La grotta di Trofonio* (Artaria, 1786, p. 290) will be surprised, and perhaps perplexed, to hear an orchestral ritornello prefixed to Ofelia's "minuetto" tune.

Dorothea Link's companion booklet supplies a wealth of useful information: the position of each diva in the broader context of Josephinian opera; individual prose sketches of the singers, enlivened by quotations from primary sources; Mozart's relationship to the artists; the selections themselves, to include opera, role, and significant compositional features; and well-rendered translations of the texts. Attractively framing Link's prose are portraits of two singers: a front-cover photograph of Ms. Michaels, fetchingly costumed à la Pietro Bettelini's engraved portrait of Storace (1788), which graces the back cover.

The exquisite blend of scholarship and musicianship realized in this project stimulates several responses. One is struck immediately, for example, by the young ages at which the ladies attained "stardom": one also laments their relatively early deaths. Laschi's in particular. In sketching their lives, Link commendably takes the high road, focusing on careers and vocal capabilities while soft-pedaling the relationships between Cavalieri and Salieri and between Ferrarese and Da Ponte. Given its quality and beauty, the music by the lesser-known composers cries for wider circulation. Similarly, Mozart's substitute numbers for *Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* invite reassessment. Generally speaking, "Al desio," the *Figaro* substitute for Ferrarese, has not found particular favor with modern critics. However, for the late-eighteenth-century theater habitué, Count Carl von Zinzendorf, "The duo of the two women and Ferraresi's rondo pleased as always" (7 May 1790; Rice, in *Antonio Salieri and Viennese Opera*, p. 482). This particular number, for a Susanna who could sing but could not act, prompts one to rethink the entire role. In a dramatically different vein, the duettino for Zerlina and Leporello provides a farcical moment of relief in an ever darkening act (N.B.: when I show the 1990 Peter Sellars realization of this number in non-major opera history classes, student response is overwhelmingly positive).

In sum, there is much to praise and little to criticize. Three thoughts occur, the first merely a quibble. While Joseph II undeniably founded his *Singspiel* company "partly to support local talent and partly to avoid having

to spend large amounts on imported opera” (booklet), surely this enlightened leader desired more, namely, to stimulate in another medium German culture and the German language. Second, why have scholars apparently not yet adopted a standardized spelling for Cavalieri’s first name? The caption of Patricia Lewy Gidwitz’s entry in *New Grove Opera* reads “Caterina”; it has become “Catarina” for Gidwitz’s entry in *New Grove 2*. Throughout her booklet, Link favors “Catarina,” but she offers the “Caterina” alternative as the heading for the prose sketch. Third is the far more consequential matter of attribution. Link believes that “Ahf cosa veggio” and “No caro, fa coraggio,” the final accompanied recitatives on the disk, are by Mozart. Introducing the former in the booklet, Link cites her expanded study in the *Cambridge Opera Journal* (12: 29-50, complete with score). Left unsaid is the fact that Laurel E. Zeiss, in the same issue, argues forcefully that Mozart is not the composer. Dexter Edge in his thought-provoking investigation in a later issue of *COJ* weighs the source and stylistic evidence for these recitatives (plus a third, for K. 419, which is not part of this recording; *COJ* 13 [2001]: 197-237). For Edge, “No caro, fa coraggio” emerges as the most promising, albeit still unproved, candidate for inclusion in Mozart’s *oeuvre*.

For several years now and in a variety of forums, scholars have been adding substance to those long-shadowy figures, female and male, who brought operatic roles to life during the final decade of Joseph II’s reign. Of the five divas represented here, four have entries in *New Grove Opera* (Villeneuve is missing): happily, all five appear in *New Grove 2*. Much has been written about the physical characteristics of their vocal instruments: range, tessitura, weight, and the vocal gestures at which they excelled. Exploring the realm of musico-dramatic structure, John Platoff has written about the *buffa* aria type cultivated by Mozart and his contemporaries to exploit the singular talents of Francesco Benucci (*COJ* 2: 99-120). With this recording, Link, Michaels, Alltop and their collaborators enable an international audience to experience an exciting dimension of vocal profiling.

To close on an admittedly subjective note, the warmth, immediacy, and meticulous stylistic attention that distinguish these performances combine to create the illusion of a time tunnel. Moving backward, the listener finds himself magically transported to the Burgtheater, the ideal venue for this music. One can easily picture any one of these divas composing herself as her moment approaches. One then relishes the joy of hearing an experienced singer negotiate music composed specifically for

her. One readily imagines Cavalieri as Nannette, imperiously delivering “Wenn dem Adler das Gefieder.” In the mind’s eye, one delightedly watches Storace dance as well as sing her charming “minuetto” tune: one then sheds a tear as she renders K.505, Mozart’s bittersweet parting gift. Perhaps more importantly, the late-eighteenth-century music advances into our time and vividly imprints its messages. To paraphrase Robert Winter’s definition of historically informed performance practice, the performances recorded here evoke worlds—musical, cultural, and social—in which these works in the present (in R. Larry Todd, ed., *Nineteenth-Century Piano Music* [1990], 20-21). Resurrected through Patrice Michael’s magnificent interpretations, the divas stand before us, resplendent in the bright vocal array tailored so elegantly for them by Mozart, Righini, Salieri, Martín y Soler, Storace, and Cimarosa. *Divas of Mozart’s Day* truly is a recording to treasure.