

The Opera Quarterly
RECORDINGS
April 2003

Divas of Mozart's Day

Arias by Mozart, Righini, Salieri, Martín y Soler, Storace, Cimarosa
Patrice Michaels, soprano
Classical Arts Orchestra
Stephen Alltop, conductor and fortepiano solo
Cedille Records (distributed by Qualiton Imports) CD 90000 064 (1CD)

This is an extraordinary release, grouping some infrequently performed arias (and, in one case duet) by Mozart along with some practically *never* recorded operatic excerpts by his contemporaries (six of the non-Mozart arias make their disc debuts here). The unifying element, as the title of the disc indicates, is the women for whom this music was composed, during the decade 1781-90 in Vienna. The “divas” are five in number, namely, Catarina Cavalieri (1755-1801), Nancy Storace (1765-1817), Adriana Ferrarese Del Bene (c.1760-after 1804), Luisa Laschi Mombelli (1765-c. 1789), and Louise Villeneuve (fl. 1771-99). Each soprano’s “vocal profile” consists of one aria Mozart created for her and two or three solos by other composers who wrote for them as well.

Chalk it up to the vanity of our current age of songsters that one soprano should take it upon herself to perform all the selections in a program based on the premise of differentiation among five individual vocal techniques and personalities! The extremely informative and interesting booklet notes by musicologist Dorothea Link reflect this modern mentality: in discussing the revised, decorated version of “Dove sono” that Mozart wrote for Cavalieri for the 1789 Vienna revival of *Le nozze di Figaro*, Link observes that the new version “strengthened the characterization of the Countess as a person of nobility. Perhaps this edition of the aria should be sung today; the first version is vocally plainer only because the original Countess...did not sing *fioritura* [sic].” Well, perhaps it *should* be sung today...but only by sopranos who can sing *fioritura*, please!

Luckily, soprano Patrice Michaels proves eminently up to the various demands of range, agility and expressivity inherent in these pieces, and she is well supported by the ravishingly stylish playing of the Classical Arts Orchestra under Stephen Alltop. The slightly lower, “period” pitch works to the singer’s advantage whenever the tessitura gets high. And high it

frequently turns in the opening three arias, all written for Cavaliere, the first Konstanze. If Michael's timbre tends to turn a bit brittle on the top Bs and Cs in the aria Mozart wrote for insertion in his *Davidde penitente* oratorio K. 469 (i.e., arrangement of the "Great" Mass in C Minor), she handles this challenging piece with stylistic aplomb, even gracefully embellishing what is already a sometimes tortuous vocal line. Recordings of "Tra l'oscure ombre funeste" do not abound, but Michael's compares favorably to all of them.¹ The aria by the Viennese-based Italian voice teacher Vincenzo Righini (1796-1812) for his 1785 opera *L'incontro inaspettato* (with a plot similar to *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*) has an attractive B-flat clarinet obbligato; its beautifully lyrical opening and bravura finish bring to mind Sesso's "Parto parto." And the brassy C-major showpiece from Salieri's only singspiel, the 1781 *Der Rauchfangkehrer*, is a kind of embryonic "Marten aller Arten," complete with lengthy ritornello, repeated rising and falling scalar passages above the staff, and several top Cs and Ds. Here Michael's high tessitura and sheer endurance is severely tested, but although the timbre tends to thin or turn harsh aloft, she never lets the busy trumpet-and-timpani textures rattle her admirable sense of line and pitch. (Surely a great deal of credit for the soprano's success in traversing so many vocal hurdles during this program must be attributed to conductor Alltop's and the recording technician's infallible control of balances.)

The arias for Nancy Storace, avoiding extremes of tessitura and decidedly more sentimental in tone, prove noticeably kinder to Michael's voice—which is perhaps why La Storace is represented on this disc by four selections (as opposed to the other divas' two or three). The Mozart concert aria "Ch'io mi scordi di te" K. 505 has received its fair share of exposure on disc, though the understated charm of Michael's singing in collaboration with Alltop's delicious fortepiano solo contribution put this version high on the list of desirable options; certainly it deserves to be added to any Mozart aria collection, if only for the soprano's wonderfully natural yet stylish ornamentation of the vocal line. The performance of the tuneful little pastoral aria from Martín y Soler's 1786 *Una cosa rara* is so irresistible, one can understand why that opera upstaged even *Le nozze di Figaro* in its premiere season. Another melodic entry is from Salieri's *La grotta di Trofonio* (1785), a light number that illustrates the singer's comic flair (bass-baritone Peter Van De Graaff covers the eponymous sorcerer's lines in the mid-point secco-recitative). And lest we forget that La Storace hailed from Great Britain, Michaels crowns this profile with an attractive rendition of an English-language aria by Stephen Storace (Nancy's brother), composed for

insertion into the 1787 London premiere production of Paisiello's *Il re Teodoro in Venezia*.

When *Le nozze di Figaro* was revived in Vienna in 1789, the role of Susanna went to a new diva in town, Adrianna Ferrarese. To highlight her vocal specialties (notably, wide leaps between registers), Mozart replaced the act 4 "Deh vieni, non tardar" with the rondo "Al desio di chi t'adoro" K. 577, a virtuoso piece in E-flat making striking use of obbligato basset horns, bassoons, and horns.² Michael's reading is poised and passionate, with the complex vocal-instrumentation interaction captured to perfection by the microphone. Again, her original ornamentation of the vocal line here is executed with the greatest skill and taste. The other piece representing the artistry of the original Fiordiligi is Salieri's "Sola e mesta fra tormenti" (from the 1790 *La cifra*). This aria has much in common with Cosi's "Per pietà ben mio," with its dramatic recitative, expressive rondó in E Major, and prominent horn parts. Michaels and Alltop make a very convincing case for the piece, causing one to reconsider the popular image of Salieri as an inferior composer. "Sola e mesta" is, quite simply, a grand and gorgeous aria just waiting to be discovered.

It might strike one as odd that Luisa Laschi Mombelli, who created the *Figaro* Countess, should have ended up singing Zerlina in the 1788 Vienna production of *Don Giovanni*. Odd, that is until one reads in the booklet notes that the role "was considered the principal female part" from the beginning... The role of Donna Anna gained prominence only in the 19th century." To illustrate Laschi's flair for comedy, Michaels opts for the farcical duet for Zerlina and Leporello that Mozart added to his score for the Vienna Don. In the introductory secco recitative Michael's and Van De Graaff's imperfect comic timing makes what should be a lively and funny exchange fall flat, and their reading of the confrontational duet itself smacks more of the concert hall than the theater.³ In the gem from Martín y Soler's *L'arbore di Diana* (Cupid's "Serenò raggio"), Michaels' generalized charm could use a dash of (Laschian?) spice.

The final two arias on the disc were destined for Louise Villeneuve, who made her debut in Vienna as Cupid in *L'arbore di Diana* in 1769 and went on to become the first Dorabella in *Così fan tutte*. Here the "profile" of the singer is upstaged by the musicological significance of the material. "Vado, ma dove?" a substitute aria that Mozart composed for a 1789 production of Martín's *Il burbero di buon cuore*, has been recorded dozens of times but *never* before with the introductory accompanied recitative heard here. This new recitative, "Ahi cosa veggio...," scored for strings only, was only recently discovered in an eighteenth-century copyist's score and

curiously attributed to Mozart. One theory is that, after the substitute aria was added to the score, Mozart may have been asked (by the prima donna?) during the rehearsal stage to recast Martín's original *secco* lead-in as an *accompagnato*. In an article in the *Cambridge Opera Journal*, scholar Link states that "the evidence for Mozart's authorship of [this] *accompagnato*, while not conclusive, is compelling."⁴ In another article in the same journal, Laurel E. Zeiss opines that "in many respects...the recitative differs from Mozart's standard practices. Link's hypothesis that the composer wrote the passage in haste during a rehearsal might account for these deviations. If it is by Mozart, it appears that he did not take time to polish it."⁵ Genuine Mozart or not, the *accompagnato* serves to prepare the otherwise abrupt start of the aria, reason enough to expect that all future performances of "Vado, ma dova?" be preceded by it. If in the aria itself Michaels falls a tad short of the tonal lushness of, say a Margaret Price (RCA Victor 61635-2 [2 CDs]) or a Gundula Janowicz (Deutsche Grammophon "The Originals" 4-49 723-2), she successfully conveys the dramatic contrast between the opening allegro's halting, declamatory line and the ensuing andante's serene lyricism.

The other Villeneuve offering, an aria by Domenico Cimarosa for insertion into Pietro Alexxandro Guglielmi's 1783 *La quakera spiritosa* (The Witty Quaker), also comes with a *newly* discovered *accompagnato*. Link's booklet notes inform us that the recitative seems to have been

Mozart's contribution to a [1790] *pasticcio* built around Guglieimi's opera, [which] apparently needed drastic changes to make it suitable for Vienna. How Mozart came to compose a recitative to another composer's aria within a third composer's opera can only be imagined, but since there is a strong possibility that Villeneuve sang the role of Verona, it is likely that she prevailed upon Mozart to improve her part.

Since the aria by the future composer of *Il matrimonio segreto* is of such high quality (a deeply felt, richly melodic rondo in G major with pastoral-like flutes and horns), it is not implausible to imagine Mozart willingly complying with the diva's request for another scored recitative.

Indeed, all of the music on this CD is top-drawer, making one curious to hear more by the composers who worked in rivaling proximity to Mozart. Our image of Salieri has been so contaminated by the cinema, and our attitude toward Martín y Soler so colored by the little tongue-in-cheek quote from *Cosa rara* in the second finale of *Don Giovanni*, that the arias on this

disc may come as a pleasant surprise to the average listener. Of course, the two allegedly Mozartean recitative “discoveries” will make *Divas of Mozart’s Day* an absolute must-have for Wolfgang completists! Thankfully, the fine singing, orchestral playing, sonic engineering, as well as the highly informative booklet essays more than justify the acquisition of this release by anyone interested in expanding their knowledge and appreciation of opera in late-eighteenth-century Vienna.

E. Thomas Glasow

¹ Other recordings of “Tra l’oscure ombre funeste” Includes those of Teres Stich Randall (Le Chant du Monde LDC 278 287). Barbara Hendricks (EMI 7492832) and Margaret Marabell (Philips 420-952-2).

² For the 1786 premiere production of Figaro Mozart originally sketched Susanna’s garden aria (No. 27) in an E-flat rondo in cut time (Non tardar, amato bene”). For speculation on why Mozart abandoned that idea in favor of “Deh vieni non tardar,” see Daniel Hertz, “Constructing *Le nozze di Figaro*,” in *Mozart’s Opera* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 250-52.

³ Virtually all the recordings of “Per queste tue manine.” (and there are more than one might think) feature a light, soubrette-style Zerlina. For a more imposing sound, unorthodox to us today but perhaps nearer to the royal heft of Laschi, listen to Ildikó Raimondi’s performance on the recent Naxos recording of *Don Giovanni* (E660080-82) Unfortunately the Naxos set omits the secco recitative, but in the duet proper one hears, for once, a Zerlina who actually sounds like she could pose a physical threat to Leporello!

⁴ Dorothea Link, “A Newly Discovered Accompanied Recitative to Mozart’s “Vado ma dove,” K. 583 *Cambridge Opera Journal*, vol. 12, no. 1 (March 2000), p. 50.

⁵ Laurel E. Zeiss, “Mozart or Not? The Musical Evidence,” *Cambridge Opera Journal*, vol 12. no. I (March 2000), p. 53.