

# Prelude

“Inside Masterworks”



HARTFORD  
SYMPHONY  
ORCHESTRA

LISTENING IN COLOR

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## Masterworks #3: Merry Mozart December 9-11, 2016

*Lorenzo Da Ponte – The man behind  
the man behind the music*



Three of Mozart's greatest operas, *Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte*, were the product of a successful joint venture with Lorenzo Da Ponte. Together, they revolutionized opera and created a “new kind” of theatrical experience.<sup>i</sup>

In a letter to his father, Mozart stressed the importance of his collaboration with Da Ponte: “...the best thing is when a good composer, who understands the stage enough to make sound suggestions, meets an able poet, that true phoenix.”<sup>ii</sup> Da Ponte was Mozart's “true phoenix,” and the combination of Da Ponte's ability to transform “prose drama into poetry” with Mozart's brilliant music was groundbreaking.<sup>iii</sup>



Born Emanuele Conegliano in 1749, Lorenzo Da Ponte was born in a Jewish ghetto near Venice. After his mother's death, Lorenzo's father, who wanted to marry a Catholic woman, converted the entire family from Judaism to Christianity.<sup>iv</sup> Taking the name

of the patron who baptized them, Emanuele became Lorenzo Da Ponte. He and his brothers enrolled in a seminary and were provided with a robust Classical education, which would otherwise have been unavailable.<sup>v</sup> Although encouraged to become a priest, Da Ponte was drawn to Venice, writing that life as a priest was “wholly contrary to my temperament, my character, my principles and my studies.”<sup>vi</sup>

For the next several years of his life, Da Ponte immersed himself in women, gambling and wrote “rebellious” poetry attacking the state.<sup>vii</sup> It was 1776, the start of the American revolution, and Da Ponte, undoubtedly influenced by the Declaration of Independence, dared to speak of the right to the “pursuit of happiness” irrespective of one's station in life.<sup>viii</sup> These ‘dangerous’ concepts, alien to a strictly-ordered Venetian society, caught the attention of Venice's Inquisition, which began a campaign to expel Da Ponte. In 1779, he was sentenced to 15 years' banishment from Venice on the count of sedition.<sup>ix</sup> In late 1781, with a letter of introduction to Antonio Salieri (a composer in the court of Emperor Joseph II), an unemployed Da Ponte arrived in Vienna. In 1783, no doubt as a result of his employment by the Emperor, he met Mozart – and the course of opera was altered.<sup>x</sup>



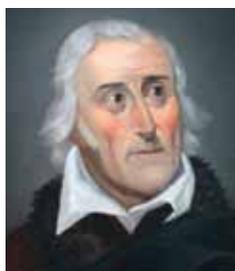
Statue of Lorenzo da Ponte, Ceneda, DaPonte's birthplace

At the time, opera consisted of arias (usually designed for specific singers) with lengthy ‘recitatives’ connecting the music and action. Their first venture, *Marriage of Figaro*, changed operatic form: Mozart and Da Ponte used the full colors of the orchestra and voice, with a uniform effect from beginning to end, creating real drama filled with irony, humor and paradoxes to support the serious themes of fidelity, love and nobility.<sup>xi</sup>

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Lorenzo Da Ponte – *The man behind the man behind the music.*

*Don Giovanni* was their next successful collaboration. Da Ponte altered Mozart's original idea to present *Don Giovanni* as a tragedy by inserting lighter elements to heighten the dramatic action and contrast. It worked; the opera premiere in Prague was hailed as a masterpiece. The Emperor declared it "divine, perhaps even more beautiful than *Figaro*."<sup>xii</sup> Thrilled with the result, Emperor Joseph II instructed Mozart to compose a new opera based on a libretto written by Da Ponte; thus was born *Così Fan Tutte*.



In 1790, after just four performances of *Così*, Emperor Joseph II died, and his demise ended the liberal ideas of the American Revolution – freedom and equality – that Joseph helped cultivate.<sup>xiii</sup> Da Ponte, now age 41, was suddenly unemployed and without the protection of his patron. Leopold,

the Emperor's brother, was told stories of Da Ponte's scandalous affairs, and Da Ponte was falsely accused of writing a slanderous poem against the new Emperor.<sup>xiv</sup> By 1792, Da Ponte was forced to flee Vienna.

Now married to English-born Anna Grahl (known as Nancy), Da Ponte moved to London to join his wife's family. Working two jobs, assistant to an opera house manager and a bookselling business, was insufficient. By 1800, his meager income led to bankruptcy.<sup>xv</sup> To escape their financial difficulties, Nancy resolved to move to the United States where members of her family had settled.

In 1805, at the age of 56, Da Ponte followed his 36-year-old wife and four children to New York City to start again. Nancy's decision to settle in New York forever altered the city's culture. Soon after his arrival, Da Ponte met Clement Clarke Moore,<sup>xvi</sup> son of Bishop Benjamin Moore, president of Columbia College, now Columbia University.<sup>xvii</sup> With knowledge of European music, painting and classical literature, Da Ponte began teaching at Clement's house and the two became lifelong friends.<sup>xviii</sup> Da Ponte, a brilliant poet, fluent in multiple languages and well-versed in literature, was welcomed into New York Society. After all, this was the man who had collaborated with Mozart! And Nancy, fluent in French, German, Italian, Dutch and Spanish, could discuss music and literature as well as her husband.

Da Ponte became the first professor of Italian at Columbia College.<sup>xix</sup> He introduced the works of Dante to the United States. He started a boarding school at his home on Greenwich Street, opened an Italian bookstore, and became one of the first suppliers of Italian literature for the College's library and for the Library of Congress.<sup>xx</sup> He became a U.S. citizen in 1828, and, finally liberated from the constraints of European aristocracy, freely expressed his opinions on any subject he chose.

Da Ponte did not merely introduce opera to New York: he helped finance what ultimately became the Metropolitan Opera. In 1825, after a visit from an opera troupe, Da Ponte urged the addition of *Don Giovanni* to the schedule, and personally raised funds for the 1826 production.<sup>xxi</sup> Three years later, he arranged for an Italian opera company to perform Rossini and Bellini operas in New York and Philadelphia and began campaigning to establish a permanent opera house in New York.<sup>xxii</sup> In 1833 (at the age of 84), Da Ponte raised funds and contributed his own resources to build the Italian Opera House, the first opera house in New York City.<sup>xxiii</sup> Although the house burned down in 1841, three years after Da Ponte's death, its presence established the permanence of opera houses in the United States, and was the predecessor of New York's Metropolitan Opera.<sup>xxiv</sup>



DaPonte's gravesite, Calvary Cemetery, Woodside, Queens, NYC

Like so many immigrants who contribute extensively to the richness of America, this Italian immigrant forever enhanced the intellectual and cultural literacy of his newly adopted city and his newly adopted nation.

**Please join the HSO's presentation of Merry Mozart, including the famous Overture to *Don Giovanni*, December 9 – 11, 2016.**

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## Masterworks #3:

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### Wondering How the Music Will Sound?

Please try HSO'S LISTENING GUIDE below, with links to the pieces you'll hear on our concert stage!

To hear a recording of the Bournemouth Symphony playing the Overture to *Don Giovanni*:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=raO6b59q\\_WU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=raO6b59q_WU)

For the "Jupiter" Symphony, enjoy this recording by the Vienna Philharmonic, conducted by Riccardo Muti:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sk8ktNpChu8>

### Curious about the Mackey piece which has not yet been recorded?

If you are ambivalent about 21st century music, check out an article by someone who shared your concerns:

<http://www.violinist.com/blog/laurie/20115/12342/>

Or, read about the 2013 Canadian premiere by the Toronto Symphony, conducted by HSO's Carolyn Kuan:

[http://www.concertonet.com/scripts/review.php?ID\\_review=9044](http://www.concertonet.com/scripts/review.php?ID_review=9044)

And finally, here is a clip from a WQXR interview with Mackey:

<http://www.wqxr.org/#!/story/five-epic-classical-works-electric-guitar/>

## The return of Casey's Classics

Recommended recordings  
for your listening pleasure!

### Curious about what you will be hearing on the concert program, or want to hear more?

**Coleman Casey**, HSO's dear friend, Director Emeritus and beloved in-house audiophile, offers the following recommendations for recordings of selections featured on our upcoming Masterworks Concert:

**Mozart's Overture to Don Giovanni** receives a powerful interpretation from Sir Neville Mariner and the Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields.

There are many wonderful performances of **Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphony**, but Leonard Bernstein and the Vienna Philharmonic rise to the top of my list; despite the fact that this is not a performance which uses period instruments, this particular symphony is so large in scale that it actually flourishes under the grand and somewhat massive approach applied by the conductor (DG).

<sup>i</sup> Bowen, Susan W., *Mozart's American Librettist*, <http://www.schillerinstitute.org/educ/his/daponte>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2006/jan/07/classicalmusicandopera.mozart>

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iv</sup> Bolt, Rodney. "The Librettist of Venice: The Remarkable Life of Lorenzo Da Ponte; Mozart's Poet, Casanova's Friend and Italian Opera's Impresario in America". Bloomsbury, 2006.

<sup>v</sup> Bowen, Susan W., *Mozart's American Librettist*, <http://www.schillerinstitute.org/educ/his/daponte>

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid

<sup>x</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2006/jan/07/classicalmusicandopera.mozart>

<sup>xi</sup> Bowen, Susan W., *Mozart's American Librettist*, <http://www.schillerinstitute.org/educ/his/daponte>

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid

<sup>xv</sup> Russo, Joseph Louis. "Lorenzo Da Ponte: Poet and Adventurer".

New York, AMS Press, 1966.

<sup>xvi</sup> Clement is best known as the author of "Twas the Night Before Christmas"

<sup>xvii</sup> Bowen, Susan W., *Mozart's American Librettist*, <http://www.schillerinstitute.org/educ/his/daponte>

<sup>xviii</sup> Ibid

<sup>xix</sup> Ibid

<sup>xx</sup> Ibid

<sup>xxi</sup> Ibid

<sup>xxii</sup> At the time, the only permanent opera house in the United States was in New Orleans.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Ibid

<sup>xxiv</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/01/08/nights-at-the-opera>