

LORENZO DA PONTE: CULTURAL PIONEER IN NEW YORK

An Appreciation by

DAVID FREEDBERG

*Director, The Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America
at Columbia University*

It was a clear, cold day in November. The Lower East Side was looking attractive in the crisp autumn light. Gentrification had not yet begun – at least not in any serious way. I found myself at the gate of an overgrown community garden which (as I suddenly remembered) a sister-in-law of mine had helped establish in the hopeful days of the early 1970s. Two women and a man were warming themselves over a brazier, a Dickensian scene that even then seemed rather out of place in New York. The group was friendly and loquacious when another, older man appeared from the shrubs in back. Bluntly, he asked me whether I knew where I was. I began mumbling an answer when he interrupted. Pointing to what I then recognized as fragments of one or two old tombstones, he asked whether I realized that a famous figure in the history of opera had been buried there. He had forgotten his name, he said; and as he was struggling to recover it, the name came back to me, like a lost memory. He was referring to Lorenzo Da Ponte.

Even then I knew the bare bones of his poignant story. Exiled from Vienna in the year of Mozart's death, a failure in Paris and London, Da Ponte ended his life as a shopkeeper in New Jersey and Pennsylvania and an aged professor in New York city. Appointed to teach Italian at Columbia College in 1825 at the age of 76, his student numbers dwindled from a few to none, and he turned to other literary activities before establishing an opera house first in New York and then in Philadelphia. Like Mozart before him, he was buried in an unmarked grave, in the old cemetery on East 11th Street, the remnants of which, stretching across to 12th street, I was visiting on that cold but clear November morning.

After the enchantments and intrigues of Vienna, it was a long and disappointing coda. After the successes of the great operas, the rest of Lorenzo Da Ponte's life seems the story of a loser. But is it? It remains puzzling and almost impossible to assess. His *Memorie*, first published in New York in 1823, do not give the impression of a heroic or even a particularly strong character, as he struggles against the many setbacks of his life after Vienna. The *Memorie* are engaging and entertaining enough, almost in the manner of his friend Casanova's (with plenty of amorous adventures, but with little of the erotic sauce), and they tell of all the ups and downs – after Vienna it was mostly down – of a life full of vicissitude and reversals of fortune. Often the *Memorie* seem petty, full of gossip, all too trivial. They are self-pitying and self-justifying. Openly wounded by his lack of recognition after his great Viennese days, "the author of thirty six dramas, the poet of Joseph II, of Salieri, of Martini, and of Mozart; after having given to American the Italian language, literature and music... having finally reached the age of eighty-nine and lavished away all he had in the world, now remains deserted, neglected and forgotten, as if his voice had never been heard, or as if he were a fugitive escaped from the galleys", he laments two months before his death in 1838. It is true that his earlier achievements seemed to count little in America, and that his efforts to establish Italian culture in New York – from teaching to establishing a library and an opera house – were for the most part not successful. At least not in the short run.

It is impossible not to feel a kind of retrospective sympathy for the man. The barest details of his life, at al-

most every stage, provoke it. Even locally, here in New York, he has pretty much been forgotten. When I assumed the Directorship of the Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America at Columbia in the year 2000, I could not even find Columbia's only portrait of him. Eventually it was discovered in the lounge of the School of Engineering, and I insisted that it be brought over to the Casa Italiana, the magnificent building by McKim Mead and White that is now the home of the Italian Academy. At last it has found its appropriate place on the Columbia campus.

It is a disconcerting portrait, showing Da Ponte looking old, tired, toothless and disappointed – as indeed he must have been. The flair of the great librettos seems far away. Even by the time he published his *Memorie* he must have realized that his heroic efforts to promote Italian culture in the New World had had few palpable results. Everything seemed to turn bad. After arriving in Philadelphia in 1805 at the age of 56, he immediately embarked on spreading the knowledge of Italian culture in New York. His commitment was deep, his activities on behalf of literature and music – and the enlightenment politics he had already acquired in Vienna – indefatigable. But at every stage of the way what started promisingly seemed to founder. Was it the character of America that was not yet ready to engage with the sophistications and nonchalances of European culture (to say nothing of its histories), or was it the personality of Da Ponte himself? Everything had gone so well with Mozart in Vienna; but here, in a society that was unprepared for the ironies of a Beaumarchais and the rococo wit of a Metastasio – to say nothing of the profundities of Dante – Da Ponte was rudderless, adrift in a society whose shallows were full of perils. No wonder he occasionally felt sorry for himself.

But perhaps these judgements are too harsh.

Already before he came to America his life (as retold in greater detail in this volume) was complex enough. It starts with a fact he suppresses in his *Memorie* – that he was a Jew, born in 1749, in Ceneda in the Veneto, to the tanner Gabriele Conegliano and his wife Ghella Pincherle. It was to this past that he owed the Hebrew

with which he would later impress the Bishop of New York, Benjamin Moore (who was also struck by his command of Latin, English, French and Spanish). His mother dies; his father wishes to marry a Christian; the Bishop of Ceneda baptizes the whole family; and upon his conversion the young Emanuele Conegliano adopts the name of his Bishop-protector. He becomes a priest, takes lovers, writes an offensive sonnet, and leaves Venice in 1777. When Mozart suggests that he write an adaptation of Beaumarchais' banned *Mariage de Figaro*, Da Ponte is on his way. He delivers his libretto for *Le Nozze di Figaro* in 1786; it is followed by *Don Giovanni* 1787 and *Così fan tutte* in 1790; Mozart dies, and Da Ponte makes his way to Paris, London, and eventually to New York. He opens a shop in Elizabethtown in New Jersey, but New York, of course, is the constant magnet. Da Ponte never misses a chance to set himself up there, preferably as a teacher of Italian language and literature.

His first break comes, aptly enough, as he is browsing in Riley's bookstore on Broadway. After asking the bookseller if he has any Italian books, an American gentleman approaches him and joins the conversation. He throws down a gauntlet: Italy, he says, has only produced five or six great writers – Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Ariosto, Tasso – he can't remember the sixth. The challenge provides the opening. Da Ponte delights in telling the gent that it would take at least a month to list the names of the other great writers of Italy, up to the present; and within three days, on December 15 1807, he begins teaching Italian in New York, encouraged by his interlocutor, who turns out to be Clement Moore, son of Benjamin Moore, rector of Trinity Church and Bishop of New York, and cousin of Nathaniel, Professor of Latin at Columbia. Soon Da Ponte writes a *Compendium* of his own life (a kind of first instalment of his *Memorie*), to which he adds an account of the first "*Literary Conversazione*" held in his own house. His wife helps him in running the girls' side of the school; and he is a lively and popular teacher. All the while he retains his interest in politics. As early as 1808 he writes a canzone "To the United States of America", where, with typical Da Pontean literary extravagance he refers to Napoleon as

“carco si di brame, che dopo il pasto più che prima ha fame” (“when stuffed he craves more fiercely than before; his raging greed can never gorge its fill”). In this way Da Ponte uses a line from Dante to conjure up an image that makes one think of the great English caricaturist of the time, Thomas Rowlandson. Only Da Ponte could have done such a thing.

But America was not wholly ready for him. Italian was still insufficiently in demand. Soon the school declined, typically enough for all Da Ponte's ventures. He returns to Pennsylvania, this time to open a store in Sunbury. But New York never ceases to beckon. In 1819 he returns again, partly in order to provide his son with a better classical education, partly in order to call on his friends the Moores. Within a week he has twelve students again, and is once more on his pedagogical way – at the age of 70, still unstoppable. He writes an “Apologetic Discourse on Italy” in which he defends the Italian character against the all-too typical allegations of sensuality, unreliability, venality and so forth – the usual clichés which had surfaced in the course of George IV's famous prosecution of his wife Caroline of Brunswick. He translates Byron's *Prophecy of Dante* into *terza rima* (and in it manages to quote his erstwhile friend Ugo Foscolo), publishes his *Memorie*, starts *The New York Review and Athenaeum Magazine* published by Columbia College, opens a kind of bookstore in his own home (in which, needless to say, he sells his own books), writes more poems, translates more books. Finally in 1825 he is hired to teach Italian at Columbia.

Astonished by the fact that Columbia has no Italian books in its library, Da Ponte offers to sell his own library to the College; and of course it is his old friend Clement Moore who selects the books for the College from amongst those offered by Da Ponte. In 1828 Da Ponte is commissioned by the Trustees to produce a catalogue of all the books in the library, and he publishes his *History of the Italian Language and Literature in New York, with Italian, French and Spanish Letters by Young Ladies of his threefold Class*. While continuing to agitate for a better Italian library in New York, he suggests books to be acquired by the newly formed Library

of Congress. Tireless on the cultural scene, he maintains contact with all who matter in New York, the Andersons, the Phillipses, the Verplancks and, of course, the constant Moores. But his financial difficulties continue unabated. He is not paid for his Columbia classes, the Italian Society Library is barely a success, and he has to take in boarders, who may thereby acquire “a knowledge of Italian without additional expense”.

By now Da Ponte is 80. He is still indefatigable in his promotion of Italian culture. Somehow or another he finds the funds to bring an opera company over from Bologna to New York in 1832, under the direction of Giacomo Montresor. He asks for no more than 20 people; Montresor arrives with 55. Da Ponte finds English translations of operas and oratorios – or he translates them himself, as in the case of Rossini's *Othello* when the opera is performed by Montresor's company in Philadelphia. In 1833 the Italian Opera House is built in New York, a sumptuous place better than any other theater in town – and yet in the same year, Da Ponte is cut out of all financial and artistic decisions, an event which he records in a typically self-justifying pamphlet entitled *A History Incredible but True*, part II. But it is probably true that the relative penury which dogged him in the last few years of his life can be attributed to the investments he made, one way or another, in his efforts to establish an Opera House in New York. He dies at his daughter-in-law's home at 91 Spring, on the corner of Broadway, and is buried in the old Catholic cemetery of Old St Patricks on Eleventh Street, in the unmarked grave recalled so many years later to me on an unexpected afternoon in November.

It is not difficult, in considering the bare bones of this life, to scant its achievements, to conclude that other than the librettos for Mozart, most of Lorenzo Da Ponte's projects came to naught. It was a tumultuous life certainly, but after Vienna, it was acted out on the still small stage that was New York in the first two or three decades of the nineteenth century. There would surely be something wrong with this assessment, however. In the first place, there are those librettos: debonair, brilliant, full of insight into both language and character, moving for their intel-

ligence and understanding – and above all, the perfect vehicle for some of the most profound music we have. Even if he had written nothing else, it would be difficult to underestimate the scale of Da Ponte's achievement. But it is almost as if the rest of his life gets in the way of measuring that achievement fully. It is easy to be distracted by the shallowness of the post-Mozart life, the triviality of his manoeuvres to re-establish both himself and his status. Often it seems as if there are just too many entrances and exits – and reentrances and re-exits, as if Da Ponte himself had become a figure in a comic opera which he and Mozart could once have saved from banality but could now no longer. The adolescent conversion, unmentioned in his *Memorie*, marked him for life. The need to adapt to new surroundings, to the wholly alien culture that was then New York, fueled the old man's energy, both accounting for his social charms – evident from everything he records – and for his inability to sustain the originality that had found its perfect outlet in Vienna.

But a deeper assessment is needed, humanly, politically and culturally – especially for the thirty-three American years. Already fifty-six when he arrived on these shores, with a full and adventurous life behind him, he faced his new life with attack and vigor. Undaunted by the difficulties before him, he pressed on, undeterred by the failures that followed him every step of the way. Though irritated by lack of recognition, he had one sustaining mission: the promotion of Italian culture in New York. There was no grand vision at work here, but rather native instinct – a simple, dogged commitment to an idea that was deep in his bones.

Da Ponte arrived in New York with the culture not just of the writers he knew – Metastasio, Foscolo, Goldoni, Beaumarchais, Casanova – but of the grand precession of titans – Dante, Petrarch, and of course Boccaccio (and Tasso and Ariosto too). He sold, bought, imported and exchanged Italian books. He taught girls, boys, college students and adults. He established his libraries and catalogued those of others. Importing an opera company he raised large sums for the construction of a building that would not have been out of place in Semper's

Berlin. To suggest that Da Ponte's main interest in New York was to make money from culture, as Charles Rosen does in his introduction to the latest American edition of his *Memorie* is simply misleading. In Vienna he wrote for Mozart, Salieri, Martín y Soler. When not out of humor, the court tolerated his irrepressible spirit of subversion; despite his many supporters, the American climate was less hospitable to the temper and tenor of his character. He was a libertine in a land of puritans. He was a Jew who became a priest, who when first taking a wife was obliged to call her a lover – before he abandoned orders altogether. He mixed with the Moores and the Verplancks on the one hand, the Grahls, the Niccolinis and the Levys on the other. In his freedom from real prejudice, he was a genuine binder of community. The sympathies that revealed themselves in the librettos emerged early on, and carried through to America. "I embrace in one glance the King on the throne and the ragged beggar on the street". It was he who adapted Beaumarchais's politically subversive *Figaro* into a work that Joseph II could praise (as he also praised *Don Giovanni*), who convinced the Emperor to reopen the Italian opera in Vienna after he had closed it, and who so aroused Leopold II's ire that he once exclaimed to him, in his presence, "To the devil with this disturber of the peace!". This was the court to whom one moment he wrote odes and on other occasions lampooned.

The changes in Da Ponte's life were not those of a hypocrite; they were motivated by his cultural commitments (which often require flattery) and by his political beliefs. Often in the *Memorie* Da Ponte seems self-serving; but these moments represent the intrusion of his anxieties into the master program of his life – the introduction of a profound literary culture to one that was still being born. Da Ponte was vain and difficult, but radical in the best of senses. He is the emblem of precisely those aspects of old Europe that are often still lacking in America. The New World may not yet have been quite ready for a man with his knowledge of the sentiments, his sense of irony, his libertinism; but the ideals that motivated him are ones still to be prized. We no longer have much time for the style of the man or the style of the *Memorie*, but it

is worth recalling how greatly they were prized by Grillparzer, Wagner, Saint-Saens and Lamartine and that they were translated by Burckhardt. For all the too-evident failings of his character – and none were grave – the time is ripe for a reevaluation of his contribution to American civilization. On the face of it, Da Ponte may not have achieved much in his long American years; but if anyone, in the early nineteenth century, can be said to have laid the way for the cosmopolitan city that New York became, for the spirit of tolerance, energy, and enthusiasm that still marks its social and cultural life, it is Lorenzo Da Ponte. He is the perfect emblem of the mixture of vivacity and deep culture that marked Italian civi-

lization from its Roman beginnings; and of the wry Enlightenment that is the gift of Mozart's Vienna (and that finds its expression in their operas). That Da Ponte succeeded in familiarizing New York with all this marks a quiet but seismic shift in American culture. It was subterranean, and has not always been noticed; but the earth moved perhaps just a little. Da Ponte's superficial effervescence has continued to obscure the changes he helped bring about; but equipped with the present volume we are surely now in a better position to be less distracted by the details and to reassess the true measure of his contribution.