

Lorenzo Da Ponte's Work for the Stage During his Time as a Librettist in Vienna

DANIELA PILLGRAB *

Biographical Notes

Lorenzo Da Ponte was born on 10 March 1749 as Emanuele Conegliano, the son of leather merchant Geremia Conegliano and his wife Rachele Pincherle in the town of Ceneda (part of Vittorio Veneto since 1866). When Emanuele was five years old, his mother died giving birth to her third child; ten years later, his father re-married a Christian named Orsola Pasqua Paietta and consequently, Geremia Conegliano and his three sons converted to Catholicism. The baptism was solemnised by the Bishop of Ceneda on 29 August 1763, and according to custom, the family was given the bishop's family name, Da Ponte; the eldest son Emanuele, then fourteen years old, also assumed the bishop's first name, Lorenzo.

In September that year Lorenzo and his two younger brothers Girolamo (previously Baruch, 1752–1783) and Luigi (previously Anania, 1754–1781) were admitted to the bishop's seminary at Ceneda, where Lorenzo was ordained to the lower orders two years later. Bishop Da Ponte died in 1768 and Lorenzo transferred to the bishop's seminary of Portogruaro where he started teaching after only one year and was ordained as a priest in 1773. However, Lorenzo did not feel a calling to the ministry and took advantage of the first plots against him as reason to leave the seminary. He went to Venice, where for the first time he came into close contact with the opera stage.¹

In 1774 he and his brother Girolamo accepted teaching positions at the bishop's seminary in nearby Treviso. Lorenzo became a teacher of rhetoric and took charge of the library. As he had in Portogruaro, he taught secular Italian literature and wrote poems which were discussed in public. Lorenzo's treatises in verse, influenced by Rousseau and in part highly subversive and critical of the government, were circulated and led to a general ban against Lorenzo in 1776² prohibiting him from teaching in all educational institutions in the Republic of Venice.

* The author would like to thank H. E. Weidinger who inspired this contribution.

1 In his *Memorie* Da Ponte leaves us in the dark about the events of his Jewish childhood and Christian baptism. With respect to his stay in Venice, Da Ponte's *Memorie* tell the reader more about his passion for gambling and his many amorous adventures.

2 Sheila Hodges, *Lorenzo Da Ponte, The Life and Times of Mozart's Librettist*, Madison/Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press 2002, p. 21 sq.