

ABOUT THE LIBRETTIST

Lorenzo Da Ponte

Librettists are rarely given sufficient credit – especially Da Ponte, for he and Mozart were true collaborators, each respecting the other. Da Ponte's life, of which only some of its salient facts are told here, seems unbelievable.

Lorenzo Da Ponte was born Emanuele Conegliano in a Jewish ghetto near Venice in 1749. When he was fourteen, his widowed father remarried a sixteen-year old Catholic requiring that the family convert to Catholicism, and Lorenzo took the name of the bishop who baptized him. At this point he could barely write an Italian sentence. He soon entered a seminary, mastered Hebrew and Latin (in which he wrote poetry) and was promoted to professor, then vice rector – all the while carrying on several love affairs. Da Ponte was ordained at age 24 and assigned to a church in Venice and, among other forgivable unclerical escapades, got a married woman twice pregnant and arranged entertainment for a brothel. But far worse, the authorities found some of his poetry unforgivably seditious. He was brought to trial in absentia and banished, but he had already fled to Vienna. There he acquired such a reputation as a poet that he was named Poet to the Court Theater of the Hapsburg Emperor.

Mozart's landlady introduced him to Da Ponte and their three remarkable blendings of text and music suggest an ideal collaboration. For example, Mozart usually detested rhymes in libretti; words should suit the music, not be forced into a rhyme. Yet Da Ponte was able to write in rhymes which fit naturally into Mozart's music. Even libretti adapted from other sources were his own. He did not copy, but rewrote the text completely, using his skill to turn prose into verse suitable for singing. As court librettist, Da Ponte composed in French, German, Spanish, and Italian.

In 1791 Mozart died and Da Ponte was dismissed by the new emperor. He left for Trieste with a soprano. After she had been reclaimed by her husband, Da Ponte proposed marriage to an Englishwoman and for a while they lived in London. On arrival there, the couple's only possessions were six louis, a gold watch, and a ring; and for years their fortunes went through cycles of good and bad. They finally sailed to America, settling in New York with their four children.

Da Ponte came with only a collection of Italian classics, several copies of Virgil, and about \$40 in cash. He eventually moved to Pennsylvania and tried to be a successful grocer, distiller, milliner, and seller of medicines; but recurring financial problems convinced him to return to New York. He imported Italian books, sold them door-to-door, opened a bookstore, and became an American citizen. In another bookstore, Clement Clarke Moore, known as the author of "The Night Before Christmas," overheard Da Ponte asking for Italian books. Through an astonishing series of events this eventually led to Da Ponte's being appointed as the *first professor of Italian at Columbia University*. In this role he was remarkably successful.

He was the first to teach Dante in America and took in boarders, introducing them to the pleasures of Italian cuisine. In his memoirs he claimed to have imported 26,000 volumes and

taught Italian to 2,500 people. His contributions of books were the foundations of the Italian collections of Columbia University, The Library of Congress, and The New York Public Library. Da Ponte died in August 1838 at the age of 89. He was still striking-looking in spite of his having no teeth. He had sowed his wild oats as a young man and thereafter lived a conventional, though colorful, life. He was faithful to his wife and a loving father to his children all of whom married into New York's best families.

Mozart and Da Ponte's immortal works:
Le Nozze di Figaro, Così fan tutti, Don Giovanni