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# News

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## NEW CD OF CLASSICAL OPERA ARIAS EVOKES MOZART-ERA DIVAS

### Unique Program Profiles Five Prima Donnas of late-18th Century Vienna

#### Eight World Premieres of Works by Mozart and Others

Soprano Patrice Michaels and the period-instrument Classical Arts Orchestra, conducted by Stephen Alltop, evoke the prima donnas of Mozart's Vienna on a unique new CD, *Divas of Mozart's Day*, from Cedille Records (CDR 90000 064).

The program, based on recent research by music historian Dorothea Link of the University of Georgia, spotlights the most celebrated female singers of late-eighteenth century Vienna through music tailored to their talents by Mozart, Salieri, Cimarosa, Martín y Soler, Vincenzo Righini, and Stephen Storace.

Many of the CD's 13 selections, which include 11 arias and two rarely performed duets, are world-premiere recordings. The works, all from the decade 1781-1790, are grouped according to the singers they were written for, rather than by composer, to fashion a vocal profile for each legendary diva.

Ms. Michaels and the Chicago-based orchestra perform pieces written for five fabled divas: Catarina Cavalieri, the first Constanze in *The Abduction from the Seraglio*; Nancy Storace, the first Susanna in *The Marriage of Figaro*; Adriana Ferrarese del Bene, the original Fiordiligi in *Così fan tutte*; Luisa Laschi Mombelli, who created the Countess in *The Marriage of Figaro*, and Louise Villeneuve, the first Dorabella in *Così fan tutte*.

A native of Vienna, Cavalieri (1755-1801) was renowned for her *fioratura* abilities. "She could deliver a torturously demanding bravura aria with every note in place," according to the CD notes by Prof. Link. Mozart wrote a great deal of memorable music for Cavalieri. In a letter to his father, Mozart spoke of her "agile throat."

London-born Storace (1765-1817) possessed all the special qualities of a gifted comic singer: strong acting skills, an engaging stage personality, and fine musicianship. Viennese audiences adored her in lighter, simpler repertoire, and she later enjoyed a long and successful career in English comic opera.

Ferrarese (c.1760-after 1804) studied in Venice and performed in London before arriving in Vienna, where she made her reputation singing serious roles in *opera buffa*. The publication *Rapport von Wien* reported, “She has in addition to an unbelievable high register a striking low register and connoisseurs of music claim that in living memory no such voice has sounded within Vienna’s walls.”

Laschi (1763-c. 1789) came to Vienna in 1784. On September 25 of that year, the *Wiener Kronic* reported, “She has a beautiful clear voice . . . she is very musical, sings with more expression than the usual opera singers and has a beautiful figure!” According to Prof. Link, “she performed an extraordinarily wide range of roles, defying classification as a singer.”

Villeneuve (fl. 1771-1799) appears to have started her career as a ballet dancer in Vienna. By 1789, her singing career had reached the point where she successfully replaced Laschi in Martín’s *L’arbore di Diana* by virtue of “her charming appearance, her sensitive and expressive acting and her artful, beautiful singing,” (*Wiener Zeitung*).

The program offers two newly discovered—and never-before recorded—accompanied recitatives by Mozart, plus the recorded premieres of six complete pieces (by Salieri, Martín y Soler, Righini, and Stephen Storace). Curiously, Mozart wrote the accompanied recitative “No caro, fa coraggio” to a Cimarosa insertion aria for an opera by Pietro Gugliemi, *The Witty Quaker* (1790). Mozart’s accompanied recitative to the aria “Vado, ma Dove?” is a celebrated find whose discovery has attracted wide notice.

Also of special interest is the aria “Al desio di chi t’adora,” which Mozart wrote for the 1789 revival of *Figaro* (in which Ferrarese replaced Storace as Susanna). Opera aficionados might recall the 1998 falling out between the Metropolitan Opera and *Figaro* director Jonathan Miller, who protested Cecilia Bartoli’s insistence on substituting this and another aria from the revival for the originals.

Ms. Michaels, whom *The New Yorker* has called “a formidable interpretative talent,” has concertized extensively and sung with opera companies throughout North America, including Lyric Opera of Chicago. This is her eleventh recording for Cedille.

In a review of last February’s concert presentation of *The Divas of Mozart’s Day*, staged at Northwestern University in advance of the recording sessions, *Chicago Tribune* critic Ted Shen wrote, “Michaels was in top form—her voice luminous, diction clear, and phrasing exquisite. She negotiated the octaves with deceptive ease and her acting was bewitching . . . [The] Classical Arts Orchestra . . . played with spirit and finesse.”

Bass-baritone Peter Van De Graaff joins Ms. Michaels in two duets, including a rarely heard piece Mozart wrote for the 1788 Vienna production of *Don Giovanni*.

That duet, “Restati qua...” between Zerlina and Leporello, written for Laschi, was “a highlight in an evening of many,” the *Chicago Tribune* reviewer wrote. “Michaels, fittingly coquettish, was teamed with ... Van De Graaff in a skit of utmost hilarity and expressive vocalism.”

Notably, the concert’s start was delayed for 20 minutes because of long lines at the ticket counter. In apologizing to the audience, the stage manager announced that the event had drawn the most walk-in traffic of any classical concert held during his years at the hall.

Advance press coverage had tagged *The Divas of Mozart's Day* as one of the week’s essential concerts, with the Pioneer Press awarding it “First Choice” among all the week’s arts and entertainment events in Chicago’s culture-rich northern suburbs.

The CD’s 28-page booklet includes biographical profiles of the five divas, notes on the musical selections, and complete aria texts in the original languages and English translations.

Cedille Records (pronounced say-DEE), dedicated to showcasing Chicago’s most noteworthy classical artists, is an arm of the nonprofit Chicago Classical Recording Foundation.

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*Divas of Mozart's Day*  
(Cedille Records CDR 90000 064)

Music of Mozart, Salieri, Martín y Soler, Cimarosa,  
Vincenzo Righini, and Stephen Storage

Patrice Michaels, soprano  
Classical Arts Orchestra, Stephen Alltop, conductor  
with Peter Van De Graaff, bass-baritone  
Based on a concept by musicologist Dorothea Link