

## ANATHEMA OF VENICE

# Lorenzo Da Ponte: Mozart's 'American' Librettist

by Susan W. Bowen

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### **The Librettist of Venice; The Remarkable Life of Lorenzo Da Ponte; Mozart's Poet, Casanova's Friend, and Italian Opera's Impresario in America**

by Rodney Bolt

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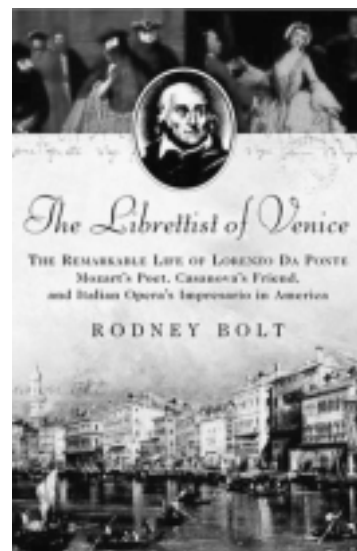
As the 250th anniversary of the birth of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart approached, I was happy to see the appearance of this new biography of Lorenzo Da Ponte, librettist for Mozart's three famous operas against the European oligarchy, *Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan tutte*. The story of the life of Lorenzo Da Ponte has been entertaining students of Italian for two centuries, from his humble roots in the Jewish ghetto, beginning in 1749, through his days as a seminary student and vice rector and priest, Venetian lover and gambler, poet at the Vienna Court of Emperor Joseph II, through his crowning achievement as Mozart's collaborator in revolutionizing opera; to bookseller, printer, merchant, devoted husband, and librettist in London in the 1790s, with stops along the way in Padua, Trieste, Brussels, Holland, Florence, Dresden; and finally to America, where he ended his days in 1838.

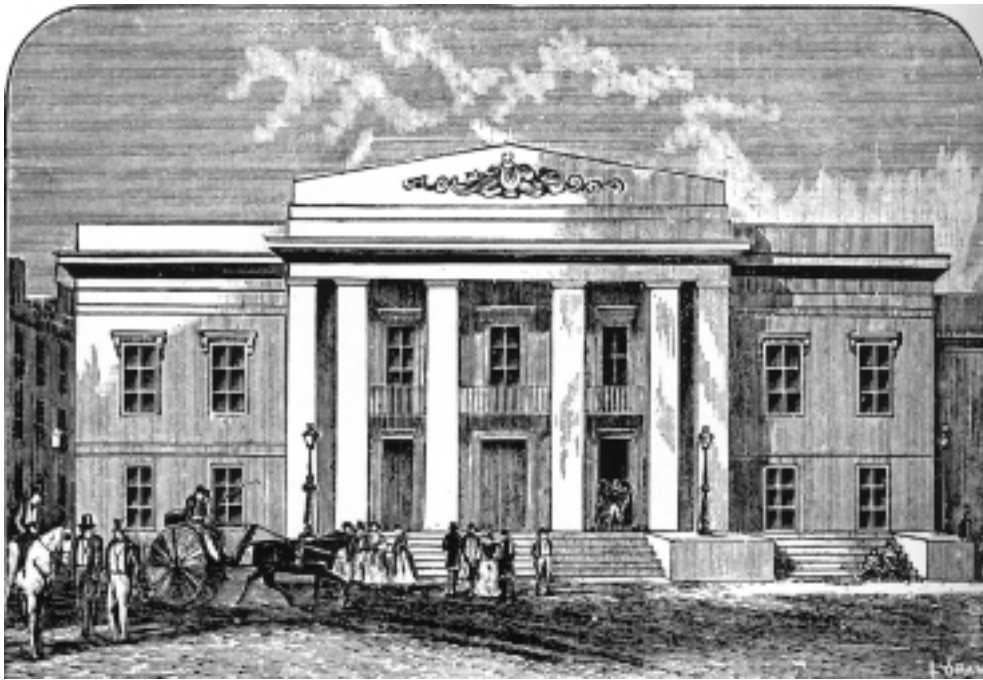
But the more I read, the more I sensed that something important was missing. Bolt had plenty of facts and anecdotes, but the truth itself was lost in the details. How could it be possible, that this creative mind, who worked with Mozart

and made a revolution in opera, who was kicked out of Venice by the Inquisition because of his ideas, who, emigrating to America where he introduced the works of Dante Alighieri and Italian opera, and found himself among the circles of the American System thinkers in Philadelphia and New York, was "not political"? It became obvious that the glaring omission in Rodney Bolt's book is the "American hypothesis."

Any truly authentic biography of this Classical scholar, arch-enemy of sophistry, and indefatigable promoter of creativity in science and art, must needs bring to light that truth which Venice, even today, would wish to suppress: that Lorenzo Da Ponte, (1749-1838), like Mozart, (1756-91), was a product of, and also a champion of the American Revolution and the Renaissance idea of man that it represented.

The battle in which Da Ponte was engaged and to which he dedicated himself, through to his 90th year, was against the same enemy we face today: the Venetian oligarchy, with its offshoots in the Anglo-Dutch Liberal fascist operations, and their method. Lyndon LaRouche has recently emphasized the historic and ongoing mortal battle between the proponents





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*New York's Italian Opera House, the first in the city, opened in 1833. Da Ponte financed its construction with his own funds and with large sums he raised from others, but the company failed in 1836. Still, it laid the foundation for a permanent presence of opera in the city, which was revived in the 1860s, after his death.*

of true creative thinking, on the one hand, and sophistry, on the other; between the Classical concept and the Romantic (as in Roman Empire). Sophistry destroyed ancient Athens, and as the enemies of the American System know, sophistry, in the form of cultural and moral degradation, intellectual fraud, and “spin” instead of truth, has been their preferred method of attack on the U.S. population in the recent decades, to destroy us *from within*, to the point that the population tolerates all kinds of horror, for example, the Cheney-Bush Administration.

Often, as in the three Mozart-Da Ponte operas, reality lies “behind the notes”; this book’s title itself, though catchy, reveals a lack of comprehension of the political warfare in the late 18th Century, which then, as now, was fought mainly on the battleground of ideas, with scientific, cultural, and literary weapons. Contrary to Bolt’s enchanting portrayal of the poet, adventurer, lover, composer, and controversial Enlightenment thinker, who emigrated to America where he survived careers as grocer and merchant before becoming New York’s first teacher of Italian and setting up its first opera house, I offer here a more truthful perspective.

Lorenzo Da Ponte lived poetry and the poetic principle, and dedicated his life to ensure that he could bequeath this knowledge to future generations. From a young age, he put a premium on truth, and despised the pretentious academic “bread scholars” (as the German poet Friedrich Schiller dubbed them), court poets, and other phonies he often encountered, and his polemics were often humorous, and frequently with biting irony, but always elegantly composed, demonstrating a knowledge of artistic composition and Classical literature that was unsurpassed, except by a few of his associates.

As a teacher who created the first chair of Italian language and literature at New York City’s Columbia College, he brought to life Dante, Petrarch, Alfieri, Ariosto, and the Greek Classics to more than 2,500 students in America; as a bookseller and a philosopher, he personally deposited more than 26,000 Italian-language books into libraries and bookstores. He expounded on many subjects in magazines, newspapers, and gave orations; he held small cultural events for birthdays, and at age 75, he organized and financed the first American production of his opera *Don Giovanni* in 1826. When he was well into his 80s, he personally organized and financed the first opera house in New York City, in 1833. This nation owes a tremendous unacknowledged debt to our immigrant son Da Ponte.

This article will begin to do justice to his real legacy.

## **A Genius Develops in Venice—And Is Expelled**

Lucky is he who takes  
The good in all  
And through chance and events  
By reason is led.

What is wont to make others weep  
For him is cause for laughter  
And in the turmoil of the world  
He will find peace.

—Finale of *Così fan tutte*

Lorenzo Da Ponte was born Emanuele Conegliano, in 1749, near Venice, in the Jewish ghetto of Ceneda, the oldest of three sons of Geremia Conegliano, a leather tanner, and his

wife Rachele. Not enough is known of his education; the Latin tutor hired by his father taught him very little, and he had no other reported schooling, although when he was 13 years old, Emanuele was Bar Mitzvah'ed, which meant he had a familiarity with the Bible and the Hebrew language. He also reports in his *Memoirs*, that he devoured all the books he found in the family's attic.

Nine years after his mother died, when Emanuele was 14, his father decided to marry a Catholic girl, which he could not do as a Jew unless he converted. In August 1763, father and sons were baptized by Msgr. Lorenzo Da Ponte, and the family adopted his name. Emanuele then became Lorenzo Da Ponte. Many half-siblings followed from this marriage. By 1764, Lorenzo and his two brothers were enrolled in a seminary, where they were provided a real Classical education, which, under their previous circumstances, would have been unthinkable.

An inspired young teacher, Abbé Cagliari, from the University of Padua, instilled in Lorenzo a respect for the Italian language which he already loved as a medium for poetry and great ideas. The revolutionary idea that the Italian poets Dante and Petrarch were as worthy as the Latins Virgil and Horace, thrilled these bright young minds, and with his friends Girolamo Perucchini and Michele Colombo, he studied, criticized, and exchanged verses, and discussed philosophical ideas.

The bishop and Lorenzo's father determined that the boys would continue toward the priesthood, so in 1769, the Da Ponte brothers went to the seminary in Portogruaro, near Venice, where their education continued in science and the humanities. However, the Italian language had to be studied in secret. Lorenzo became an instructor and then vice rector. Sometime during this period, Da Ponte began an unfortunate three-year love affair with Angela Tiepolo, a very abusive woman, who lured him deeper into the Venetian swamp. His passion and loyalty were manipulated by Angela and her gambling-addicted brother, to the point of his near ruin. He abandoned his beloved poetry and art! The Tiepolos were *barnabotti*, poor members of the old nobility who, although often penniless, were forbidden to work (because they were *nobility*), and turned to gambling, intrigue, and debauchery, as the main professions open to them.

Bolt paints a dynamic picture of the Venice of the 1770s, and of the woeful tale of the young poet, caught in the clutches of that slimy culture. Venice was the epitome of hypocrisy: the use of the masks, even when Carnival was over, enabled respectable husbands, wives, nobles, priests, and others to engage, undercover, in amorous affairs, gambling, dancing, drinking, and all-around degenerate behavior, all night long. It was accepted practice, of course, that when the morning came, the cloaks came off, and respectability, rules, and laws of behavior, which were very strict, returned, and everything appeared "normal." (As we shall see, the political system was just like the social system: Appearance said it was a republic, but it was in fact a police state with sugar coating.)



*The Venetian oligarchs' famous masks allowed them to engage in all sorts of night-time degenerate behavior, as well as political intrigues, until morning came and the disguises were packed back in the closets. Here, "The Ridotto," a painting by Pietro Longhi, from the 1740s.*

In 1775, when his brother Giralomo and his friend finally extracted Lorenzo from the disastrous affair in Venice, the Da Ponte brothers secured teaching jobs in Treviso. Lorenzo advanced rapidly, shining as a teacher and poet, and was later given the honor of composing poems for students to present at the ceremony at the end of the school year. He concentrated on his work, spending his time with his books and in discussions, with Girolamo and the scholar Giulio Trento, rediscovering his Muse and his passion for teaching.

### **The Spirit of 1776**

Bolt mentions that the Da Ponte brothers had "likely heard" about the American Declaration of Independence, while in Treviso. The year of the signing of the Declaration, with its idea of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" was also the year that Venice's Inquisition began its campaign to *expel* Da Ponte. The two events were related.

In the 1770s, Benjamin Franklin, the "Sage of Philadelphia," and his electrical discoveries, were the talk of Italy. One can imagine the discussions in the cafés among the active minds in Italy, as his lightning rods were being erected atop buildings. Franklin's scientific theories were printed in Ital-

ian, beginning in 1752, and by 1771, the political and philosophical news from America was also followed very closely. Da Ponte studied with the famous scientist Giovanni Battista Morgagni (1682-1771), who was well-reputed throughout Europe for his work in medicine, anatomy, and letters, during the period that Franklin's associate John Morgan was visiting him. By 1775, translations of Franklin's works and correspondence were circulating throughout most Italian universities, and many Italians were talking of the Franklin stove, the three-wheel clock, and, of course, the glass *armonica*, which Franklin named in honor of the musicality of the Italian language, and for which both Mozart and Beethoven composed small compositions. And after Poor Richard's *The Way to Wealth* began to make the rounds in Italian translation, in 1775, Italian verses proliferated celebrating the man "who took the lightning from Jupiter, and the Scepter from the tyrants."

Such was the environment in Italy in 1776, and one is hard pressed to imagine that in that historic year, Lorenzo Da Ponte was *not* profoundly influenced by the philosophy and revolutionary ideas of the scientist and statesman Benjamin Franklin, whom Bolt never mentions. When Da Ponte was honored with the task of composing the poetry, on some scientific theme, to be presented for the ceremony at the end of the school year, in August, he chose the theme of "happiness."

The Accademia presentation, designed to show the skill of the poet, was to be composed in Latin or Greek, and Italian, and was to employ different meters, style, and rhythm. Lorenzo penned a prose prologue, and then four Latin and 11 Italian poems, each with its own concept, in the form of a Socratic dialogue, on "Whether Mankind had attained happiness by uniting a social system, or could be considered happier in the simple state of nature." The recitation, by the best students, was composed in the prescribed form of pro and con debate, which they did very eloquently.

Although an unusual subject for a scientific exposition, everything went well, until, as was customary, the works were published. The Venetian Inquisition authorities read them and began immediate action to ban the teacher with the dangerous ideas. The *Riformatori*, the body in charge of education, received the accusation, which was then referred to the Senate, which ordered a trial for Da Ponte in December 1776.

## The Inquisition Moves In

In his *Memoirs*, Da Ponte described this "epitome of justice" for his readers, after reporting that his recent Venetian friends (Senator Bernardo Memmo, whom he had just met, and Pietro Zaguri) "did not deem it wise or necessary to speak" in his defense:

A very forceful orator, the Procurator Morosini attacked me, and at the same time, the two Public *Revisori* whose function it was, *ex officio*, to prohibit or permit the publication of my theses. The ecclesiastical *Revisore* was a monk, of whom Barbarigo, an indefatigable

defender of the cowl, loved and favored *usque ad aras et ulterus*. Barbarigo undertook his defense, joining meantime with Morosini in denouncing me, and seeing, or thinking that he saw that sentiment was on his side, he read in stentorian tones a Latin elegy, which must have been but vaguely understood by these worthy Pantaloons, but which, declaimed energetically with a dressing of invective and sarcasm, served marvelously to arouse those ill-humored pigtailed against me. The American in Europe was the title of the elegy: *Ergo ego semotoe tactus telluris amore, etc.*

After reading these Latin verses, of which the Most Serene Venetian Senate heard much, understood little, and knew nothing at all, the shrewd cripple [Barbarigo, counsel to the Holy Office in Venice—SB] read one of my *sermoni*, which, being in Italian, must have proved more intelligent to them: "Man, by Nature Free, becomes a Slave through Laws." Unimaginable the tumult that arose in the assembly at the reading of that poetic skit, composed by me for no other reason (as indeed were all the other compositions of that scholastic entertainment) than to supply practice for a certain number of my pupils in the art of declamation. I had, in fact, refuted it in the opposing thesis written on Cicero's well-known adage, *Servi legume facti sumus, ut liberi esse possemus*. ("We are made servants of the law, so that we can be free.") That, however, my accuser did not take the trouble to read.

"Listen, your excellencies," cried the dishonest orator in a loud voice, "listen attentively to the scandalous principles of the young man and then judge of what answer you must make."

And here he repeated several passages of that poem, among others the following, which was more emphatically disapproved and hissed than others:

"Subject and slave through error of mortal men, once I feel the weight of chains whose jingle the sane man hears from afar, I fear no longer the fasces of consul or the threatening frown of censor. I embrace in one glance the king on his throne and the ragged beggar on the street, to whom, at times, I toss a worthless coin that he may pay his crossing to the Ferryman of the Stygian swamp. The chatter of those Lords who proudly lift their gilded horns on high seems the light breath of a nascent zephyr, and while worshipful throngs pay them homage, I, self-possessed, lift calm eyes upon the clouds to follow some passing crane, or mayhap, some winged Hippogriff, or now lower them to gaze reflectively at the marble statues of Pasquino and Marforio."

The greater part of those poor wearers of the toga thought they saw in the "golden horns" I ridiculed, the little horn of the Doge's cap, and unable to endure the profanation, voted against me with one general cry. The great verdict was then announced: the two *Revisori*

were declared *uno ore innocens*, and I alone guilty and deserving of punishment. (Memmo came running to give me news of everything.)<sup>1</sup>

As they announced Lorenzo's sentence, everyone was struck by fear, except for him. Da Ponte describes how difficult it was to keep from bursting out in laughter at the arrogant *Riformatori*, "who had more need to be reformed than morality and judgment for reforming." Da Ponte said:

The importance attached to the affair by my adversaries, and the dazzling apparel given the prosecution of a public senatorial trial, led many people to think that the aristocratic majesty I had offended could be appeased only by the complete sacrifice of my liberty or of my life. My brothers and my friends wished me to evade the thunderbolt by flight, But I laughed at them and their fears. I could not believe that they would proceed with severe punishments after having beaten so many drums to make an effect. *Venetian policy never barked when it intended to bite* [emphasis added].

The upshot was that Da Ponte was expelled and forbidden to teach anywhere in the Serene Republic, although his banishment was not executed until December 1779. Every copy of the poems was confiscated, and orders went out through the Venice to investigate the educational system and report back to the Senate on their findings.

Just before the trial began, the literary figure Gasparo Gozzi was secured by Memmo to help Da Ponte. Gozzi was impressed with Da Ponte's work and suggested tolerance to the *Riformatori*, for the youth had much talent, but Gozzi was told point blank: "So much the worse. We must deprive him of the means of becoming dangerous." Da Ponte was barred from teaching ever again, but he remained in Venice, privately tutoring the children of noblemen, and soon, with his brother, becoming a successful improviser of verses on the streets and in cafés, as his Venetian protectors embraced him, typically, to keep an eye on him, before insisting that he flee Venice (the first time.)

During these three months, the scandal made the young poet a local *cause célèbre*, and while staying at the home of Memmo, Da Ponte was introduced into Venetian high society, where he met the Venetian spy Casanova, with whom he is often mistakenly identified and compared. (Even the title of Bolt's biography indicates a friendship between them.) Correspondence between Casanova and Zaguri, for whom Da Ponte worked, exposes the actual disdain they showed towards Da Ponte, rather than any friendship. Our poet maintained contact with many acquaintances, especially in the literary world, like Casanova, although he was not fooled by the latter's evil

nature, as he describes in his *Memoirs*. He and Girolamo worked in Venice until he had to flee for good.

Da Ponte's *Memoirs* describe a series of Venetian setups, although they are never identified as such, where he was "played" by the oligarchy there. (Often, biographers like Bolt misidentify this as Da Ponte's unjustified sense of persecution). He was forced to leave Venice for Padua, where he met Cesarotti and other poets, but after a while returned to Venice, made amends with Memmo, and was assigned to tutor the children of the nobleman Giorgio Pisani, whom he had met at Zaguri's house earlier. Pisani was a leader of the *barnabotti*, and ran for the office of *avogador* in 1778-79, on a campaign to reform Venice's laws. Pisani gave speeches attacking the Venetian police-state methods employed under the cover of silk stockings—which began to disturb some authorities. He lost the election, and any hopes for reform in the Serenissima Repubblica were dimmer than ever. A disgusted Da Ponte composed a little *sonetto codato*, a poetic form used for satire, developed by John Milton.

Da Ponte's blistering polemical poem attacked the state, and also three senators by name. He had circulated it privately to some friends, but "through the indiscretion of a few people," it became generally circulated, and within a short time it was the talk of the town. It was written in the local Venetian dialect, so even the more humble folk could understand it, and gossip quickly spread about this author of the "American Elegies" corrupting the youth, as his poem intensified the rage of his detractors, who moved to oust him for good.

A scandal involving an affair with the married woman in whose house he was living, became the official reason for his banishment. It was later that Da Ponte discovered that an accusation had been placed in the mouth of the lion at St. Mark's about the horrid and enormous crimes of the Abbé Da Ponte, who had "embraced the faith only to trample on and ridicule it and dishonor two noble families of the republic" (an Inquisition-like reference to his having converted from Judaism), through his affair with Angioletta Bellaudi. This accuser, Gabriel Doria, was not just a relative of the families, but an official agent of the Inquisition. And although Da Ponte may never have discovered this, it was his great Venetian patron who set him up, as evidenced in a letter from Zaguri to Casanova dated years later, in 1792, after Casanova had informed Zaguri that Da Ponte would go to London with a woman. (Da Ponte did not tell Casanova that he had married Nancy Grahl, who was with him.) Zaguri writes:

He [Da Ponte] is too much of a scoundrel, but since we also greet scoundrels, greet him in my name. I am perfectly sure that the English will not like him, *and that any day some accident will happen to him*, such as, after a few days at my house, on account of which I said to him, "too many things, abbé, too many things!" [emphasis added].

1. Quotes from Da Ponte are from his *Memoirs* and other books by him. See *For Further Reading*.



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*Da Ponte discovered that his banishment from Venice had been precipitated in the usual Venetian manner: An accusation against him was placed in the mouth of the famous lion at St. Mark's Square. The accuser was an official agent of the Inquisition.*

Zaguri proceeds in the letter to misrepresent the facts of the matter, which were not unknown to him. This incident involving Angioletta Bellaudi was the pretext used to evict Da Ponte from Zaguri's home, and shortly after that, from Venice. By September 1779, the order came for Da Ponte's arrest, and since he had already left the area, by December 1779, Da Ponte was sentenced: 15 years' banishment from Venice and all her territories, which judgment, if he defied it and was caught, meant he was to be imprisoned in a room without light for seven years.

### The Long Arm of Venice

The fugitive poet did not wait around for the sentence, but fled to Gorizia, a town north of Trieste in the Austrian Empire, and thus outside the reach of the long arm of Venice. There was an Italian community there, and it was a center of book-publishing and culture. He had no influential patrons or letters of introduction, but given the occasion of the 1779 Peace of Teschen, just concluded between Frederick the Great and Maria Teresa, he wrote an ode and dedicated it to Count Guido Cobenzl, whose son was the negotiator of that Peace. This endeared Da Ponte to the older Count, who personally printed and distributed the poem. From this, further opportunities opened up, and Da Ponte secured work writing, translating, and publishing for the local lords of Gorizia, at least until his run-ins with other poets forced him to search for greener pastures.

Da Ponte had joined Gorizia's "Arcadian colony," which had Count Cobenzl as its president, and another poet, Colletti, as secretary. This was a discussion group of *litterati* committed

to maintaining the purity of the Italian language, especially in the Austrian Empire, which met for drinking, writing, and reciting poetry. Da Ponte prospered, but grew tired of the local rivalries, and took the opportunity to leave Gorizia, having received an invitation to come and work at the court in Dresden.

Arriving there, Da Ponte discovered that the letter was a forgery, a trick, and that there was no employment there for him at all. He was befriended by the poet Catarola Mazzola, with whom he stayed while in the city, and from whom he gained an introduction to the work of adapting libretti, as Mazzola agreed to let Da Ponte assist in his work.

Da Ponte left Dresden after Mazzola brought him two letters some months later—one about the death of his beloved brother, whose income had supported the Da Ponte family at home in Ceneda, meaning that that responsibility would now be his.

The second letter was addressed to Mazzola from a friend in Venice, warning that Da Ponte had come to Dresden for Mazzola's job, and he should be on his guard. They both laughed, but Da Ponte, sentient about Venice, and also detecting that Mazzola might indeed have had such concerns, decided to move on. As he was leaving, Mazzola quickly wrote and handed Da Ponte a letter of introduction to Antonio Salieri, the composer for the court of Emperor Joseph II, who was in the imperial capital, Vienna.

### The Court of Austrian Emperor Joseph II

Da Ponte arrived in the grand city of Vienna in late 1781, and lived off the funds he had brought with him from Dresden, circulating in literary circles and looking for work. In late 1782, Da Ponte, attending the public gatherings of poets held nightly by the famed imperial poet Metastasio, had the fortune to have the aged bard read lines of Da Ponte's poem, and then ask the author to recite the rest. This praise by Metastasio was fortuitous in gaining Da Ponte some notice, and when Emperor Joseph II decided to reestablish the Italian theater in Vienna, which had been replaced by the national theater a year earlier, Da Ponte applied for the post of poet to the theater, and was accepted.

Joseph II, though a Habsburg, was an enlightened monarch, a cultured educator, for whom science and art were crucial to what he considered good government. He was known for his religious toleration, which allowed Jews to dress in the same manner as Christians and even associate with Christians, and his attempt to break down social barriers to develop the economy. These radical ideas outraged both the authorities of the Church and also the nobility, but Joseph persisted in this policy throughout his ten-year reign (1780-90). He elaborated his radical ideas:

I am prepared to employ anyone, let anyone practice agriculture or a trade, establish himself in a city, who

has the required qualifications and would bring advantage or industry into my states.

This same Joseph II, before he became Emperor, made a secret sojourn to Paris in 1775 to meet Benjamin Franklin. Joseph had been traveling with his royal Italian friend Belgioioso, under the name of "Count Falkenstein," and Niccola, the Tuscan minister, was trying to arrange the meeting. According to Franklin's writings, the scheduled meeting, which was to appear accidental, did not take place at that time.

Joseph, a musician and man of letters, was very much involved in the musical life of the capital, and Da Ponte was granted an audience, so Joseph could meet the man who would become the poet to the imperial theater. Da Ponte described the audience in his *Memoirs*:

Before this, I had never spoken to a monarch. Although everyone had told me that Joseph was the most humane and affable prince in the world, nevertheless I could not appear before him without feeling great awe and terror. But his smiling countenance, his pleasant voice, and above all the extreme simplicity of his manner and clothes, which in no way reflected what I had imagined of a king, not only raised my spirits, but scarcely gave me time to realize that I was standing in front of an Emperor. . . .

. . . Always eager to learn, he asked me many questions about my country, my work, and why I had come to Vienna. I replied quite briefly, which seemed to please him. At last he asked me how many plays I had written, and when I said frankly, "None, Sire," replied with a smile, "Good, good! We shall have a virgin muse!"

We will never know what else was discussed between the Emperor and the poet.

## A New Kind of Opera Librettist

Da Ponte's new appointment included securing opera libretti for the theater, adapting and revising them, and preparing the performances, but the virgin librettist knew he had much yet to learn, to master the art of composing a good opera libretto. His work with Mazzola had been an introduction, but did not fully prepare him for the task. He made a special arrangement to view some of the older libretti in the theater, and after a few hours of studying the "precious jewels" in the library of Sr. Varesi, Da Ponte recoiled in horror. The Italian comic operas he perused were neither poetry nor art; he found only doggerel and banal junk, lacking in metaphor, drama, and idea content.

His intention was to compose a libretto that would conform to a high literary standard, but he had no model.

His first commission for the court composer Salieri came in 1784, and the play chosen by the composer for Da Ponte,

was selected without much thought. *Il rico d'un giorno* turned out to be a fiasco, which Da Ponte foresaw, but was yet unsure of a solution:

I now fell seriously to work, but I soon perceived how far imagination outruns execution. The difficulties that I had to surmount were innumerable. The subject did not admit of a sufficient variety of incidents to keep alive for two hours the attention of an audience; I found as I advanced, that the dialogue was tame, the songs forced, the sentiments trivial, the action languid, and the characters uninteresting; in short, I seemed to have lost the entirety of the art of writing, and I felt like a child endeavoring to wield the club of Hercules. At length, however, I finished the first act, and there remained but the finale to compose.

The frustrated librettist put it aside and returned to it again and again, but was cognizant of its inherent failings, and thus thankful each time the opening night was postponed. When *Il Rico* was finally performed in December 1784, it was a big flop, much to the pleasure of those who wanted Da Ponte's job. Salieri was so angry that he swore that that he would "cut off his own fingers" before accepting another libretto from Da Ponte. Only Joseph II told the poet that his opera was not so bad, and he should try another.

Da Ponte was developing a concept of what Lyndon LaRouche calls the "unity of effect," which is necessary for a successful composition. In considering the very popular opera of the day, *Il re Teodoro*, whose libretto by the widely known poet (and Da Ponte's rival) Abbé Casti was set by Salieri, Da Ponte said:

The songs were charming, the *pezzi concertati* (duets, trios, etc.) extremely poetical, the Finale well imagined and written, and yet the opera was neither warm and interesting, nor calculated for stage effect; the action was languid, the characters insipid, the catastrophe improbable and almost tragic; the parts *in fine* were beautiful, but the drama, upon the whole, was contemptible. It brought to mind the idea of a jeweler who had destroyed the effect of several gems for want of skill in their arrangement and symmetry.

From the study of this successful, but flawed opera, he learned much about the defects of his own drama, recognizing that being a good poet is not sufficient to write a good drama. In 1785, with the encouragement of the Emperor, and commissions for libretti for the Spanish composer Vicente Martin y Soler (known as Martini) and for Stephen Storace, emboldened him to master this art.

For the (half English) Stephen Storace, the brother of famed soprano Nancy and friend of Mozart, he transformed Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* into the Italian opera

*Gli equivoci*. For Martini, he successfully transformed a comedy by Goldoni into the opera *Il burbero di buon core*, and began to turn the corner in Vienna, even as fierce skirmishes with the jealous Abbé Casti and others in the court raged on. In January 1786, when the opera succeeded, Joseph, who was seen applauding at the opera, approached the poet and said aloud, “Da Ponte, we have gained our cause!”

Da Ponte, like Mozart, faced many rivals in the Italian theater environs. That he was favored by Joseph II gave him certain capabilities, but it also made for acrimonious relations among the envious cretins in the court environs. Da Ponte’s disdain for sophistry, together with his vast knowledge, enabled him to maneuver successfully through the web of intrigue that was the Habsburg Court in Vienna. It also made him a perfect magnet for the like-minded genius, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

### The Immortal Mozart

In 1783, Mozart first met Da Ponte at the home of Baron von Wetzlar, one of the cultural salons that were frequented by musicians, political operatives, and other intellectuals.<sup>2</sup> These gatherings were hotbeds of pro-American sentiment and activity, in which the latest breakthroughs in science and philosophy were also debated. Mozart requested a libretto from the Italian theater poet, and was promised one within six months, after the poet’s other obligations were met.

After the first discussions between Mozart and Da Ponte at the salon, Mozart wrote to his father about the promise from Da Ponte, expressing concern that nothing might come of it—that this Italian poet might not follow through, or that he might be involved in the prevalent cut-throat competition and court intrigues, which would mean that Mozart might never receive a decent libretto. But after his obligations were completed, Da Ponte was ready to deliver as promised. He had been emboldened by the success of his collaboration with Martini, and also the encouragement from the Emperor himself against his rivals:

Before long several composers turned to me for libretti. But there were only two in Vienna deserving of my esteem: Martini (Martin y Soler) and Mozart, whom I had the opportunity of meeting in just those days at the home of Baron Wetzlar, his great admirer and friend. Though gifted with superior talents to those of any other composer in the world, past, present, or future, Mozart had, thanks to the intrigues of his rivals, never been able to exercise his divine genius in Vienna, and was living there unknown and obscure, like a priceless jewel buried in the bowels of the Earth. I will say boldly, and I think myself entitled to support my assertion, that to

my exertion alone, the world is indebted for those fine vocal compositions which he afterwards composed. I consider my success in forcing him into notice, as an eminent composer for the voice, as the most agreeable circumstance of my life. As a writer for the stage, I had gained the entire confidence of the Emperor, and was determined to use my favor at court for the interest of Mozart.

. . . I was at a loss for some time to find a mode of showing his [Mozart’s] abilities to advantage, without risking the displeasure of my imperial patron who was prejudiced against him as a composer of vocal music, by the evil reports of those who were fearful of his rising into notice. Under these difficulties, I paid Mozart a visit, and asked him whether he would undertake to compose the music for a piece which I had some thought of writing. “I would most willingly undertake it,” replied he, “but I know that neither the managers of the theater, nor the Emperor, would suffer it to be performed.”

Indeed, Mozart’s desire was to demonstrate to the world what he could create with an opera, which fuses the orchestral and vocal, dramatic, and musical into one coherent work of art. He had composed operas since he was a child, but he knew well that his Muse was yet to be discovered by the world. Earlier, Mozart had expressed thoughts similar to Da Ponte’s about the role of the libretto for the composer, in a 1781 letter to his father, before the release of his 1782 German opera *The Abduction From the Seraglio*:

I should say that in an opera the poetry must be the obedient daughter to the music. Why do the Italian comic operas please everywhere—in spite of their miserable libretti? Just because the music reigns supreme and when one listens, all is forgotten. Why, an opera is sure of success when the plot is well worked out, the words written solely for the music and not shoved in here and there to suit some miserable rhyme. . . . I mean words or even entire verses which ruin the composer’s whole idea. Verses are indeed the most indispensable element for music—but rhymes—solely for the sake of rhyming—the most detrimental. . . . [T]he best thing of all is when a good composer, who understands the stage and is talented enough to make suggestions, meets an able poet, the true phoenix; in that case, no fears need be entertained as to the applause even of the ignorant.<sup>3</sup>

By 1785, Mozart had been in Vienna for three years, and had been married to his beloved Constanze for two. At the salon with Baron Von Swieten, which met each Sunday, Mo-

2. Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., “Mozart’s 1782-1786 Revolution in Music,” and “Mozart and the American Revolutionary Upsurge,” *Fidelio*, Winter 1992. Available at [www.schillerinstitute.org](http://www.schillerinstitute.org).

3. Emily Anderson, ed., *The Letters of Mozart and His Family* (Macmillan: 1989)





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Leonardo Da Ponte as a young man.



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Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, as he appeared when Da Ponte arrived in Vienna in 1781. Mozart and Da Ponte met in 1783, and their historic collaboration began soon after. Shown here is a portrait of the Mozart family by Johann Nepomuk.

zart had been studying the fugues of Bach, and said they discussed and “played nothing but Bach and Handel.” This intense examination led to Mozart’s breakthrough on the principle of motivic thorough-composition, specifically, with his breakthrough compositions K.475 Piano Fantasy and the K.476 “Das Veilchen,” the first *Lied*. Mozart engaged in a musical dialogue, across the generations, with the discoverer of well-tempered polyphony, Johann Sebastian Bach.

Mozart had made a scientific breakthrough in principle, which generated the genre known as the German *Lied*, and he wanted to apply that same principle to opera. The composer had worked his way up from an unemployed artist to a prolific composer, respected and prosperous pianist, and music teacher. That year, Mozart wrote piano concerti, chamber music works, a horn concerto, the “Masonic Music,” the comedy *The Impresario*, and the Haydn string quartets, as well as the works mentioned above. Mozart also gave numerous concerts, threw parties, and hosted illustrious colleagues, including Joseph “Papa” Haydn, who told Mozart’s father in February 1785, “I say to you before God, and as an honest man, that your son is the greatest composer known to me either in person or by reputation: he has taste, and what’s more, the most profound knowledge of composition.”

Little is known of the story behind the March 1785 performance of Mozart’s cantata “Davide Penitente,” K.469, the text of which is attributed to Da Ponte, but we do know that work on *The Marriage of Figaro* began in earnest. One of the most powerful combinations of creative capability the world has ever seen went to work. Da Ponte considered his

work with Mozart as the crowning achievement of his career.

Although Mozart was doubtful that he could break through the cabals controlling the theater, Da Ponte assured him that he would take care of that matter. Composer and poet began to discuss an appropriate libretto, with Mozart insistent that he wanted a text for Beaumarchais’s *Marriage of Figaro*, even though it had just been banned in the empire! The play had been recently scheduled to open in the German theater, but Joseph II forbade it just before opening night, although he did permit printed copies of the play to circulate, so it was very well known in Vienna. Baron Wetzlar offered to finance the opera as a private affair outside Vienna, were the Emperor to forbid it, but Da Ponte insisted they begin working on it, and said he would seek permission from Count Orsini Rosenberg, or from Joseph himself, at a fortuitous moment.

### The Revolutionary ‘Figaro’

*The Marriage of Figaro* was a pro-American play written by the French supporter, financier, and spy for the American Revolution, Pierre Caron de Beaumarchais, who had secured arms for the colonies in the American Revolution. Mozart and Da Ponte began work, and Mozart’s father reported that because they composed from morning till night, Wolfgang had no time to correspond with him. They worked in secret, (without a commission) for two months straight, until that opportune moment, when Da Ponte would be able to demonstrate to Joseph that all the offensive parts had been removed, and that the music was divine.



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A ticket for the premiere of Mozart and Da Ponte's *The Marriage of Figaro*. Da Ponte considered his work with Mozart as the crowning achievement of his career.

When the opera was finished, it just so happened that there was a need of a score for the theater, so Da Ponte went to speak with Joseph, who had personal oversight over the musical events in Vienna. "What?" said Joseph, "Don't you know that Mozart, though a wonder at instrumental music, has written only one opera, and nothing remarkable at that?" Da Ponte's reply was that without his Majesty's clemency, he would have written only one opera himself in Vienna. The Emperor gave his conditional permission, relying on Da Ponte's judgment in transforming the French play into a non-offensive Italian opera.

Now, Joseph knew that there would be many ruffled feathers among the nobility, if this piece were performed, and just as Da Ponte arrived to tell Mozart, so did a messenger of the Emperor, demanding that he immediately present himself, and his score, at the Palace. Upon hearing some of the music, which astounded the monarch, Joseph commissioned the work, and in May 1786, after more intrigue and attempted sabotage by the opera honchos, the two artists presented *The Marriage Figaro* to the world, endearing them to posterity, but further infuriating their opponents. The two were conscious of the wholly unique creation which they brought into the world, as the poet wrote in the libretto's introduction to their four-hour-long work:

This opera will not be one of the shortest to have been exhibited in our theater, for which we hope that ample recompense will be offered by the variety of themes woven into the action of this play, as well as its original-

ity and large dimensions. The musical numbers are of the widest possible variety, so as not to leave any performers unoccupied for long periods, to avoid the tedium and monotony of long recitatives, and to lend expression to the many different passions which the characters experience. We wanted to present our most gracious and honorable public with a virtually new kind of play.

And that they did. Previous to the production of *The Marriage of Figaro*, what existed were comic operas and serious operas, generally with set-piece arias, duets, trios, a certain amount of action, connected by recitatives, designed most often to show off the vocal qualities of the singers. With this work, the composer and librettist, who considered art to be very serious business, set an entirely new standard in opera which shook the world. Consider Da Ponte's

comments on writing a *Finale*, which he did not want to be disconnected from the rest of the opera, in the customary fashion:

This *Finale* in Italian comic operas, though strictly connected with the other parts of the drama, is a kind of little comedy by itself; it requires a distinct plot, and should be particularly interesting; in this part are chiefly displayed the genius of a musical composer, and the power of the singers, and for this is reserved the most striking effect of the drama.

*Recitativo* is entirely excluded from this division of the piece. The whole of it is sung, and it must contain every species of melody. The *adagio*, the *allegro*, the *andante*, the *cantabile*, the *armonioso*, the *strepitoso*, the *arcistrepitoso*, the *strepitososissimo*, with which last every act commonly ends. It is a theatrical rule that in the course of the *Finale*, all the singers, however numerous they may be, must make their appearance in solos, duets, trios, quartets, etc. And this rule the poet is under the absolute necessity of observing, whatever difficulties and absurdities it may occasion; and though all the critics, with Aristotle at their head, exclaim against it, I must observe here that the real Aristotles of a dramatic poet are in general, not only the composer of the music, but also the first *buffo*, the *prima donna*, and not very seldom the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th buffoon of the company. After this description, the distress I suffered in attempting to compose my



Wolf Trap Foundation/©Peter H. Krogh

*The Countess and her servant Susanna, in the Wolf Trap Opera Company's 2002 production of The Marriage of Figaro. The two women devise an elaborate plan to trick the skirt-chasing Count into fidelity to his own wife.*

first *Finale* may be easily imagined; I was a thousand times tempted to go to the Emperor and entreat him to liberate me from my engagement.

*Figaro*, with its unity of effect from beginning to end, using the full colors of the orchestra and voice with its arias, sextets, quartets, to create a real drama filled with ironies and paradoxes, truly enabled the audience to leave the theater better people than when they entered it. The story line is complex: A Count intends to use the nobility's "right of the first night" (to sleep with the bride before the groom does), even though the practice had been officially banned. The target, Susanna, his wife's servant, with help from her fiancé Figaro (the Count's servant), and from the Countess herself, plan to trick the Count into loving his own wife. The first plan goes awry, and a second one is cooked up by the ladies without Figaro's knowledge. Meanwhile the Count's own plan, to use one of Figaro's creditors to force Figaro into another marriage, backfires completely. This operatic representation of the revolutionary ideas of the 1776, filled with humor, disguises, and jokes, and subsuming the themes of fidelity, love, real nobility versus "noble" birth, perception versus reality, poses the question of what the future holds for society. The audience sees the hormonal young page Cherubino, and decides whether he will grow up to be "noble" like the Count, or truly noble, like the upstart servants Figaro and Susanna. With amazing playfulness and divine music, this revolution in opera demands that individuals confront their axioms and relationships, and act accordingly.

Michael Kelly, Mozart's friend and the tenor who played

both Basilio and Don Cursio in the première performances of *Figaro*, wrote in his autobiography:

At the end of the opera, I thought the audience would never have done applauding and calling for Mozart; almost every piece was encored, which prolonged it nearly to the length of two operas, and induced the Emperor to issue an order on the second performance that no piece of music should be encored. Never was anything more complete than the triumph of Mozart and his *Nozze di Figaro*, to which numerous overflowing audiences bore witness.

There are few, if any, existing letters or documents which would give more insight into the deliberative creative process that gave birth to these operas, but it is evident from the works themselves, that Mozart and Da Ponte were having a great time battling the sophists and the oligarchy! There are many jokes within the work, some more "inside jokes" than others, such as when Susanna says to Figaro, "We have gained our cause!" after she deceives the Count by agreeing to meet him in the garden. (This was precisely what Emperor Joseph had said to Da Ponte, as recounted above.) More serious jokes were included also, with Figaro singing of the glories of war, for which the entire empire was being mobilized.

Years later, in a reply to the *Edinburgh Review*, which deliberately left out Da Ponte's name from its discussion of his operas, he elaborated the role of poetry and the libretto. In his "An Extract from the Life of Lorenzo Da Ponte," he included an appendix which showed the transformations of

the French prose of Beaumarchais's play into the Italian verse that was set to music. (Casti belittled it as "just a translation.") Da Ponte cited the letter shown to him by Salieri, where Beaumarchais commented on his adaptation of *Figaro*, saying that even with the many deletions and transformations, the poet maintained continuity, such that had he (Beaumarchais) done the same, he would have called his an original work. He had a more developed idea of the librettist:

. . . [I]f the words of a dramatic poet are nothing but a vehicle to the notes, and an opportunity to the action, what is the reason that a composer of music does not take at once a doctor's recipes, a bookseller's catalogue, or even a spelling book, instead of the verses of a poet, and make them a vehicle to his notes, just as an ass is that of a bag of corn? Mozart knew very well that the success of an opera depends, *first of all on the poet*; that without a good poem an entertainment cannot be perfectly dramatic. . . . I think that poetry is the door to music, which can be very handsome, and much admired for its exterior, but nobody can see its internal beauties if the door is wanting.

Da Ponte showed his disgust with what he saw as ignorant or maliciously poor translations from the Italian to English, which "destroy the sense of the original, and present to the public a mass of low and unintelligible absurdities." He cited the poetic translation made by one of his students of the "*Voi che sapete*" arietta of Cherubino in *Figaro*, as superior to the literal translation they provided, since it conveys the *idea* of what is being sung. To make a good translation, although he never explicitly says it, requires creativity, which his detractors despised.

I was reminded of a recent comment by LaRouche, in a paper about creativity, that "true joy lies within the bounds of that quality of creativity which sets the human individual apart from the animal world. True joy is helping to make the world better, in that fashion, for people of times to come. True joy is building a nation, or resuscitating a ruined nation which will be fit for creative human beings to inhabit, or simply mustering the insight to do a kindness." It is exactly that quality of joy that characterizes both Mozart and Da Ponte, with their unbounded optimism despite adversity, and their sense of humor, profound use of irony and metaphor, their commitment to truth, and refusal to be manipulated by money or, rather, lack of it.

They happily broke the all constraints and intrigues of the Venetian players and defenders of mediocrity. With their revolution, they defeated the windbags who had been hoping for a "wind egg." The *Finale* of *Figaro*, which Da Ponte outlined above, indeed ends with the singers facing the audience, after all the intrigues are over, and addressing them: "So let us all be happy."

## The Imperial Opera

By 1786, Da Ponte was a busy man—of the 21 operas staged at the Burgetheater, ten were new productions, and of these, six had libretti written by him, including *Una Cosa Rara* for Martini, and *Figaro*. After *Figaro*, both Mozart and Da Ponte made more enemies at the court, who preferred the triumph of mediocrity. Gossip and sabotage were predominant, but Da Ponte, as always, drew from his arsenal to out-flank the Lilliputians and prevail.

Da Ponte wrote a new libretto for Martini on a Spanish comedy of Calderón, appropriate for his patron, the Spanish ambassador, but insisted that Martini grumble at Da Ponte's "delay in writing," and say publicly that "a poet from Venice sent him a libretto." His *Memoirs* tell of the normal conflagration and complaining when the parts were distributed to the singers, and he says one can imagine his inner gloating when one singer in all earnestness approached him saying, "Read that book, Signor Da Ponte, and see how a comic opera is written!" Since they didn't know the poet's identity, the singers and others in Orsini Rosenberg's employ proceeded to attack Martini's score, which both Da Ponte and Joseph thought beautiful. The singers waged intrigues against them, until Joseph's personal intervention demanded that the opera be performed.

At the opening of the opera *Una Cosa Rara, o sia bellezza ed onestà* (*A Rare Thing, Is Beauty and Virtue*), chatter among the nobles continued about the "wonderful Venetian librettist." Applause was enthusiastic, and even Joseph demanded an encore, breaking his own rule of a few days earlier. When Da Ponte, the librettist, was finally presented, the singers, the opera chatterers, and the society ladies were embarrassed, some were miffed, and some of his previously most vocal rivals were livid: "I imagine they regret having been born with tongues, having praised my words so highly before knowing that I was the author."

This not only ended the public debasement of his talent, but it made him and Martini popular throughout Vienna. The two had a good laugh over Da Ponte's dramatic change in stature, as many conspicuous signs of favor and flattery emanated then from Viennese society folk. The popularity of the opera *Una Cosa Rara*, although virtually unknown today, eclipsed *Figaro*, as fashionable Viennese women copied the opera's hairstyles and Spanish pastoral clothing, and as audiences filled the opera houses night after night. Mozart thought the music was very pretty, but commented that "in ten years no one will remember it!"

After these successes, Da Ponte was inundated with requests, and after a few uninspired compositions, he was told by the Emperor that he need not write more libretti for mediocre composers. When he was asked for a libretto by each of Mozart, Salieri, and Martini, Joseph was cautious, but gave him permission to compose for all three, simultaneously, only after Da Ponte told the Emperor his plan:

I shall write evenings for Mozart, imagining I am reading the *Inferno*; mornings I shall work for Martini and pretend I am studying Petrarch; my afternoons will be for Salieri. He is my Tasso!

For Mozart, Da Ponte decided on *Don Giovanni*; for Martini, Da Ponte composed an original libretto called *The Tree of Diana*, and for Salieri, he adapted Beaumarchais's play *Tarare*, which had opened in Paris that year. The story of Tarare's overthrow of the cruel tyrant, ends with the gods proclaiming that Man's greatness derives from solely from his character, not his social status. Da Ponte transformed and lightened up the ending, and added numerous ensembles. Da Ponte and Salieri realized that other major changes were necessary to accommodate music for "Italian acting singers," as opposed to the "French singing actors." They changed the name from *Tarare* to *Axur, Re D'Ormus*, and it was also a success.

## Don Giovanni

Mozart set to work and finished *Don Giovanni* over the Summer of 1787. In the year that the U.S. Constitutional Convention was taking place across the ocean, poet and composer again delivered a stinging blow to the oligarchy, with *Don Giovanni o il punti dissoluto*, which was a *dramma giocoso*, a drama with humor. According to Da Ponte, Mozart had wanted to compose a tragedy, but Da Ponte insisted on inserting "Batti, batti," "La ci darem," and other lighter elements, to improve the dramatic action. Indeed, Da Ponte not only understood dramatic impact, he may have foreseen the political necessity of such additions in such a work.

Again, with sublime art and a clear conceptual framework, they targetted the Venetian oligarchical system, and its conception of man as a beast. "Don Juan" was not a new theme—in fact, there were a number of plays and even an opera already being performed on that theme in Vienna that year; but Da Ponte had two other commissions he was obligated for, simultaneously, and Mozart was pleased with the idea. Da Ponte borrowed liberally from Bertati's libretto of *Don Juan*, but the transformation was complete. The opera premièred in Prague, exceeded all expectations, and was hailed as a masterpiece unlike anything the world had known before. Mozart conducted, and was applauded throughout. Da Ponte had been called back to Vienna to work on the opera with Salieri, who did not like being upstaged. Da Ponte said:

I did not see the performance of *Don Giovanni* in Prague, but Mozart immediately wrote to me and told me about his miraculous success and Guardasoni wrote me the following words: "Long live da Ponte, long live Mozart! All the impresarios and all the virtuosi must praise them. As long as they are in the world theater, will never know want."



Washington Opera/Carol Pratt

*Don Giovanni* and Zerlina, in The Washington Opera's production of *Don Giovanni* in 1998. This powerful polemic against oligarchism was written in 1787, the year that the U.S. Constitutional Convention was taking place.

...The Emperor summoned me, overloaded me with gracious felicitations, presented me with another hundred sequins and said that he greatly longed to see *Don Giovanni*. Mozart returned, and since Joseph was shortly to depart for the field [he left in February 1788—SB], hurried the score to the copy-clerk to write out the parts. The opera went on the stage—*Don Giovanni* came on the stage—need I recall it? *Don Giovanni* did not please! Everyone, except Mozart, seemed to think that something was missing there. And so parts were added, the arias were changed and it was newly performed: and *Don Giovanni* did not please!

And what did the Emperor have to say about it? "That opera is divine, it is perhaps even more beautiful than *Figaro*, but it is not a morsel for the teeth of my Viennese." I told Mozart this and he was not upset, and he said: "Give them time to chew on it!"

He did not delude himself. I ensured, according to his wish, that the opera was performed frequently: And the applause strengthened with every performance, and little by little, even Vienna of the dull teeth acquired a taste for it, they appreciated its beauty and ranked *Don Giovanni* among the most beautiful operas staged in the opera theater.

Don Giovanni is a Spanish nobleman whose activity consists of seducing women, often procured with the assistance of his servant, Leporello, who opens the opera complaining of his fate. Giovanni, masked, is inside the house seducing an unsuspecting noblewoman, whose screams awaken her father, as she tries to free herself and unmask her seducer. The father comes out to defend her, and Giovanni kills him in the duel. The lunge unfolds through to the end of the opera, where Giovanni is destroyed by a higher power, represented by the statue of the man he killed, who comes to dine with him. The work is an elaboration on the ideas of justice and vengeance, natural law, love, the relationship between the oligarchy and the peasants, reality and perception, through a masterful use of irony and humor.

What audience cannot hear the biting irony, as the degenerate nobleman sings “*Viva la Libertad!*” at his banquet, espousing the virtue of hedonistic “freedom”—as the ideas of republican liberty in the U.S.A were pronounced with the close of the Constitutional Convention. This was no “morality play,” as was so commonplace at the time, where the “evil guy gets it in the end.” Even without discussing the music itself, the complex of characters, their relationships, and the issues facing society indeed do address the morality of the population and the rulers, but from the standpoint of the complex domain.

Being a servant of the feudal lords and oligarchy (as the musicians serving Don Giovanni were) was an affront to the very idea of Mozart’s concept of man. His insistence that art and artists serve only posterity kept him in financial difficulty much of the time, but he was not one to sell out for money. The smaller ironies entwined within the major polemics of Mozart and Da Ponte, enrich the operas and make them even more enjoyable, while most of the popular operas of the day are long forgotten.

The year 1787 was a turning point for Mozart, with the death of his son, financial difficulties, lack of subscribers to his concerts, and then, the death of his father, Leopold. Nevertheless, Mozart worked through the Summer on the score, and finished just in time for the October opening. 1787-88 was also a turning point for Joseph II of Austria, whose support was waning among his subjects in the capital, as Austria prepared to join the war against the Turks. In France, in the aftermath of the Queen’s “necklace affair,” which was run against Joseph’s sister Marie Antoinette, there were riots in Paris, and a deterioration of the political and social conditions was becoming evident in the Austrian capital as well. Joseph left for the front in February 1788.

Under the stress of imperial financial problems, in addition to his anger at an insult by one of the singers, Joseph announced the cost-cutting measure of closing of the Italian opera. When he returned to Vienna, Da Ponte came to him with a plan to keep it functioning via subscriptions, which he had already organized. Da Ponte gained his objective, and the opera company was maintained.



Library of Congress

*Habsburg Emperor Joseph II (reigned 1780-90) was an enlightened monarch whose government reflected the ideas of the American Revolution, and who made the immortal contribution of sponsoring the collaboration between Mozart and Da Ponte.*

### ‘Cosi Fan Tutte’

The last operatic blast at the oligarchy created between Da Ponte and Mozart was born in 1789-90. In 1789, as the French Revolution was erupting and the Austrian Empire was in trouble, Vienna itself was changing. Intrigues and spying were even more rampant, as the uncertainties in the political situation and the power shifts inside the capital made everyone suspect and cautious. Joseph’s policy of tolerance was gone, and one historian of the day, cited by Bolt, observed that in Vienna, “one never speaks openly, and never about matters of importance. It is known that the walls have ears.”

In this environment, Da Ponte continued at his post, writing libretti for popular operas of the day by Salieri and Martini, and also putting on performances of operatic arias called *Il Pasticcio*—a performance of concert arias by different composers, with light recitative, often satirical, in between, which also kept the singers, orchestras, and stage personnel employed. Competition among prima donnas and others was fierce, and it was over the rivalry of the two mistresses of Da Ponte and Salieri, both prima donnas, that their friendship ended. Mozart travelled to Leipzig, where he heard the St. Thomas Choir of the Bach tradition, and to Berlin, where he was offered better employment, but returned to Vienna. Da Ponte continued to raise subscriptions, and began to open the opera to a wider audience. Previously, it was limited to the nobility, and the popular theater for others.



Washington Opera

A Washington Opera Company production of *Così fan tutte*, with (left to right) Guglielmo, Don Alfonso, and Ferrando. Don Alfonso, the “philosopher,” makes his wager with the dreamy-eyed young men, to teach them a thing or two about the world.

In 1789, *Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* were revived in Vienna with great success, after which Joseph ordered Mozart to compose a new comic opera with a libretto by Da Ponte. Thus was born *Così fan tutte* or *La scuola degli amanti*, which opened in January 1790. Both Mozart and the poet thought that this “third child” of their collaboration was exquisite, and were excited about its production.

This third opera, a comedy based on Classical references from Ovid, Boccaccio, Ariosto, and Shakespeare, but original to Da Ponte, is a hard-hitting attack on sophistry, with specific barbs at the anti-science mob and the formalists who were dominant in 1790 Austria. To say, as critics often do, that these operas are about sex, lust, and adultery, rather than politics, is worse than foolish. The construction of political freedom, as Schiller discusses, is the most beautiful of all works of art. Hopes for such a situation in Vienna were rapidly waning.

*Così fan tutte*, actually a *dramma giocosa*, has within it some of the most sublime music ever composed for voice. Some scholars report that Joseph wanted the plot to be based on current scandals in Vienna, and some say it targeted him. Again, Mozart and Da Ponte use metaphor to try to uplift a decaying society, and force the audience to reflect on itself in history. There is evidence that Salieri began working on, but then abandoned, the libretto which Mozart took on.

The action opens with a heated debate in a tavern, between two young soldiers and an older philosopher, Don Alfonso, over the fidelity and virtue of the soldiers’ fiancées. The philosopher tries to end the debate, but the soldiers draw

their swords and demand a duel to the death, to defend the honor of their women. In dramatic duets and trios, they finally agree to Alfonso’s wager, that he will prove in 24 hours that their Penelopes are no different than other women respecting fidelity.

Then the women, two Ferrarese sisters (a joke on Da Ponte himself, since his mistress was from Ferrara) sing of their lovers, as Don Alfonso arrives to give the disastrous news: Their men have been called to the front. The soldiers enter and say their goodbyes in a series of duets and trios which meld into the sublime quintet. Music that reaches the depths of the soul is sung both by the sincerely upset women, and the men involved in the bet.

At this point even an uninformed audience conceives a paradox between the music and the action.

The men leave and the women go home to kill themselves, but enter Despina, the maid, who sees them distraught and suggests instead that they amuse themselves. They are horrified at the thought and leave. The philosopher engages the assistance of Despina in bringing in some rich foreign gentlemen, mustachioed Albanians (their fiancées in disguise), to woo the ladies. A description does not do justice to the amazing Italian libretto, with its poetic form and its multitude of puns, inversions, and jokes.

After many amorous moves, it’s still not clear what the women will do. The rejected Albanian wooers are so tormented by this repudiation that they drink poison and “die.” But a doctor comes, Despina in disguise, and they are miraculously revived. Then the women give in, and call a notary—again Despina in disguise—to perform the marriage between the sisters and the Albanians. She babbles unintelligible nonsense, supposedly Latin, which is a very good imitation of a “bread scholar” who speaks in a language no one can understand. But alas, at the wedding, Don Alfonso says he hears the return of the troops, and reality strikes the women, as the Albanians exit.

The soldiers return, singing of the joy of love and fidelity, question the goings on, after finding the notary hiding in the back. Despina shows herself, when Don Alfonso pushes the double marriage contract to the floor into plain sight. The women are pale, but point to Don Alfonso and Despina, whom they blame for corrupting them. Don Alfonso tells the soldiers that the answer is in the room he points to, where the “Albanians” are hiding. The young soldiers return with their cos-

tumes partially on, and begin to woo the ladies as they had done when they were disguised as the Albanians, exposing the cruel hoax. The three women are astounded, the sisters continue to blame Don Alfonso, who laughs and replies that he indeed invented the plot to make them all the wiser, that it was all done for the good. Despina says she learned the moral to the story: Take care that in fooling others, someone else may well fool you.

They all sing to the audience, as was done in *Giovanni* and *Figaro*, that we must let our actions be guided by reason:

Lucky is he who takes  
The good in all  
And through chance and events  
By reason is led.

What is wont to make others weep  
For him is cause for laughter  
And in the turmoil of the world  
He will find peace.

The use of disguises, and also the testing of marital fidelity, were literary devices that have been used since ancient Greece. Having Despina acting as a lawyer, babbling nonsense is just one attack on the sophistry of the day. A more glaring example, indicating the authors' disgust with the sophistry so prevalent in Vienna at the time, is the scene where the rejected Albanians take poison to kill themselves, only to be miraculously revived by Despina, disguised as the eminent doctor, who arrives with a giant magnet. She touches their heads with the magnet, and pulls it along their bodies, saying this is Mesmer's cure, and then the Albanians begin shaking and shivering until they are miraculously revived. The reference to the fraudulent "animal magnetism" theory of Mesmer, which had been refuted by a French commission that included Benjamin Franklin in 1784, is very clear.

*Così fan tutte* premiered against the backdrop of the United States of America becoming the first constitutional republic, but also, of the disastrous French Revolution, which proved to be very different than the hoped-for model of the American Revolution. Emperor Joseph was both politically weak, and physically ill, and the Austrian Empire's economy was suffering from the terrible, unpopular war that was claiming her sons. Joseph II's reforms, which had characterized his early reign beginning in 1780, and the Josephine era, were coming to an end. And they were finally laid to rest with the Emperor's passing.

Emperor Joseph II died in February 1790, after just four performances of *Così fan tutte*, and Leopold, Joseph's brother, who had formerly ruled in Tuscany, had little concern for the arts and sciences. In the Habsburg Empire, the door was slammed shut on those ideas which Joseph had allowed to resonate—the ideas of American Revolution.

Martini soon moved to Russia to take the post of court composer in St. Petersburg. With the Italian theater closed, and Emperor Leopold's disinterest in the artistic world, there were no more Mozart-Da Ponte commissions. Mozart set *Cleomenza di Tito* by Metastasio and adapted by Mazzola for the coronation, which is a most compact and beautiful treatise on statecraft. A letter indicates that Da Ponte suggested they try their luck in London, but Mozart was working on *The Magic Flute* for the German "popular" theater for at least six months more. Mozart died in December 1791. Salieri stayed on in Vienna.<sup>4</sup>

## Escape to London

After Joseph's death, Da Ponte stayed on as theater poet through 1791, but was relieved of his post shortly after that, supposedly in the context of a scandal about his mistress, topped off by a lie that he had written a slanderous poem against the new Emperor. Again, Da Ponte had to flee. He wrote in 1807:

I was obliged to leave Venice. I sought asylum in Vienna, where I had the good fortune to obtain the favor of Joseph II, who conferred upon me the office of dramatic poet, and continued me in that employment until his death. Having been favored by Joseph, was a crime in the eyes of Leopold. After a year of suffering, I was constrained to leave Vienna.

Da Ponte was not only unemployed, but exiled. A meeting with Leopold outside Vienna was helpful in clearing up the matter, but not sufficient to allow him to return and work in the capital.

He fled Vienna and went to Trieste, where he met Anna Celestine Grahl (Nancy), through her father, and they married in 1792. He taught her Italian as she taught him French, and they fell in love, but she was betrothed to another. When her father, a merchant from Dresden, discovered that Nancy's fiancé was after his money and not the love of his daughter, he offered Da Ponte her hand. Nancy, born in England, to a German father and French mother, both converted Jews, was

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4. It is important to note here the context in which Salieri and Mozart were "enemies." Mozart knew his own genius, and opposed the predominance of the mediocrity of the court and its environs. Salieri was the court composer, and therefore Mozart's opponent in a cut-throat competition. Mozart was not an early favorite of the Emperor, and by the time Joseph appreciated Mozart's capabilities and creativity, the monarch was preoccupied with the foreign wars and domestic unrest.

Salieri prevented Mozart from getting commissions early on, and the long delayed première of *Don Giovanni* in Vienna required the personal intervention of the Emperor. Salieri simply did not want his own work to be upstaged. These intrigues were rampant and destructive. However, contrary to some allegations, Salieri did not kill Mozart, nor was he a key protagonist in that affair, even if, for his own advancement, he might have liked to kill Mozart's spark of creative genius.



educated in languages. They resolved to go to Paris.

The Da Pontes left Trieste and travelled to various cities, visiting many people, including Casanova, from whom the poet hoped to collect a debt, on their way to Paris. He carried a letter of recommendation to Marie Antoinette, from Joseph II, but when they learned of the imprisonment of the Queen, they changed course for London instead, and joined Nancy's family which had moved there. They spent a year in London, travelling also to Holland and elsewhere trying to establish an Italian theater, and returned to London when a post opened up at an opera house there. Da Ponte wrote libretti, oversaw opera theater operations, and was assistant to the manager, William Taylor, whose wheeling and dealing cost Da Ponte much money and trouble.

In London for over 12 years, Da Ponte faced many enemies and more intrigues in the theater and among the various characters there. He had a successful bookselling business, and developed a working friendship with the librarian and poet Thomas Matthias. There is catalogue of Da Ponte's Italian-language books in the British Library today, which lists the thousands of books in his possession. He signed notes to help his friends at the theater, for which he ended up bankrupt, but of his political and other associations, little is known.

Many people passed through London in the 1790s, including scientists and musicians, such as Haydn, who had attended the dress rehearsal of *Così fan tutte* in Vienna, at Mozart's request. It was in London that Da Ponte reestablished contact with a number of the Italians he had known as a young man, including Michele Colombo. His half-brother Paolo came to London and set up a printing shop, but Da Ponte's *Memoirs* tell us little about the interesting people he must have been in touch with there. There is also much to be learned about Nancy Da Ponte, a cultured and educated woman 20 years his junior, who bore him four children there and also worked in the theater coffee house. Da Ponte had financial problems there, and all the biographies report on his 1800 bankruptcy. This is given as the reason that the family decided to go to the United States, where some of Nancy's family had already settled. She and their children sailed in September 1804, and soon after, Da Ponte followed them.

### Bringing Classical Culture to America

In June 1805, at the age of 56, Lorenzo Da Ponte crossed the ocean, and disembarked at Philadelphia and joyously rejoined his family, who had relocated to New York. He carried

just a few books and some personal belongings, along with a vast knowledge of Europe's Classical culture and literature, which he was ready to disseminate through the New World like intellectual seeds ready for planting. Cultivating these seeds became his life's mission, both to enrich American culture with the beauty of Dante and the Italian language-culture, and to develop others who would be inspired by the Muses to keep the poetic art alive for posterity.

Da Ponte was an anti-sophist, Classical thinker, and part of the transatlantic American republican conspiracy, from his early days in Venice, to his work with Mozart and the republican circles, to his 33 years in the U.S.A. (1805-38). He was neither a Casanova libertine, nor a Rousseauvian, but rather, a scientific thinker, trained in astronomy, medicine, history, language, and the arts, who loved his culture and both his countries with an indefatigable passion to defend the Classical tradition of Judeo-Christian civilization against its numerous adversaries. He was an Italian-American, having become a U.S. citizen in 1828, "making it possible for him to express his opinions freely on any subject he chose."

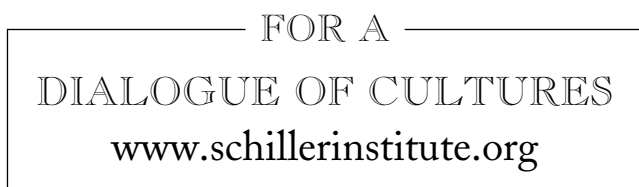
Da Ponte taught more than 2,500 students, and single-handedly filled libraries with thousands of volumes of Latin and Greek Classics and works of ancient and contemporary Italian authors. He spread his books also through Mexico; he catalogued the books and described them (from his memory, as these were the first such reference books), such that librarians from all over the country could begin to order books in Italian.

The American chapter of Da Ponte's life is as full of yarns and tales from his days in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York, as was his exotic life in monarchical Europe. But more important than the events reported while Da Ponte was living in America, were those not reported! The author of the "American Elegies" of 1776 and the librettist of *The Marriage of Figaro* in 1786, did not likely retire from the political scene when he came to America. In fact, he saw no distinction between scientific, poetical, and political work, such that what he left in his *Memoirs* and letters as footprints for us to follow, indicates that we yet have much to uncover about his work in the United States.

For example, a portrait of Ponte was painted by Samuel Morse, the inventor of the telegraph, although there is no mention anywhere that their orbits ever crossed paths.

When Da Ponte first arrived in the country, he followed the advice of his father-in-law, and invested in a grocery store:

Let anyone who has a sense of humor imagine how I laughed at myself whenever my poetical hand was obliged to weigh two ounces of tea or to measure half a yard of "pigtail" for a cobbler or a teamster, or to pour for him a three-cent "morning dram" which, of course, had nothing in common with my other dramas, *Una Cosa Rara* or *Le Nozze di Figaro* for instance.



A few months later a yellow-fever epidemic broke out, and the family moved to Elizabeth, New Jersey, where he discovered that, to his dismay, even in America there are unscrupulous types in business, so when calm returned to New York, so did the extended Da Ponte family.

## New York in 1807

The family returned to New York in 1807, which is when Da Ponte met Clement C. Moore (1779-1863) in Riley's bookstore, where they began a lifelong friendship. Moore was a scholar of Greek and Hebrew, and later the founder of the General Theological Seminary and a trustee of Columbia College, but who is best known today as the author of "The Night Before Christmas," which he wrote for his children. The editor of Da Ponte's *Memoirs* (Livingston, 1929) wrote:

There is no doubt that this was an important moment for the American mind. Da Ponte made Europe, poetry, painting, music, the artistic spirit, classical lore, a creative classical education, live for many important Americans as no-one, I venture, had done before. . . . And his classical scholarship, his competence as a creative Latinist, dazzled quite as much as his fame as an Italian poet. . . . It was not so much Da Ponte, as Da Ponte and his setting—the cultural atmosphere of his home—that survived in his children and thereafter. . . . It happened to me thrice, a near century after Da Ponte's death, to hear some New Yorker boast, not quite knowing the significance of the words, that his grandmother, or his mother "studied with Da Ponte."

Indeed, when Moore met Da Ponte, hope that he might learn to read Dante in the original was kindled; after discovering that the poet not only had heard of, but had met Metastasio, and had known Mozart personally, and more, that he had visited the places that Clement and his cousin Nathaniel and others had only talked of, he invited the old European to meet his father, Bishop Benjamin Moore. Bishop Moore was an Episcopal priest, later Bishop of New York, a professor and president of Columbia College, and the person who officiated at the inauguration of President George Washington, and administered last rites to Alexander Hamilton after his fatal duel with Aaron Burr.

The Bishop was dazzled by the poet's mastery of Hebrew and Latin, his vast knowledge of Roman and Vulgate scripture, and his poetic ability. Here was a man who also knew Virgil, Horace, and other Latin authors by heart, as well as Homer and other Greeks. Here in New York City was the man who had written the words for Mozart's operas! Mrs. Da Ponte was also a hit with this society crowd, and besides introducing Italian cuisine, Nancy spoke French, German, Italian, Dutch, and Spanish, and could discuss music and literature as well as her husband.

Clement Moore became Da Ponte's student and lifelong friend, and soon assisted him in setting up his Manhattan Academy for Young Gentleman and Nancy's Manhattan School for Young Ladies, where languages, music, and the sciences were taught. In March of 1807, Da Ponte began his *Conversazione*, the first of which he published with his *Storia compendiosa della vita di Lorenzo Da Ponte*. This little book, published by Riley, included the poems and dialogues recited and translated by his first Italian class, which included Clement and Nathaniel Moore, and John MacVickar, among others. Contributions included a poetic translation of the arietta "Voi che sapete," sonnets of Dante and Petrarch, other Da Ponte poems, a dialogue called "The Two Brothers," and a translation of a Metastasio poem (which Mozart had set as a trio) into English and French.

From 1807 through 1811, the Da Pontes continued to be in the center of New York society; they held cultural evenings in their home with poetry, socialized with some of New York's leading families: the Livingstons (with whom Da Ponte maintained a warm friendship), the Hamiltons, the Duers, Ogilvies, the Verplancks, and others. Da Ponte began teaching a number of students, began working on importing Italian-language books, and also set up a distilling business. But in 1811, when the distilling business ran into trouble, Nancy's family invited the Da Pontes to join them in what they described as an idyllic situation in Sunbury, Pennsylvania, and the family left New York and moved west.

## Pennsylvania, 1811-18

Facts and figures are voluminous about Da Ponte's debts and finances, his business acumen, and family feuds, especially around his move from New York to Sunbury, but little else of substance is presented. He stayed in Northumberland County, where his wife's family, the Grahls and the Niccolinis, had settled earlier. His neighbors included the family of Joseph Priestly, relatives of Benjamin Rush, and other prominent families with whom the Da Pontes socialized. These families shared in the education of their children; he and Nancy established a music school where they taught language; and his children, now five of them, were tutored by some of the parents of his students. In 1814, he built a large three-story residence, and he was so successful in business that he became the second-biggest taxpayer in the county.

Again, there is much to be investigated, as one can hardly imagine that during the years in Sunbury, the poet was not involved at all in any political or world affairs. As a merchant, he made 72 trips between Philadelphia and Sunbury, in seven years, and though he divulges very little about his activities, he mentions two friends, Dr. Physick and Dr. Benjamin Smith Barton, fathers of American surgery and medicine, who were both active members in the Philadelphia branch of the American Philosophical Society, founded by Benjamin Franklin.

(Latin was the language of medicine in those times, which Da Ponte had studied with some of the Maganagi circle as a young man in Italy.) He often spoke of the many pleasant hours he spent in conversation with eminent scientists and philosophers.

Another Philadelphia friend and associate of Da Ponte, member of the American Philosophical Society, and of James Fenimore Cooper's Bread and Cheese Club (a literary-philosophical-political society), was American System fighter Charles Jared Ingersoll (1782-1862), a Pennsylvania Congressman and U.S. Attorney, who was instrumental in bringing the German economist Friedrich List to Pennsylvania. Da Ponte's son Joseph apprenticed in Ingersoll's law office, until the young man's early death from consumption in 1821. Philadelphia was a center of political activity during the War of 1812, and also throughout the teens, with people like economist Mathew Carey, who was elected to the American Philosophical Society in 1822, writing pamphlets and organizing politically. Carey was also a publisher and a bookseller.

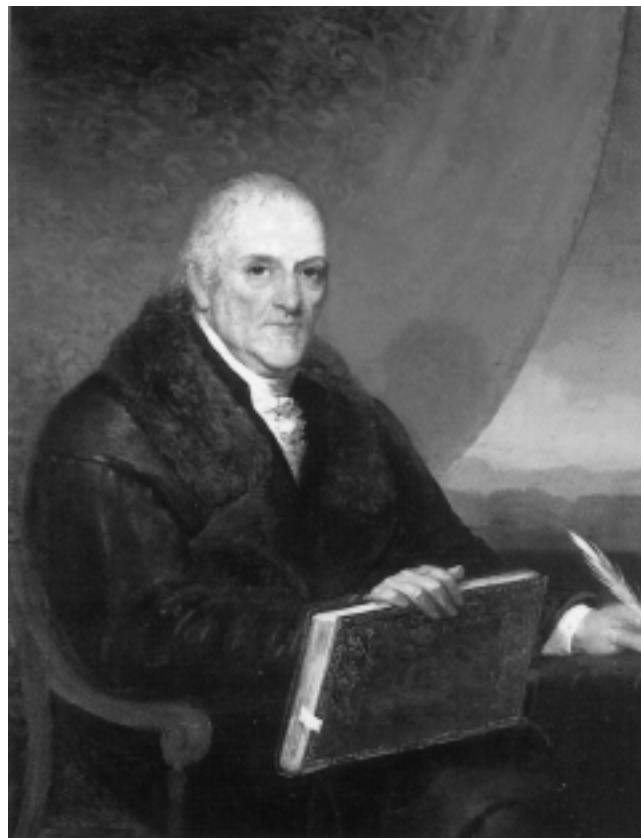
### New York, 1819-1838

Da Ponte was happy to leave Sunbury in 1818, and, after a short stay in Philadelphia, he was invited in 1819 to return to New York and teach at Columbia College, by Clement Moore, by then a leading professor of Greek and Oriental Studies there. The Da Pontes' five children all benefitted from the Classical scientific education they received. They were all fluent in many languages, and helped with translations, as well as with the family businesses. His children were Louisa (1798-1823); Fanny (1799-1841); Joseph (1800-21); Lorenzo L. (1804-40); and Carlo (1806-?).

Moore continued to encourage Da Ponte's teaching, and also his bookselling and other literary activities.

In New York, Da Ponte inaugurated a series of lectures on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the which introduced that divine poet to an American public for the first time, creating a surge of interest in the Italian language and the Renaissance. Some of the lectures were published in the *New York Review and Athenaeum Magazine*.

In 1819, he published his *Extract from the Life of Lorenzo Da Ponte, with the History of the several Dramas written by him, including "Figaro," "Don Giovanni," and "The School for Lovers," with music of Mozart*. This was a reply to an article about the London King's Theater productions in the March 1819 *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, which was nothing more than a running commentary on the actors and singers in the Italian theater, much of it derogatory. In discussing *Don Giovanni* of Mozart, Da Ponte took umbrage at the deliberate omission of any mention of his name as the librettist, and took the occasion to publish this beautiful treatise which covers poetry, libretto writing, and some of his own history, with the text in both Italian and in English. He included the *Blackwood's* article itself, in Italian as well as



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*Da Ponte at Columbia College (now Columbia University) in New York City, where he was the first professor of Italian. He sold his library of Italian literature—some 26,000 volumes—to Columbia, forming the core of its collection to this day.*

English, and an appendix, mentioned above, with wonderful samples of his libretto arias, transformed from the original French prose, and also Clement Moore's translation of the arietta "*Voi che sapete*."

By 1821, he and Nancy founded the boarding school at his house for students to join his own children and friends in a real Classical education. That year however, the Da Pontes suffered a devastating loss with the death of Joseph, their talented son who was apprenticing with Charles Jared Ingersoll. Joseph returned from Philadelphia and died soon after from tuberculosis, which was not diagnosed then. Da Ponte went to the home of his dear friend John R. Livingston to mourn—a house where he often spent his Summers. The Livingston family had been active in political and scientific life since the American Revolution, and John's brother was a Congressman. John R. Livingston, whose daughters Da Ponte had tutored, had escorted George Washington at that President's inauguration. He worked with Robert Fulton and the steamship business. Da Ponte worked on translations there, and got back to work.

By 1823, at Columbia College, Da Ponte began publishing his *Memoirs*. They were first published as a small essay in 1807, and then in the *Extract* in 1819. He published them serially, as a three-volume work, which he found most useful in teaching his students Italian. (He revised them through the last version in 1830.) He was saddened by the death of his oldest daughter Louisa in 1823, but continued on, writing a history of Italian literature. He created a catalogue with lists of his own books, and he and his son Carlo wrote the book descriptions.

Da Ponte was adamant in his defense of the culture, language, and history of Italy, especially in the face of prejudices arising in the context of Italian immigration to New York City in 1820s. His biting debate with the young historian Prescott in 1824 in the *North American Review* was to defend the importance of the Italian influence in literature.

He was the teacher and associate of a number of leading American System political figures, many of whom were involved in the 1824 Presidential campaign of John Quincy Adams and the New York Bread and Cheese Club of James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, and Fitz-Greene Halleck. (One may imagine that Cooper's book *The Bravo* may have been informed by some of the Da Ponte's intimate, first-hand knowledge of Venetian methods.) Congressman Gulian Verplanck boarded and studied with Da Ponte for years, and as a Congressman he arranged the first bulk purchase of books from Da Ponte for the Library of the Congress.

As the Erie Canal opened in 1825, there was a sense of optimism and growth, with the American System developments under President John Quincy Adams.

Columbia College in 1825 established the first chair for Italian literature, and Da Ponte became its first professor. He sold his library of Italian literature—comprising some 26,000 volumes—to Columbia. He also established an Italian library (with 600 volumes) within the New York Public Library. Both remain to this day the cores of their collections of Italian poetry and other literature.

Manuel Garcia and his opera troupe came to New York, via London, to perform Rossini's opera *The Barber of Seville*. It was in that late 1825 performance that Garcia's young daughter, the later famous Maria Malibran, made her debut.

Inspired by the success of the opera, by May 1826, Da Ponte had organized the first production of *Don Giovanni* in America. He personally raised the funds, organized the management, and located and recruited one of the singers! James Fenimore Cooper and other celebrated New Yorkers were in attendance, reportedly seated prominently in the front row.

Da Ponte appreciated Rossini, but also enjoyed the knowledge, as recounted in his *Memoirs*, that there was an order of magnitude of difference between the Rossini operas and *Don Giovanni*. He describes a patron at the opera who asked to be awakened to hear certain arias in the Rossini. When Da Ponte,

whose identity was unknown to the patron, sat by him again at the performance of *Don Giovanni*, Da Ponte asked if he wished to be awakened at a certain point in the opera; the patron replied, absolutely not! He said he could not sleep at all during this performance, nor after it, either!

In 1828, Da Ponte became an American citizen, sponsored by his son Lorenzo L. This was not mentioned in the *Memoirs*, but Da Ponte told his friend Rosetti in Italy in an 1829 letter, that this would enable him to speak more freely. New York was going through many changes, technological, political, and social. Sojourner Truth, the former slave and abolitionist leader, lectured in New York that year; the state legislature abolished slavery; and there was a Presidential election. Da Ponte continued his teaching, and donated a huge number of books to the New York Society Library, which were available for his students to consult at any time.

Nancy, his beloved wife and partner since 1792, passed away in 1831, after a short and unexpected illness. She was much younger than Da Ponte, in her 60s, and the poet was devastated, but tried to express his sense of loss in the 18 sonnets he composed in her honor.

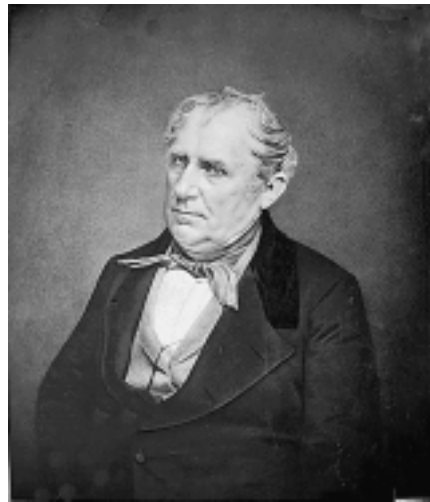
The next year, he brought the Italian opera company of Giacomo Montessoro to perform in New York and Philadelphia. They performed Rossini and Bellini operas, among others. And in 1833 (when he was 84 years old!), Da Ponte financed with his own funds and with a large sum he raised for the construction of New York's first opera house, which he managed and promoted, with Count Chevalier Rivafinoli. It went through management shuffles and later burned down, much to the poet's dismay, but laid the foundation for a permanent opera presence there, which was reinvigorated in the 1860s.

In the 1830s, New Yorkers had seen the opening of the Erie Canal, major technological innovations, the American System, commerce, and opera. There had also been epidemics and financial problems, and with the advent of the Jacksonian era, scandals were brewing as part of political attacks (against the Livingstons and others). In contrast to the "aristocratic" opera in foreign language, popular culture was moving in. By 1832, four years after his first performance in Louisville, Kentucky, Thomas "Daddy" Rice, as "Jumpin' Jim Crow," was one of the highest paid entertainers in America. Rice, the white entertainer who painted his face black with burnt cork, dressed as a slave, limped like a cripple, sang and danced, jumped and turned. Throughout the 1830s in New York and elsewhere, the racist caricature of the "shiftless Negro" developed into a prominent form of "entertainment." Sheet music was sold to the public, and these shows were booked in "better" theaters, like those which had previously booked Shakespeare.

It was this degradation of culture which Da Ponte was involved in fighting, as were leading American patriots. What Americans know today as "Jim Crow," the set of racist norms



Library of Congress



National Archives/Mathew Brady



Library of Congress

During his decades in the United States, Lorenzo Da Ponte became part of a circle of American System proponents, including such notables as (left to right) inventor/artist Samuel Morse, author James Fenimore Cooper, and Congressman Gulian Verplanck.

and laws enacted in the late 19th Century to deny African-Americans their rights as American citizens, was named for the racist stereotype introduced in the theater. The oligarchy has always understood the power of cultural warfare, and uses it to effect policy changes.

In the 1830s, Da Ponte, even with his extensive scientific, cultural, and political network, may have seen himself as the last of a dying breed of scholars, and was determined not to allow that quality of creative thinking, which enabled Dante, Franklin, or Mozart to create such sublime works, to be extinguished. Although his opera house project failed, he continued to teach, publish, and organize for the Classical idea in America. Since his *Memoirs*, covering the period after 1830 no longer exist, there is much yet to discover from letters and other sources.

His correspondence with political figures around the 1830s Italian Risorgimento, including his oldest and dearest friend Michele Colombo, has not been translated into English yet. It was Colombo who invoked the name and ideal of Benjamin Franklin in Italy, using *Povero Ricardo* (Poor Richard) to mobilize his own countrymen in the 1830s. Da Ponte also corresponded with the poet Felice Romani, who was a friend of the patriotic poet Ugo Foscoli. Da Ponte had met the young Foscoli years earlier in Italy, and spoke highly of him. Romani travelled throughout Europe and then settled in Milan, where he worked with Italian patriots such as Foscolo and Monti. Romani wrote librettos for Vincenzo Bellini, including *Norma*, *Il Pirata*, *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*, *La Sonnambula*; and for Gioacchino Rossini, *Il Turco in Italia*; Gaetano Donizetti, *Anna Bolena* and *L'elisir d'amore*; and Giuseppe Verdi, *Un Giorno di regno, or il finto Stanislao*. One can only imagine Da Ponte's input into what developed as the golden

age of *bel canto* in Italy, directly linking Mozart to Verdi. (Did the direct connection from Mozart to Verdi go through New York?!)

### Da Ponte's American Circle

Da Ponte continued writing and publishing his *Memoirs*, the last one published in 1830. He had apparently composed a final section of it, which we are told was destroyed because it contained attacks on Nancy's family in Sunbury. He had often referenced some tension between them over financial and business decisions, but that may not have been the real reason. What interesting window might the world have today, on the insight on the various events in the music and politics, were those pages not destroyed? But he did leave us with this:

Now will my patient reader listen to me for a few moments. In the first 3 parts of my *Memoirs*, the cities in which I lived, the character of the posts I held, the distinguished individuals with whom I had to deal and a certain play of Fortune that seemed bent on subjecting me to the extremest test of her capricious power, supplied me with ample and excellent material wherewith to interest and entertain my reader. The country I have been inhabiting for more than 5 *Lustra* past, yields me no such adventures. I am therefore in the situation of a preceptor of botany traveling about with pupils to instruct them in that science; and who, after showing them the attributes and virtues of trees, plants and flowers, must now pass through desert lands or cross barren mountains, and in order not to waste time, discusses the properties of the shrubs and brambles he has at hand.

Living as I am here in America, I can only write of domestic affairs, and of those events and cares of civic life in which I have been and still am, if not the protagonist of the tragic-comedy, at least one of the leading actors. From all such, nevertheless, a wise reader may learn something useful; the person with the eye to see the doctrine that is hidden under the verses, may learn the rules of good living both from the precepts of Socrates or Plato, and from the child's tales of Aesop. Many writers . . . maintain that more may be learned from the reading of some private "Life" than from that of many histories of peoples and nations.

Da Ponte's long-time friends included many in the circles of Columbia College, including Dr. John W. Francis, who was by his side in his last days as the poet translated and recited for him, which, as Francis said, was to show him that his mind was still sharp. Dr. Francis was the medical doctor for Edgar Allan Poe, as well as for some of the U.S. Presidents, and he was a founder and elected associate of numerous medical and scientific associations abroad as well as in the United States; he was also a founder of Rutgers Medical School. His other endeavors included the New York Historical Society.

Two of the most beloved people in Da Ponte's life, and his closest collaborators, were his son Lorenzo L, and his son-in-law, astronomer and physician Dr. Henry J. Anderson, Fanny's second husband.

Lorenzo L. (1804-40), married to Cornelia Durant, a niece of President Monroe, was a professor of Italian literature at the University of the City of New York, now New York University, as well as at a small Washington College, where he taught French, Spanish, and Italian, as well as History and Literature. He held teaching posts elsewhere, and was known as a Greek scholar.

He wrote histories, including the 1833 *History of the Florentine Republic and of the Age and Rule of the Medici*. In the preface, he proclaimed that it was to be the first volume of a projected *New American Library of History*, which would chronicle the history of the world from a patriotic Yankee point of view. According to a Washington College historian, Lorenzo L. planned that, "unlike the works of British historians," who he said were tainted with "opinions and doctrines the reverse of those which, as Americans, we should desire our children to imbibe," his history books would show a healthy respect for democratic traditions.

Like his father, he was remembered for his teaching. A former student remarked, "He taught us English literature in such a successful manner that we regarded that study merely as a recreation."

Dr. Henry J. Anderson (1799-1875) was one of the first boarders at the Da Ponte home in 1821, and married Fanny Da Ponte in 1831. Anderson graduated in medicine from Columbia, and devoted his leisure time to mathematics. In 1825,

he was appointed professor of mathematics and astronomy at Columbia College. In 1826, he was editor, along with William Cullen Bryant and Robert Charles Sands, of the short-lived, monthly literary magazine *The New York Review and Aethnaeum Magazine*, which featured book reviews and essays on science, literature, and the arts, as well as poetry. Contributors included Fitz-Greene Halleck, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Richard Henry Dana, and others.

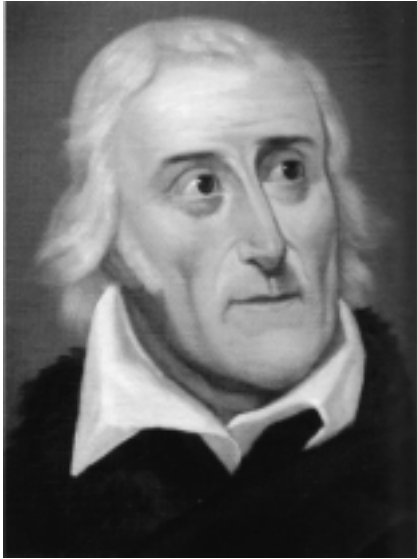
In 1840-41, he and Fanny went to Italy and then Paris, hoping to restore Fanny's health. In Paris, he worked closely with the anti-Newtonian astronomer François Arago, who, together with Carl Friedrich Gauss and Alexander Dallas Bache, Franklin's grandson, organized the *Magnetische Verein* (Magnetic Association). After Fannie died in 1841, Anderson travelled in Europe and Asia on scientific missions, including the geological survey of the Dead Sea in 1847, for which he wrote the official report for the U.S. government. By the 1850s, he was active in the aforementioned New York Bread and Cheese Club, and until his death he was active in international scientific missions. In 1874, he joined as a volunteer the American scientific expedition sent out to observe the transit of Venus in Australia at his own expense. On his return, he visited India, but died while exploring the Himalayas.

Other literary figures who were regulars in the Da Ponte home were writer Samuel Ward, Jr., and his daughter, Julia Ward Howe, composer of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic"; Italian emigrés such as the music teacher and composer Bagioli; and of course his many students over the years. Through these students and friends, the Da Pontes intersected many social, literary, and political orbits. Probably those closest to him at the end of his life, were the pallbearers at his funeral:

Clement C. Moore, mentioned above as Da Ponte's first Italian student and lifelong friend, who met Da Ponte in 1807, and brought him into academic and society circles in New York.

Gulian Verplanck, a friend of Clement Moore, professor at the Theological Seminary; New York Congressman from 1825 to 1833; and House Ways and Means Chairman from 1831 to 1833. He was an early boarding student of Da Ponte, wrote on Shakespeare, and was a member of the Bread and Cheese Club. Re-elected as a Jacksonian democrat, Verplanck drew Andrew Jackson's ire when he would not follow the President's opposition to the rechartering of the Second Bank of the United States, which he said was sound and stable, findings contrary to those Jackson wanted. Verplanck's defiance cost him favor with the Administration, and his career at the Federal level ended in 1833.

Dr. Macneven, an Irish-American medical doctor, was also known as "the father of American chemistry." He was an associate of Drs. Hossak, Francis, Dr. Physick, and Mott. He was a prominent activist for the uplifting of Irish-Americans, and had been a political prisoner from 1798-1802 in



*A portrait of Da Ponte in old age, from a miniature by Nathaniel Rogers. His last years were saddened by the decline of American culture around him, yet he never gave up his efforts to uplift the population with beauty.*

Dublin. He had been a medical student in Vienna in 1784, and may have known Da Ponte there. In New York in the late 1830s, he was an important social activist in the Catholic Church.

Lorenzo Da Ponte lived until 1838, and although some of his later writings reflect sadness at the treatment he had received from various quarters, especially after the failure of the opera house in 1836 due to some bad business manipulations by his partners, the Panic of 1837, and the cultural decline all around him in New York, he kept at it. He moved in with his son Lorenzo L. and daughter-in-law, where Cornelia continued the boarding school after the death of Nancy in 1831. Da Ponte continued to teach and write to his friends.

He was adamant that the legacy of the Classical art he fought for not be lost, and that his work, and that of the immortal Mozart, not be forgotten in the new world:

I believe that my heart is made of a different stuff from that of other men. A noble act, generous, benevolent, blinds me. I am like a soldier who, spurred by the longing for glory, rushes against the mouth of the cannon; like an ardent lover who flings himself into the arms of a woman who torments him. The hope of giving, *post funera*, immortality to my name, and of leaving to a nation which I revere a memory of me which will not be ignoble; and the sweet allurements of arousing feelings of gratitude and goodwill in those who follow an art that was not disgraced by my pen; the desire to awaken love for the beautiful language which I brought to America, and love too for our ravishing music; longing to see once again on the American stage some of the children of my youthful inspiration, which are remembered in the theaters of the Thames, the Danube and the Elbe; and finally, a sweet presentiment of joy,

encouragement and honor, based on the integrity of my actions, the reliability of my promises and the happy success of a well-organized spectacle, were the powerful spurs which goaded me to this delightful undertaking, and from which nothing, so far, has succeeded in deterring me. I dreamt of roses and laurels, but from the roses I had only thorns and from the laurels bitterness! So goes the world!

In this 250th year after Mozart's birth, new publications and celebrations are welcome, to celebrate the creative output of the composer and his librettist. Those of us engaged in today's battle against sophistry and oligarchism can benefit greatly by knowing more about the great minds who shaped our civilization and culture. But a more accurate title for such a new biography might be *Lorenzo Da Ponte, Classical Scholar, Poet and Librettist; Enemy of Venice, Friend of Mozart and the American System, and the Midwife of Dante in America*.

### For Further Reading

#### Books:

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- Volkmar Braunberghrens, *Mozart in Vienna* (Harper Perennial: 1991)
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- Dr. John Wakefield Francis, *Old New York, or Reminiscences of the Past Sixty Years* (New York: New York Historical Society, 1857), on the Internet in "The Making of America Series."
- Sheila Hodges, *Lorenzo Da Ponte, the Life and Times of Mozart's Librettist* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002)
- Antonio Pace, ed., *Benjamin Franklin and Italy: Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society* (American Philosophical Society: 1958)
- Lorenzo Da Ponte, *Memoirs of Lorenzo Da Ponte*, edited and annotated by Arthur Livingston (J.P. Lippincott Co.: 1929; 1959 reprint)
- Lorenzo Da Ponte, *An extract from the life of Lorenzo Da Ponte: with the history of several dramas written by him, and among others, Il Figaro, Il Don Giovanni, & La scola degli amanti, set to music by Mozart* (New York: 1819).
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