



REVIEW: BOOK

The Italian Opera Singers in Mozart's Vienna

Dorothea Link

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With her new book *The Italian Opera Singers in Mozart's Vienna*, Dorothea Link has perhaps reached the summit of her life's work: research into the singers for whom Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart composed his Da Ponte operas and into opera in Josephine Vienna. Throughout nearly five hundred pages she offers a remarkable wealth of information, well structured in chronological order. In the eight central chapters, 4 to 11, she describes the seasons of the court opera, from the reestablishment of opera buffa by Joseph II in 1783 to the first season under his brother and successor, Leopold II. This central story is preceded by three introductory chapters. They deal with the Viennese opera system, the contemporary classification of singers and their roles, and sources for the opera casts of the 1780s. In an epilogue, Link tells of the end of Josephine opera under Leopold II and summarizes her findings (chapter 12). Readers can immerse themselves in the two rich appendices following this chapter: ten complete role lists for the leading singers in Vienna, including their careers in Italy, London and elsewhere, as well as 'A Tale of Four Scores', which explains the insights to be gained from four particularly interesting Viennese opera manuscripts.

The book is nothing less than a story of the golden decade of Josephine opera. Just as John Rice told it from Salieri's perspective (*Antonio Salieri and Viennese Opera* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998)), or the great Mozart biographers from Mozart's point of view, Link tells this tale from the perspective of singers. In writing this story, the author offers the virtues of modern musicological methods and meticulous attention to detail. The sheer amount of information presented in this book is overwhelming, and although the plan of a chronological *parcours* through the seasons and opera productions is derived from Otto Michtner's well-known classic *Das alte Burgtheater als Opernbühne* (Vienna: Böhlau, 1970), the subject is treated much more thoroughly, on the basis of rigorous research. As Link never tires of pointing out Michtner's inaccuracies, a critical remark in turn should be permitted. In Michtner's book, the chronology of Viennese court opera is so consistently interspersed with cast lists and portraits that it is very easy to follow. Link, on the contrary, has chosen a very dense, continuous text, only occasionally broken up by a few musical examples and illustrations, which turns her book into a reading experience that is primarily for connoisseurs and researchers. It requires a high degree of concentration to follow the scholarly writing and reconstruction of all Viennese opera casts of the decade. However, anyone who has ever started researching singers of Mozart's time will follow this story with enthusiasm and admiration.

Since the opera season in Vienna usually began after Easter and ended in Lent, each of the central chapters deals with a double year, starting with chapter 4, 'Nancy Storace: The Italian Company, 1783–84', and continuing through to chapter 11, 'Adriana Ferrarese: Portents of Change, 1790–91'. Along similar lines, each chapter is devoted to the leading prima donna of the respective season, and

is indicative of Link's central thesis: that the success or failure of any Italian opera in Vienna depended mostly on the prima donna. The author would be the first to admit the significance of male buffa stars like Francesco Benucci, Stefano Mandini and Vincenzo Calvesi, of course. Indeed, Link has edited aria collections related to those three vital singers, published by A-R Editions in 2004, 2011 and 2015. And they are also assigned primary roles in her new book. However, she started that series of aria collections with *Arias for Nancy Storace, Mozart's First Susanna* (Middleton, WI: A-R Editions, 2002), and her intensive research into Anna Morichelli Bosello also focused her attention on Viennese prima donnas, a perspective she has now turned into the central narrative of her book.

According to Link, the prima donna always played the primary role in Vienna, or rather two *prime donne*. Starting with chapter 6, her second main thesis comes into play: the double-prima-donna system defined Viennese court opera under Joseph II. The emperor and Count Rosenberg, as his confidant in all questions relating to the theatre, consistently endeavoured to find two equally brilliant sopranos who could alternately take on the leading roles in the *opere buffe*. To borrow Link's words: 'it seems, then, that the Italian court opera knew to engage two prime donne from the start or, equally likely, learned the value of doing so from experience. It also seems that operas composed in Vienna took advantage of the presence of two prime donne in the company by featuring two prima-donna roles' (319–320). On the one hand, the alternation of the prima donna and the 'altra prima donna' guaranteed that a large number of new productions could be studied and rehearsed continuously while pieces were still being performed on stage. On the other hand, the double-prima-donna cast offered Viennese composers a unique artistic perspective: Antonio Salieri, Vicente Martín y Soler, Mozart, Joseph Weigl, Stephen Storace and many others were able to write operas in which they juxtaposed two almost equal female roles. One of these roles was of a serious character and the other one more comical – or, speaking in contemporary terms, one 'prima donna di mezzo carattere' and one 'prima buffa'.

In her chapters on Nancy Storace, Link describes all the highs and lows in the Viennese career of this classic prima buffa. In 1785 the overburdened Storace was finally joined by an 'altra prima donna': first Celeste Coltellini, then Luisa Laschi. It becomes clear that Link's sympathies lie with Laschi, whose importance and versatility she profiles much more than earlier scholars have done. She furthermore uses the years leading up to the premiere of *Le nozze di Figaro* – for which Storace created the first Susanna – to introduce the male protagonists of the Viennese ensemble and to analyse operas imported from Italy. By working out the ticket revenue for each individual performance, this study offers a reliable account of the success and failure of each opera production. Although many factors might have influenced public interest in a certain opera, Link argues that the one central determining element was the cast of singers, and especially the two *prime donne*.

Link also demonstrates that the Italian performers could not do without the support of the German singers, especially in the early years 1783–1785, but also in the case of a later production like the Viennese version of *Don Giovanni* (1788). Rather than emphasizing the fierce competition between the Germans and Italians, as previous scholars have done, she instead paints a picture of productive coexistence. The author therefore also provides detailed vocal profiles and artistic biographies of Aloysia Lange, Caterina Cavalieri and Valentin Adamberger. Even Ludwig Fischer, the outstanding German bass of the era and Mozart's first Osmin, is compared to Benucci, the other great bass singer in Vienna. All of these profiles contribute to a wide and colourful panorama of dozens of singers, including also short-term visitors to Vienna like the tenors Giuseppe Viganoni or Giuseppe Calvesi, the celebrated castrato Luigi Marchesi and the prima donna Brigida Giorgi Banti.

Since Link is a scholar of both Morichelli Bosello and Martín y Soler, she uses a chapter for drawing a double portrait of the new prima donna and her favourite composer under the title 'Anna Morichelli Comes and Goes, 1787–88'. The chapter provides an enthralling read, which describes in gripping fashion the fatal consequences of the Turkish war and the sick emperor's

struggle on behalf of opera. The cryptic letters Joseph II sent from his military camp in the Balkans to Rosenberg concerning the choice of the new prima donna have often been analysed, but Link finally manages to unravel that puzzle. Ultimately, his missives led to the appointment of Adriana Ferrarese del Bene, the soprano from Udine, whom the emperor had heard in just one performance of Giuseppe Sarti's *Giulio Sabino*, together with the castrato Domenico Bedini, while in Trieste on 4 March 1788. Despite Joseph II's reservations, she came to Vienna and remained there until Easter 1791. Link dedicates two and a half chapters to Ferrarese, including detailed commentaries on the revival of *Le nozze di Figaro* and the first run of *Così fan tutte*.

Ferrarese might be taken as an example of a truth that Link herself states in the very last sentence of her final chapter: 'The wider the investigative net is cast, the better the singers can be understood' (322). In general, however, Link does not take into account details from the Italian careers of singers before they were active in Vienna. Thus she underestimates Ferrarese's status as a 'prima donna seria' in Italy with a repertoire of her own and a highly original approach to aria arrangements. Alongside Luigi Cherubini's *Giulio Sabino* and Angelo Tarchi's *Il conte di Saldagna*, there was a third opera seria newly written for her before coming to Vienna: *Nitteti*, Sebastiano Nasolini's opera debut, first performed in Trieste on 5 April 1788, and now lost (Carlo L. Curiel, *Il Teatro S. Pietro di Trieste 1690–1801* (Milan: Archetipografia di Milano, 1937), 212). Tarchi's *Il conte di Saldagna*, first performed by her at La Scala in summer 1787 alongside Luigi Marchesi, provided her not only with her highly successful first rondò for Vienna – 'A sol bramo, o mia speranza', which she had already sung in Genoa with an entirely altered text during the carnival of 1788 ('Quante pene in tal cimento', in G major instead of F major, Genoa, Conservatorio Niccolò Paganini, Fondo Antico NN. 321, fols 4r–5r) – but also with her first aria in Martín y Soler's *L'arbore di Diana*. Since Link dedicates several of her few musical examples to this as yet unidentified aria, it is important to consider its source: it was in fact Marchesi's first aria in *Il conte di Saldagna*, originally sung to the text 'Se chi son io non sai, all'opre mie lo chiedi' (see the Paris score in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, D-8950(1), fols 154r–171r). Similarly, Link could easily have identified Saul's daughter Micol as Ferrarese's role in Da Ponte's pasticcio oratorio *David* (Vienna, 1791), by taking into account the singer's earlier repertoire from London and Italy. Indeed, the duet 'Consola le tue pene' was originally written for her and Matteo Babbini in Cherubini's *Giulio Sabino* (Act 3 Scene 4), and later performed by her and Bedini as an insertion duet in the Florentine *Didone* pasticcio from October 1786. All these details point in the same direction: even in Vienna, Ferrarese thought of herself mainly as a 'prima donna seria', which she underlined by cleverly choosing insertion arias from her Italian repertoire.

Link's book would be even more revealing if she had dedicated more space and time to those Italian aspects of 'her' singers' careers. As with her aria collections as found in the second appendix, she has concentrated almost completely on Viennese repertoire, a 'one-sidedness' that is, on the other hand, the major virtue of her book. Thus Link is able ultimately to prove the vital importance of research into singers: even in Vienna, the very centre of the 'classical style', it is not possible to understand eighteenth-century operatic repertoire whether in general or in terms of individual works, without taking into account the singers behind the music.

Karl Böhmer is a native of Mainz, where he studied musicology, history and art history. Since the publication of his doctoral dissertation *W. A. Mozarts Idomeneo und die Tradition der Karnevalsopern in München* (Tutzing: Schneider, 1999) he has written books and articles on Handel in Rome, Alessandro Scarlatti's oratorios, operas by Mozart and his contemporaries, and Mozart singers, such as Domenico Bedini and Francesco Ceccarelli, among other topics. Böhmer has been the general manager of Villa Musica, a state foundation for chamber music based in Rhineland-Palatinate, for over thirty years, and he teaches at the Hochschule für Musik Mainz.