

Introduction

“[T]he success of an opera depends, FIRST OF ALL,
ON THE POET: that without a good poem an
entertainment cannot be perfectly dramatic ...”¹

When the author of these legendary lines thus exalted the role of the poet, he was primarily referring to himself, Lorenzo Da Ponte, one of the most important and renowned “artist figures” of late eighteenth-century theatre in Europe and the United States. Born Emanuele Conegliano in Ceneda (today called Vittorio Veneto), in the North of Italy on 10 March 1749, Da Ponte died in New York City on 17 August 1838 after a spectacularly productive life. During his remarkable life in which he moved from Venice to Gorizia, on to Vienna, Prague, London, and eventually as far from the city of his birth as Philadelphia and New York, the stage writer Da Ponte produced a large body of dramatic texts as well as poetry and prose, while simultaneously staging his own life and casting himself in a number of roles including libretto writer, theatre manager, translator, book dealer, publisher, printer, merchant, language teacher, and university professor.

In 1782–83 Emperor Joseph II appointed Da Ponte poet of Italian opera at the Vienna “Burgtheater,” thus ushering in what was probably the most successful period of theatrical production of Da Ponte’s life. In Vienna, Da Ponte wrote nineteen opera libretti, including what have until today remained his biggest successes, the operas which marked his collaboration with composer Wolfgang Amadé Mozart: *Le Nozze di Figaro*, première in Vienna on 1 May 1786; *Il dissoluto punito o sia Il D. Giovanni*, first performed in Prague on 29 October 1787; and *Così fan tutte o sia La scuola degli amanti*, introduced to audiences in Vienna on 26 January 1790. Throughout the years 1786–1791, Da Ponte’s works for the stage dominated the programme and made him the most influential representative of Italian opera in Vienna: during the 1790–91 season, for instance, no fewer than thirteen of eighteen works produced had been written by Da Ponte, accounting for a total of ninety-eight performances and five premières that season.² Subsequently, Da Ponte relocated to London, where he worked as a stage writer at the King’s Theatre on the Haymarket for several years until in 1805 he set out for America where he spent the remainder of his life. In New York and Philadelphia Da Ponte performed a tremendous feat by introducing the New World to the most significant theatrical art form of Old Europe: Italian opera.³

1 Lorenzo da Ponte, *Extract From The Life of Lorenzo Da Ponte*, New York: J. Gray & Co. 1819, p. 18.

2 Cf. Daniela Pillgrab’s contribution to this publication.

3 For Da Ponte’s biography cf. Wiebke Krohn, Johannes Schweitzer, “Lorenzo Da Ponte: Leben und Werk”, *Lorenzo Da Ponte: Aufbruch in die Neue Welt*. Ed. Werner Hanak for the Jewish

Not only did Da Ponte stage operas about fictional characters, but he also “staged” himself as a character in a mutable narrative. In America, Da Ponte wrote several “staged” autobiographies in which he re-arranged his own life, changing and suppressing in various editions details he considered delicate, unbecoming, or contentious, leaving it to scholars and historians to speculate about his intentions and to critique the implications and significance of Da Ponte’s self-censorship.

This issue of *Maske und Kothurn* is divided into three parts: the first explores philosophical and theoretical issues related to librettology, theatre and opera, the second section deals with fundamental research of theatre history, and the third part is concerned with Da Ponte’s autobiographies and the way in which he staged himself. Klaus Heinrich’s contribution, “Notes on Librettology,” opens the philosophical section with an essay on the concept of *librettology*, which he defines perspicaciously. Tracing the origins of modern libretti to theatres of antiquity, Heinrich proposes that librettology exposes and documents the emergence of modern anxieties about the role of the artist. In his second paper in this volume, “Notes on the History of Collecting,” Heinrich demonstrates the direct relationship between collecting – also a great passion of Da Ponte’s – and librettology. Da Ponte’s own library was extraordinary, yet in times of need he reluctantly parted with his beloved books, only to rebuild his collection as soon as he had recouped the financial means to do so. In his notes on the history of collecting Heinrich explores the intersections of the archaic activity of collecting the provisions necessary for survival, with the mental act of collecting one’s thoughts, and the concept of the collection as an institution dedicated to collating, documenting, and preserving artefacts.

In his paper, “Sharing Omnipotence Fantasies between the Emperor and his Librettist in the Times of Enlightened Absolutism,” Herbert Lachmayer reveals the eighteenth-century librettists’ role as producers of symbols at court whose work was vital for the “strategy of staging,” and indispensable for ceremonies. In this respect, Lorenzo Da Ponte was characteristic, as was his much-admired role model, Pietro Metastasio. Richard Heinrich links the philosopher Kant with the idea of rococo in his paper, “Daintiness and Rationality. Kant as the Philosopher of Rococo.” Heinrich pursues the concept of the rococo and proposes ways that rococo culture may be defined and applied to theatre and opera.

In the second part of the collection concerned with theatre history, Daniela Pillgrab sheds light on Da Ponte’s most productive period. In “Lorenzo Da Ponte’s Work for the Stage During his Time as a Librettist in Vienna,” Pillgrab presents for

Museum Vienna, on the occasion of the exhibition Lorenzo Da Ponte. Aufbruch in die Neue Welt. Jewish Museum Vienna: 22 March – 17 September 2006. pp. 177–186; Sheila Hodges, *Lorenzo Da Ponte, Ein abenteuerliches Leben*, Kassel a.o.: Bärenreiter 2005; Anthony Holden, *The Man Who Wrote Mozart*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2006; Rodney Bolt, *Lorenzo Da Ponte, The Adventures of Mozart’s Librettist in the Old and New Worlds*, London: Bloomsbury 2006.

the first time in such a succinct form, a compilation of the works for the stage dating from his time as a stage writer in Vienna, including an overview and complete list of performances of his stage works, and a history of the dissemination of Da Ponte's stage works to 1800 as evidenced by libretto prints. Much in Da Ponte's life remains unclear or defies verification beyond doubt. His collaboration with Giacomo Casanova, for instance, is the stuff of which legends are made. That Casanova wrote two alternative versions for scene IX in Act 2 of Da Ponte's *Don Giovanni* is certain, and in his paper, "The 'Dux Drafts'. Casanova's Contribution to Da Ponte's and Mozart's *Don Giovanni*," H. E. Weidinger situates these drafts in the history of the work and explores their dramaturgical implications.

The third part of the book brings together three highly informative texts which all focus on Lorenzo da Ponte's autobiographies. Much to the regret of scholars whose research would be facilitated if it were otherwise, Da Ponte's *Memorie* are not exclusively factual memoirs, but are a reflection of reality which is partly staged and is certainly highly embellished: in these memoirs, reality and theatricality merge. Johannes Schweitzer presents in "Lorenzo Da Ponte's Struggle against Oblivion. The poet's memoirs drawn up according to Giampaolo Zagonel's *Bibliografia* and complemented by an extended commentary", an annotated bibliography of all the "memoirs" written by Da Ponte, thus providing insight into the order in which they were created and giving even the connoisseur an overview which has not previously been available. As he identifies the differences between the first and second editions of the *Memorie*, Schweitzer also reveals the evolution of Da Ponte's perception of his life and the way he presented himself over the years. Reinhard Eisendle also deals with Da Ponte's autobiographic writings. He examines the dramaturgical aspects of narrative structure in the *Memorie*: according to Eisendle, the staging of Da Ponte's past is a kind of "self(re)construction" for the poet. Johanna Borek devotes her contribution to a comparison of Da Ponte's staging of his life in his *Memorie* with the autobiographies of other important men of eighteenth-century Italian theatre, specifically, Carlo Goldoni, Carlo Gozzi, and Giacomo Casanova.

This issue of *Maske und Kothurn* is a collaborative project that highlights the work of members of three scholarly institutions: the Department of Theatre, Film and Media Studies of Vienna University; the Don Juan Archive Vienna; and the Da Ponte Institute for Librettology, Don Juan Research and the History of Collecting.

The Department of Theatre, Film and Media Studies of Vienna University is the largest university department of its kind in the German-speaking countries. The Department is a space for inter-disciplinary theoretic discourse about the forms and productions of dramatic, theatrical and cinematic art from antiquity to the present. Concerned with dramatic and media practice, and with the staging of reality – dramatic, global, virtual, and otherwise – and of the *mise-en-scènes* of perception, the Department generates scholarship that explores both the history of these phenomena, and their dynamic relationships with other aspects of contemporary culture.

The Don Juan Archive Vienna houses a number of important collections, including source materials on the Don Juan story up to and including Lorenzo Da Ponte's version; a collection of Da Ponte's work; the so-called "Mauerbach Complex" – original theatre-related texts of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, remnants of a repository of unclaimed items which had previously been confiscated by the Nazis from Jewish collections in Austria; the collection of libretti from the Biblioteca Sezzatense; collections of orchestral and vocal scores; microfilms of the Ferdinand Traun collection and of the Albert Schatz collection; and much more, thus making available fundamental material for processing the history of Central European theatre, music theatre and popular theatre which would otherwise be difficult to access.

The research of the Da Ponte Institute for Librettology, Don Juan Research and the History of Collecting harkens back to subjects and material that were important to the man after whom the institution is named: in Lorenzo da Ponte's life, libretti, Don Juan, and collecting overlapped and influenced each other. Accordingly, the institute focuses on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century opera as well as the cultural and socio-historical contexts in which it was produced.

I would like to thank all of these institutions for their extensive cooperation which made this publication possible. Furthermore, I would like to express my thanks to the translator, Elisabeth Frank-Großebner for translation into English of the German texts by Herbert Lachmayer, Daniela Pillgrab, H. E. Weidinger, Johannes Schweitzer, Reinhard Eisendle and Johanna Borek, and Jeremy Gaines for translation of Klaus Heinrichs papers. I am especially grateful to the English language editor, Heather Evans from Queen's University at Kingston, Canada, who did an excellent job of proof-reading and correcting the English versions of the texts, and with whom I had numerous fruitful discussions about the content of the translated papers that highlighted once again the complexity of transferring scientific or scholarly knowledge from one language to another without losing the original ideas. I am convinced this task succeeded very well.

Vienna, December 2006 Michael Hüttler