Lorenzo Da Ponte - Biography

**Lorenzo Da Ponte** (10 March 1749 - 17 August 1838) was a Venetian opera librettist and poet. He wrote the librettos for 28 operas by 11 composers, including three of Mozart's greatest operas, *Don Giovanni*, *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Così fan tutte*.

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**European career**

Lorenzo Da Ponte was born Emanuele Conegliano in Ceneda, in the Republic of Venice (now Vittorio Veneto, Italy). He was Jewish by birth. His parents were Geremia Conegliano and Rachele Pincherle. He had two brothers; Baruch (born in 1752) and Anania (born in 1754). Rachele died giving birth to Anania in 1754. Geremia Conegliano, the widowed father, converted himself and his three sons to Roman Catholicism in order to marry eighteen-year-old Orsola Pasqua Paietta. She was only four years older than Emanuele, then 14 years old. Emanuele took the name of Lorenzo da Ponte from the Bishop of Ceneda who baptised him. He studied to be a teacher and was ordained a Catholic priest. While priest of the church of San Luca in Venice, he took a mistress, Anzoletta Bellaudi, who was married. Da Ponte delivered their first child, an event which he commented was "the kind of incident that happens every day." Reprimanded by the vicar-general, Da Ponte and Anzoletta opened a brothel. Charged with "public concubinage and *rapito di donna onesta*" (abduction of a respectable woman), Da Ponte was banished from Venice for fifteen years.

Da Ponte travelled to Austria, and applied for the post of Poet to the Theatres. Emperor Joseph II asked how many plays he had written. Da Ponte replied "None, Sire," to which the Emperor replied "Good, good! Then we shall have a virgin muse."

As court librettist, he wrote texts in French, German, Spanish, and Italian, and collaborated with Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Antonio Salieri, and Vicente Martín y Soler.

Sometime around 1792, da Ponte was introduced to Ann Celestine Grahl (known more commonly as Nancy), a woman twenty years younger than him, who became his wife for the latter part of his life and was mother to da Ponte's four children: Louisa (1794), Fanny (1799), Joseph (1800), and Lorenzo (1804).
American career

With the death of Joseph II, Da Ponte lost his patron, and he received little interest from the new Emperor. He moved to Prague briefly, and then to London. He started a new career there as an opera producer. But he had little head for business, and eventually found himself in bankruptcy. To escape his creditors, he fled to the United States.

In the United States, Da Ponte settled in New York first, then Sunbury, Pennsylvania, where he briefly ran a grocery store and gave private Italian lessons. He returned to New York to open a bookstore. He became friends with Clement Clarke Moore, and, through him, gained an appointment as the first professor of Italian literature at Columbia College. He was the first Roman Catholic priest to be appointed to the faculty, and he was also the first to have been born a Jew. In New York he introduced opera and produced a performance of Don Giovanni. He also introduced Gioachino Rossini's music in the U.S., through a concert tour with his niece Giulia da Ponte.

In 1828, at the age of 79, Da Ponte became a naturalized U.S. citizen. He died in 1838 in New York; an enormous funeral ceremony was held in New York's old St. Patrick's Cathedral on Mulberry Street. Some sources state that Da Ponte is buried in Calvary Cemetery in Queens, but that cemetery did not exist before 1848. Other sources say da Ponte was buried in lower Manhattan. Calvary Cemetery does contain a stone marker to serve as a memorial to Da Ponte.

All of Da Ponte's works were adaptations of pre-existing plots, as was common among librettists of the time, with the exceptions of L'arbore di Diana with Vicente Martín y Soler, and Cosi fan tutte, which he began with Salieri, but completed with Mozart. However the quality of his elaboration gave them new life, in particular the Don Giovanni character, often seen in contrast with Giacomo Casanova as the archetypical libertine character.

Lorenzo Da Ponte's great-great-great-grandson, Durant da Ponte, was Professor of American Studies at the University of Tennessee.

Works

- Operas:
  - La Scuola de' gelosi (1783) — composer Antonio Salieri
  - Il ricco d'un giorno (1784) — composer Antonio Salieri
  - Il burbero di buon cuore (1786, from the play by Carlo Goldoni) — composer Vicente Martín y Soler
  - Il Demogorgone ovvero Il filosofo confuso (1786) — composer Vincenzo Righini
  - Il finto cieco (1786) — composer Giuseppe Gazzaniga
  - Le nozze di Figaro (1786, from the play by Pierre Beaumarchais) — composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
  - Una cosa rara (1786, from the comedy La Luna della Sierra by Luis Vélez de Guevara) — composer Vicente Martín y Soler
  - Gli equivoci (1786) — composer Stephen Storace
  - L'arbore di Diana (1787) — composer Vicente Martín y Soler
  - Il dissoluto punito o sia Il Don Giovanni (1787, from the opera by Giuseppe Gazzaniga) — composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
  - Axur, re d'Ormus (1787/88, translation of the libretto Tarare by Pierre Beaumarchais) — composer Antonio Salieri
  - Il Talismano (1788, from Carlo Goldoni) — composer Antonio Salieri
  - Il Bertoldo (1788) — composer Antonio Brunetti
  - L'Ape musicale (1789) — Pasticcio of works by various composers
  - Il Pastor fido (1789, from the pastoral by Giovanni Battista Guarini) — composer Antonio Salieri
La Cifra (1789) — composer Antonio Salieri
Così fan tutte (1789/90) — composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
La Caffettiera bizzarra (1790) — composer Joseph Weigl
La Capricciosa corretta (1795) — composer Vicente Martín y Soler
Antígona (1796) — composer Giuseppe Francesco Bianchi
Il consiglio imprudente (1796) — composer Giuseppe Francesco Bianchi
Merópe (1797) — composer Giuseppe Francesco Bianchi
Cinna (1798) — composer Giuseppe Francesco Bianchi
Armida (1802) — composer Giuseppe Francesco Bianchi
La Grotta di Calipso (1803) — composer Peter von Winter
Il Trionfo dell’amor fraterno (1804) — composer Peter von Winter
Il Ratto di Proserpina (1804) — composer Peter von Winter

Cantatas and Oratorios:
Per la ricuperata salute di Ofelia (1785) — composers Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Antonio Salieri and "Cornetti" (lost)
Il Davidde (1791) — Pasticcio from works by various composers
Hymn to America — composer Antonio Bagioli

Poetry:
Letter of complaint in blank verse to Leopold II, Holy Roman Emperor
18 sonnets in commemoration of his wife (1832)

He did translations from English into Italian, and also wrote several books of elementary instruction in the Italian language. He published an autobiography, Memorie (see Bibliography), and History of the Florentine Republic and the Medici (2 vols., 1833).

Notes

Bibliography
FitzLyon, April, The Libertine Librettist (1955)
Russo, Joseph Louis, Lorenzo Da Ponte: Poet and Adventurer, New York: Columbia University
External links

- Acocella, Joan, "Nights At The Opera: The Life of the Man who put Words to Mozart", The New Yorker, 8 January 2007
Lorenzo da Ponte. Biography by Anne Feeney. Certain librettist/author collaborations have become legendary in the world of opera, such as von Hoffmannstal and Richard Strauss, Gilbert and Sullivan, and da Ponte and Mozart. Not only did Mozart begin… Read Full Biography. Biography

Lorenzo Da Ponte Facts: For nearly 150 years after his death the name of Lorenzo Da Ponte (1749-1838) languished in relative obscurity. It was only in the 1980s that he began to be recognized as one of the greatest librettists who ever lived. Of his 89 years, fewer than 20 were devoted to writing opera texts. Yet during this period, as poet first to the court of Joseph II in Vienna and then to the King's Theatre, the home of Italian opera in London, he wrote or adapted nearly 50 libretti for 19 different composers. Lorenzo Da Ponte was born on March 10, 1749 in the Italian city of Ceneda, near Venice. His family was originally Jewish, but converted to Catholicism when Lorenzo was a young child. Da Ponte studied at the Ceneda Seminary and the Portogruaro Seminary, where he later obtained a teaching position (1770-73).