

Patrice Michaels

“DIVAS OF MOZART'S DAY”

Arias by Mozart, Salieri, Cimarosa, Martín y Soler, Righini, Storace. Classical Arts Orchestra, Alltop. Texts and translations. Cedille CDR 90000064

The divas of Mozart's day didn't sing Fiordiligi one week and the Marschallin the next, with a couple of Messiahs at Christmastime. What they sang was fresh and new, composed or altered just for them. Highlighting five singers active in late eighteenth-century Vienna, Patrice Michaels, an intelligent soprano who has made something of a specialty digging up off-beat repertoire, teamed up with a musical musicologist, Mozart specialist Dorothea Link, to explore the particular technical and musical capabilities of these divas, as revealed in their tailor-made repertoire. The result is a delightful slice of musical life, performed with authority and panache, with period details. Catarina Cavalieri, a Viennese soprano with prodigious technique, created for Mozart the roles of Constanze in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* and Mlle. Silberklang in *Der Schauspieldirektor*. She also inspired him to write “Mi tradi” for her Donna Elvira in the Viennese revival of *Don Giovanni* and to spruce up the Countess's “Dove sono” for the revival of *Le nozze di Figaro*. That material alone would be enough for half a CD, but Michaels doesn't sing any of it; instead she has found other, little-known arias from Cavalieri's repertoire: a high-lying piece from Mozart's oratorio *Davidde penitente*, an excerpt by Vincenzo Righini and the humorously bombastic “Wenn dem Adler” from Salieri's *Der Rauchfangkehrer*, with Constanze-like scales and fioritura covering three octaves, which Michaels negotiates fearlessly. The charming and versatile Anglo-Italian Nancy Storace (the first Susanna) inspired Mozart's lengthy concert aria, “Ch'io mi scordi di te,” (with showy piano solo fashioned by the composer for himself, and expertly played here by conductor Stephen Alltop); Michaels brings warmth and grace, along with a sure sense of phrasing, to this and to three other excerpts from Storace's repertoire: a lilting aria from Martín y Soler's *Una cosa rara*, a cute excerpt from Salieri's *La Grotta di Trofonio* and the light-hearted “How Mistaken is the Lover” by Storace's composer brother Stephen. The original Fiordiligi, Adriana Ferrarese del Bene, was a stand-and-sing actress who excelled at grand and formal music; the rondo “Sola e mesta” from Salieri's *La cifra* is clearly a model for Fiordiligi's “Per pietà,” and when the diva sang Susanna (nowadays this is not even considered the

same Fach) in the Vienna revival of Figaro, Mozart replaced “Deh vieni” with the stiff and protracted rondo, “Al desio di chi t'adora.” Luisa Laschi Mombelli, the first Countess, sang Zerlina in the Vienna revival of *Don Giovanni* (again breaking today's Fach rules). The duet Mozart fashioned for Leporello and this Zerlina, “Per queste tue manine,” is tossed off in lively fashion by Michaels and bass-baritone Peter Van De Graaff, while Martín y Soler's “Serenio raggio” is lovely in its simplicity and vocal control. Louise Villeneuve, who created the role of Dorabella in *Così fan tutte*, had commissioned from Cimarosa a rondo to insert into Guglielmi's *La quakera spiritosa* and from Mozart an aria to substitute in Martín y Soler's *Il burbero di buon core*. This piece, “Vado, ma dove?,” preceded by a newly discovered accompanied recitative, is one of the highlights of the disc, warmly and tenderly sung. More than half of the selections have never been recorded before and they give a real feel for the musical world in which Mozart was working. Excellent and stylish music-making from Michaels and the Chicago-based Classical Arts Orchestra, under Alltop, lend the disc more than purely archival interest.

— Judith Malafrente

