

Lorenzo Da Ponte and his *L'ape musicale*: An Operatic Legacy for New York

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Lorenzo Da Ponte reached the peak of his artistic experience with the three opera librettos composed for Mozart: a collaboration so crucial for music history as to have almost obscured the remaining decades of his theatrical career.

One of the less investigated periods from this point of view is certainly the American one: we know only that when, in 1825, Da Ponte became professor of Italian language and literature at Columbia College, the nearby Park Theatre hosted the first Italian opera season, entrusted to the legendary Spanish tenor Manuel García and his troupe; and that five years later, to facilitate his niece Giulia's debut as a soprano, Da Ponte composed a libretto, the pastiche *L'ape musicale*; and that in 1832-33 he was brought in, first by Giacomo Montresor, then by Vincenzo Riva Finoli, to enterprises to set up stable programming of Italian opera in New York (both of which went bankrupt.)

These three moments not only are tightly connected but they also testify to a precise purpose, well clarified by Da Ponte himself in a passage of his *Memoirs*: "I well foresaw which and how many advantages our [Italian] literature would gain, and to what extent our language will spread owing to the enticements of Italian theatre which, for all the civilized nations of the world, is the most noble and most charming of all the spectacles that human genius has invented".

The core of his project is clearly represented by *L'ape musicale*, a work hitherto substantially overlooked by musicology although it was the first Italian opera conceived in the United States as well as the first one intended for an American audience, as expressly declared by the author in the dedication "To the inhabitants of the City of New-York".

In the libretto—the last of his life although, after more than a quarter of a century of silence, he considered it a new starting point of his activity as a playwright—he narrates, in a completely autobiographical way, the vicissitudes of an Italian opera troupe waiting to debut abroad despite the agitation of an avid entrepreneur, the naivety of the young prima donna, and the resistance of the local répétiteur, an old *maestro* hostile to any innovation and still fond of the ballad operas of the colonial period – a plot in which Da Ponte is admirably successful in transforming reality into fiction, but also in predicting the bright future the genre will have in the United States: "E l'Opera Italiana ancor trionferà!".