

# A Long Life in America After Writing the Big Mozart Librettos

By JEREMY EICHLER OCT. 5, 2005

On June 4, 1805, a ship from London sailed into the harbor of Philadelphia, and a toothless 56-year-old Italian man disembarked. He was completely broke, having gambled away all his money on the two-month passage from Europe, so he borrowed \$32 to pay the customs taxes on his violin, his tea urn, his carpet and his trunk of Italian literature.

An observer at the scene would never have guessed that here stood one of the greatest librettists in the history of music, but sure enough, it was Lorenzo Da Ponte, a name that would be forever yoked to the beloved operas that his graceful, witty and songlike poetry enabled Mozart to create: “Le Nozze di Figaro,” “Don Giovanni” and “Così Fan Tutte.”

Da Ponte never tired of dropping Mozart’s name, but his time in Vienna as the poet of the Italian opera, appointed by Emperor Joseph II, was in truth only one exciting episode in a long and fantastically colorful life. After leaving Vienna in 1791 and wending his way through Europe for more than a decade, seemingly always on the run from creditors and plagued by financial woes, Da Ponte joined his unofficial wife and children in this country. He lived out his final three decades here as a tireless emissary of Italian culture, a poet of the European Enlightenment magisterially adrift in a young, rough-and-tumble America. He died in New York in 1838 at 89.

Even today, the story of Da Ponte’s American chapter remains little known, despite the entertaining memoirs he left behind, recounting not only his picaresque adventures in Europe as a connoisseur of feminine beauty and friend of Casanova, but also his experiences in New

York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, running a grocery store, trading in medical supplies and liquor, selling Italian books, importing an Italian opera company and, finally, teaching the language and literature he loved to students, both in private lessons and as the first professor of Italian at Columbia University. It was an afterlife worthy of his stage creations.

This week Columbia’s Italian Academy for Advanced Studies is celebrating the 200th anniversary of Da Ponte’s arrival in America. [“Lorenzo Da Ponte, a Bridge From Italy to New York”](#) includes three vocal recitals, beginning tonight with the mezzo-soprano Krista River and the pianist Alison D’Amato performing settings of Da Ponte texts by Mozart, Bellini, Verdi, Strozzi and others. The Da Ponte focus continues on Oct. 10 and 11, with an academic symposium and an exhibition devoted to his life and legacy, co-sponsored by the Da Ponte Institute of Vienna.

“Da Ponte was the first representative of cosmopolitan enlightened European culture in America,” said David Freedberg, director of the Italian Academy. “He was the bridge. There’s something telling and very sad about the fact that he remains a completely unknown figure in the history of American cultural life. America ignored him when he came and has continued to ignore him. This is how we’re trying to celebrate him.”

Born into a Jewish family in Ceneda in 1749, Da Ponte was converted and baptized after his mother’s death so that his father could marry a young Catholic woman. He entered the seminary, where he received a rigorous classical education, and even became a priest before

embarking on what one might call protracted field research for his future work on “Don Giovanni.” By the time he arrived in America, however, he had become more of a family man and used his wife’s money to open a grocery store, chuckling in his memoirs about how his “poet’s hand” was now asked to measure out tea and tobacco.

But business suited Da Ponte as poorly as the priesthood. His memoirs, while famously exaggerated, present him as a kind of magnet for rogues and rascallions, or as he described them, “the poisonous leeches who are ever in pursuit of honest people to suck their blood and repay them then with disdain, criticism, and often slander.” Da Ponte was constantly on the verge of financial ruin induced by a combination of gullibility, genuine misfortune and the incorrigible generosity of his big Italian heart.

His next incarnation as a teacher and cultural impresario suited him far better, though it led to no greater financial security. He got his start thanks to a chance meeting with Clement Moore, later immortalized as the author of “The Night Before Christmas.” The well-connected Moore helped Da Ponte convince prominent New York families to send their sons and daughters to him to study Italian language and literature. Judging from surviving anecdotes, Da Ponte was a devoted and gifted teacher, even building a small stage in his house on which his students could perform. But the teaching business was not steady, and Da Ponte returned to odd jobs, trading goods and taking in boarders, to whom a newspaper ad promised that “a knowledge of Italian may be acquired without additional expense.”

According to his biographer, Sheila Hodges, the shortage of Italian books in New York was a tremendous obstacle for Da Ponte, and he was shocked to discover how hard it was to find an Italian dictionary. Even Columbia’s library, he

reported, had only one “worm-eaten Boccaccio with a broken binding.” He began importing books, opened a bookstore and traveled door-to-door hawking Dante, Machiavelli, Petrarch and others. By the end of his life he claimed to have imported more than 26,000 volumes, many of which ended up at the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library and Columbia University.

But Da Ponte knew that Italian books alone could not win over the American public. They needed -- of course -- the Italian opera, which he described simply as “the noblest and most pleasurable of all the many spectacles the human intelligence ever invented.” Already an octogenarian, he raised the money to bring a company of 53 Italian singers, for a tour that nearly bankrupted him. Da Ponte was forced to sell his beloved books, and he addressed them in a little poem that will be on display at the Columbia exhibition: “My heart is torn apart in giving you away; for in one single moment I lose what I love most.”

Still one more scheme followed, as Da Ponte raised funds for a lavish Italian Opera House that opened in New York in 1833 and burned down six years later. Not surprisingly, by the end of his life he was an embittered old man. He lived an eternity by the standards of the day, but not quite long enough to see Italian culture flower here a half century later.

The current acknowledgment is indeed overdue. Even during his lifetime, Da Ponte lamented: “In more than twenty years not one charitable writer has been found who has deigned to put down in black on a small piece of paper, so that the literary world, and in particular the Italians, may learn about it, what I have done in America!”