

If you mention Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart to anyone, they will most likely be able to tell you who he was, and what he did. He is one of the most famous composers of all time. Layman and scholar alike recognize his genius. Everyone has heard the stories of his composing large works at a very young age. One of these works was *Mitridate, re di Ponte*, his first opera seria. This paper will look at how Mozart dealt with, compromised and sometimes ignored the libretto and also his restrictions stemming from difficult performers.

Mozart and his father were traveling Europe showcasing Mozart's prodigy talents when they made a stop in Milan. It was Mozart's first trip to Italy and Leopold was making sure that young Wolfgang was getting to be known and made no secret that he was hoping to obtain a commission from the court on this trip. Leopold's efforts would be rewarded<sup>1</sup>. After hearing samples of arias that Mozart had already written, people were so impressed that he was immediately given the commission to write *Mitridate, re di Ponto* for the 1771 carnival season<sup>2</sup>. Count Firmian, Governor-General of Lombardy would be the man to give Mozart the commission for his very first opera. This commission was directly influenced by two glowing letters of recommendation from Johann Adolf Hasse, the most famous Italian composer of the day<sup>3</sup>. Mozart's father negotiated a written contract that guaranteed Mozart a payment of 100 ducats for the commission<sup>4</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Einstein, Alfred. *Mozart: His Character His Works*. 396

<sup>2</sup> Solomon, Maynard. *Mozart: A Life*. 84

<sup>3</sup> Einstein. 396

<sup>4</sup> Solomon. 78

Mozart deliberated for some time on what text to use, and finally, with the help of his father he came to settle on the libretto by Vittorio Amadeo Cigna-Santi<sup>5</sup>, a well known librettist from Turin, who had created a free interpretation of Racine's tragedy for Quirino Gasparini, who set the text as an opera just three years earlier<sup>6</sup>. Mozart was well aware of Gasparini's setting of *Mitridate* and used much of the work to draw on while making plans for his own setting<sup>7</sup>.

This was a most powerful and complicated story, especially for a boy of Mozart's age. Many scholars believe that this libretto was beyond Mozart's capabilities at the time and should have used a different text<sup>8</sup>. Alfred Einstein even goes so far as to say that Leopold should have discouraged his son from taking on such a complicated plot because Mozart was simply too young to fully use the text and all of its virtues to their fullest<sup>9</sup> and should have told him "Keep your hands off! This is beyond your powers. Wait until you are more mature, for this is the best libretto for an opera seria that you will ever have."<sup>10</sup> Others believe that the music written for this libretto was of such emotional power that it simply makes these assumptions of Mozart's inability to master such complex tragedy absurd<sup>11</sup>. The work of Mozart's youth is that of "an instinctive composer of music drama. Anyone discovering subtleties of characterization is deluding himself; Mozart's

---

<sup>5</sup> Blom, Eric. *Mozart*.

<sup>6</sup> Sadie, Stanley. *A note on Mozart's First Serious Opera*. 1

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

<sup>9</sup> Glasow, Thomas E. *Mitridate, re di Ponte*. 154

<sup>10</sup> Einstein, Alfred. *Mozart: His Character His Works*. 397

<sup>11</sup> Sadie. 1

youthful work will not bear interpretation in such terms, and was never designed to do so”<sup>12</sup>.

Soon after receiving the commission for the opera Mozart and his father continued on their European tour and traveled to Bologna. A few days after arriving Mozart received a copy of the libretto and the projected cast that he would have to work with. Mozart immediately set on working on a tonal plan for the opera and in the early fall of 1770 he began studying the libretto intensely and on September 29<sup>th</sup> he began writing the recitatives, the arias would take shape later when he was working directly with the singers at hand. Mozart figured he might as well “measure the garment right on the body”<sup>13</sup>. There seemed to be little interest for Mozart in writing the recitatives. In a letter to his mother dated October 20<sup>th</sup> Mozart writes, “I cannot write much, for my fingers are aching from the composing so many recitatives”<sup>14</sup>.

When Mozart and his father arrived in Milan the recitatives were finished and Mozart began working immediately on the arias with the singers, who had many demands of the young composer. Beyond the demands of the singers there were many other hassles. At one point during the rehearsals Gaspirini himself sent the prima donna, Antonia Bernasconi, the arias from his own setting of *Mitridate* hoping to entice her to sing his arias in place of Mozart’s new settings. Having seen Mozart’s versions of the arias already she refused to sing Gaspirini’s. Mozart received many reports of disparaging remarks behind his back of his talent, age and even his nationality. Nor could he please the singers early on in preparation for the opera: time and time again Guglielmo

---

<sup>12</sup> Sadie, Stanley. *A Note on Mozart’s First Serious Opera* 1

<sup>13</sup> Gutman, Robert W. *Mozart: A Cultural Biography*. 283

<sup>14</sup> Keys, A. C. *Two Eighteenth-Century Racinian Operas*. 2

d'Ettore, who had the title role, demanded that Mozart rewrite the arias that were meant for him.

The opera, in spite of all the vexations accompanying rehearsals, the operas success seemed inevitable as opening day approached. The readings of the recitatives quelled many questions of the young Mozart's talent for they showed that he had a firm grasp of Italian diction, thanks mainly to Padre Martini, whom he studied with intently while in Bolgna. Mozart was also very pleased with the copyist's work, for with sixteen of the instrumentalists scouring the parts the professionalism was astounding and the players were "dumbfounded". Leopold, who was present at all the rehearsals, predicted the opera's resounding success, but would not show Mozart the compliments because he thought his ears would be "too partisan". In a letter home Leopold wrote, "A good hour after Ave Maria on the day of Saint Stephen, picture to yourself Maestro Amadeo at his clavier midst the orchestra and think of me observing and listening in a box or balcony; in your thoughts wish him a successful performance and say a few 'Our Fathers' for him'. On December 26, 1770 Mozart, dressed in his best suit, led a sixty-person orchestra and seven singers in a rousing premiere that evoked cries of "*Viva il maestrino*"<sup>15</sup>. In a letter to Padre Martini Leopold wrote "My son's opera has been received most favorably in spite of the great opposition of his enemies and detractors, who before hearing a single note had spread the rumor that it was barbarous German composition.... The calumniators kept on spreading most evil reports"<sup>16</sup>.

In Milan, the first opera of the season normally drew a scarce crowd at best, but this was not the case with Mozart's *Mitridate*, this opera played to a full house twenty-

---

<sup>15</sup> Gutman, Robert W. *Mozart: A Cultural Biography*. 285

<sup>16</sup> Solomon, Maynard. *Mozart: A Life*. 78

two times during that season.<sup>17</sup> One of the keys to the operas success was Mozart's indulgence of his singers. He thought of his singers over the text, but since it was his prerogative to win his singers over, being such a young boy among great singers, he probably had to do so. Through dazzling feats of vocal pyrotechnics he won over the scrutinizing Italian crowd<sup>18</sup>. This opera was so well received and became so immediately popular Mozart was immediately commissioned to write another opera for the 1773 carnival season in Milan<sup>19</sup>.

*Mitridate* follows a very strict Metastasian mold, it's basic plan is that of a string of recitative on which he hangs dazzling arias containing coloratura embracing leaps, runs, arpeggios and many other kinds of virtuosic displays. The opera opens with a very efficient overture and is followed by twenty-five pieces, only two are for ensembles: the quintet closing the opera and the second-act finale for male and female sopranos. Apart from the duet, two arias in a minor key, and some interesting accompaniment, few places show Mozart's imagination penetrating through the libretto. As a whole, throughout the opera, Mozart almost seems self-conscious in his writing, only awakening the musical life of the protagonists, exposing a score "less wrought by inspiration than hammered out by sheer energy"<sup>20</sup>.

Despite all the emotional content and virtuosity contained in Mozart's music, as a complete work it fails to achieve "dramatic continuity". Even though Mozart gave every effort to create a work worthy of the setting, his young mind was unable to come to terms with the complete plot of the libretto, "there is little exploitation even of its externals, in

---

<sup>17</sup> Solomon, Maynard. *Mozart: A Life*. 78

<sup>18</sup> Gutman, Robert W. *Mozart: A Cultural Biography*. 286

<sup>19</sup> Solomon. 80

<sup>20</sup> Gutman. 286

particular the bold contrapositions and chiaroscuro of that pair of sons unlike in character but both in love with their father's wife. In Mozart's setting, the 'tragic dilemma does not energize; it disintegrates'<sup>21</sup>. Even though there are obvious moments of brilliance all through the piece that bring the ear to excitement, Mozart's use of the orchestra is very timid. This could be the youth's fear of the Italians dislike of "barbarous German music"<sup>22</sup>.

In the composing of *Mitridate* Mozart clearly made the decision to cater to the singers in order to ensure success. The musical content seems to have been directed by the technical abilities and limitations of the singers much more so than that of the emotions and motivations of the characters themselves<sup>23</sup>. In doing so he seems to have made several dramatic errors. There were times when the singers would demand different versions of arias because they did not reach their level technically. Sometimes Mozart would show his youth and would make misjudgments. The first version of second-act aria for the prima donna was abandoned after forty-two bars because Mozart had "misjudged matters of texture and tempo". Ismene's abandoned aria is very "four-square in phraseology and altogether a weak piece; if she asked for a new one for her first aria of the evening it would have been understandable"<sup>24</sup>. Although several of the singers gave Mozart much grief about their particular arias, it seems that the tenor, Cavaliere Guglielmo Ettore, caused the most trouble. There are four distinct sketches for his first aria that were rejected and the final version is the most technically demanding aria of the opera. His final aria was also reworked several times; the final version "does not seem

---

<sup>21</sup> Gutman, Robert. *Mozart: A Cultural Biography*. 286

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.* 287

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.* 292

<sup>24</sup> Sadie, Stanley. *A Note on Mozart's First Serious Opera*. 2

superior, but it did enable Ettore to sing several stirring top C's before marching off to death and glory"<sup>25</sup>.

As is so often the case when adapting any story to the opera stage, one of the major casualties is the inability to allow room for development. In the case of *Mitridate* a typical five-act French tragedy is condensed into a three-act Italian *opera seria*. Mozart does compensate for the majority of this by the sheer length of the work with its twenty-one arias, a duet and a short quintet for the pairs of lovers and Arbate.<sup>26</sup> Character development can also suffer in such adaptations. With Mozart's *Mitridate*, as well as many of his other early dramatic works, the character's actions are so predetermined by the mythology that from "the moment they set foot upon the stage and introduce themselves by way of a characteristic set piece, we know within a relatively narrow range what we will feel about them as they make their way through a predictable universe"<sup>27</sup>

*Mitridate* also lacks in a unity of place. In the opera there are eight separate places described as scenes for the action. The opening scene, which comes after a traditional three-part overture, is in *Piazza di Ninfea con Veduta in lontano della porta della citta*<sup>28</sup> (in the public square of Ninfea). In the fourth scene we are transported to *Tempio di Venere con ara accesa ed adorna di mirti e di rose* (In the Temple of Venus, adorned with Myrtles and roses). Scene ten offers yet another picturesque scene: *Porto di mare, con due flotte ancorate in siti opposti del canale. Da una parte veduta della citta di Ninfea* (Two fleets are anchored at each side of the seaport. There is a view of Nymphaea off to one side. To the sound of joyful music another squadron of ships sail into the

---

<sup>25</sup> Sadie, Stanley. *A Note on Mozart's First Serious Opera*. 2

<sup>26</sup> Keys, A.C. *Two Eighteenth-Century Racinian Operas*. 3

<sup>27</sup> Solomon, Maynard. *Mozart: A Life*. 510-511

<sup>28</sup> Keys. 3

port)<sup>29</sup>. In the final scene we are taken to the most elaborate scene of them all: *Atrio terreno, corrispondente a gran cortile nella reggia di Ninfea, da cui si scorgono in lontano I navigli romani che abbruciano sul mare*<sup>30</sup> (At the entrance to the land)<sup>31</sup>.

Mozart also tended to ignore, or manipulate, many of the inherent directions in the text. In contrast to the stark directions in the original ...*gardes qui soutenant Mitridate* is the elaborate stage direction of the warrior-king, who is now wounded at this point: *Nell'aprirsi della scena, preceduto intanto dale sue guardie e portato sopra ua spezie de cocchio formato dall'intreccio di vari scudi si avanza mitridate ferito...* Also as Mitridate is carried off in the final scene, Farnace, in complete submission, kisses his father's hand. As we learn from Ismene, it is Farnace that is responsible for destroying the Roman fleet. This makes little sense of the original character of Farnace, who, in the original, disappears before Act III is done, the last we see of him is him chained up in a tower and seated upon a stone. A scene that is included in Mozart's *Mitridate* but seems to have been ignored that this is the end of him<sup>32</sup>.

The biggest leap from the "strict economy" of the Racinian tragedy is the inclusion of the character of Ismene, the daughter of the king of Parthians who, in the original version, is the arranged spouse for the elder son Farnace and is only mentioned once and is never even given a name. It has been argued that her inclusion as a more important role in the opera gives more character to the opera by bringing in the female jealousy often exploited in Racinian text; however the libretto fails to take advantage of

---

<sup>29</sup> Translations - Castel, Nico. *The Libretti of Mozart's Completed Operas. Vol. II.* 209

<sup>30</sup> Keys, A.C. *Two Eighteenth-Century Racinian Operas.* 3

<sup>31</sup> Melzi, Robert C. *The Bantam New College Italian & English Dictionary.*

<sup>32</sup> Keys. 4

this opportunity and points to the true reason behind Ismene's inclusion as nothing more than "operatic expediency"<sup>33</sup>.

Other changes in the original story come in smaller details. In the original opera it opens with Arbate welcoming the arrival of Sifare at Ninfea. Upon Sifare's arrival Aspasia immediately appeals to him for help, however, unlike the Aspasia in the original, she does not name Farnace as her suitor, Sifare does this, and then expresses the secret love that he has for her. Although this does preserve the original idea of rivalry between the two brothers: *Et je suis mille fois plus criminel que lui* (I am more criminal than him), it has been lessened to *io sono di lui meno innocente* (I am less innocent than him).

Another example of a 'watered down' moment is Aspasia's appeal to Sifare itself: *Contro Farnace chiedo aita, o Signor. Dall'empie mani salvami pria: quest'è il mio voto* (Against Farnace I ask for help, oh Lord. From his wicked hands save me first. This is my wish.); this version of the passage is far from the essence of the original: *Defendez-moi des fureurs de Pharnace* (Defend me from the furies of Farnace)<sup>34</sup>. These actions are commented on in Aspasia's aria and then again in Sifare's even longer aria. Many feel that any impatience felt by an audience member aware of these changes would have to be comforted by the charm that Mozart instilled in the music of these arias<sup>35, 36</sup>.

A measure of the dramatic nature of this opera should not be taken too seriously with this opera. Mozart's focus was with the singers, male and female, and he simply took a template of what counted as a successful opera and simply filled in the blanks with virtuosic and charming music. Mozart served his singers the best to his abilities. His arias

---

<sup>33</sup> Keys, A. C. *Two Eighteenth-Century Racinian Operas*. 4

<sup>34</sup> Anderson, Elspeth, ed. *Harper Collins French Dictionary*.

<sup>35</sup> Key. 4

<sup>36</sup> Translations - Castel, Nico. *The Libretti of Mozart's Completed Operas. Vol. II*.

were stereotypical of the time (the arias for *Mitridate* being the most stereotypical in the Neapolitan style, particularly his aria closing Act I, which is in an almost *buffo* style)<sup>37</sup>. When changes were made to the story, large and small, they were often not because of any dramatic reasoning. Early versions of the opera were significantly less in stature, containing no less than six arias and one duet. These early versions would not meet the demands of the singers who were to take on these roles<sup>38</sup>.

Mozart had four main singers, all of equal quality. During the later days of writing it didn't seem to matter how much character he spun into the music the singers were always looking for more virtuosity and more coloratura. Much of Mozart's writing, even throughout the orchestra and recitatives, seems to lack courage. In particular the orchestral writing is hardly ever more than simple primitive accompaniment. But this simplicity is often coupled with arias and concert pieces when he did begin to flare his "dramatic spark, pieces in which passion simply will not be kept waiting"<sup>39</sup>. The entrance aria of *Mitridate* (aria no. 7) is far more than mere routine. *Mitridate* is returning to his homeland as a defeated warrior and this aria by itself is enough to stop one from seeing this as a stock 'theatrical tyrant'. *Asapsia's* aria (aria no. 4), in g minor, has such an explosive direct quality that it should be admired. The Roman *Marzio's* aria, despite it being somewhat superfluous, paints his character very efficiently with march-like rhythms. The second act duet is both beautiful and is in a very apt position in the opera<sup>40</sup>.

The action in the story is fairly simple, logical and direct and because of this almost all of Mozart's arias are action arias, coming out of the immediate situation at

---

<sup>37</sup> Einstein, Alfred. *Mozart: His Character His Works*. 397

<sup>38</sup> Einstein. 390

<sup>39</sup> Einstein. 397

<sup>40</sup> Einstein. 398

hand. The third-act drags a little bit and is somewhat unsuccessful, especially for it being the point in the story where Mitridate is in the greatest danger of anywhere else in the opera. At this moment all the action stops and Mitridate sings an aria in the place of allowing the action to push forward to fruition<sup>41</sup>.

The craftsmanship of the score, especially given the composer's age, and the challenges offered to the singers combined to enrapture the public, in spite of its flaws<sup>42</sup>. *Mitridate* is "the work of an instinctive composer of music drama"<sup>43</sup>. This work was a necessary step in Mozart's progress and a very important step in his lifetime preoccupation with aspects of the human condition: love, ambition and death. In *Mitridate* Aspasia's character in particular seemed to have hit a nerve with the young man. "In her role we have something that transports us to another realm of consciousness, creating in the listener a serene acknowledgement, of not an understanding, of death"<sup>44</sup>. Mozart's success with this opera comes in its emotional content. The arias are filled with emotional power and gives "one the sense that these are human beings with real problems, (even if stock and unsubtle ones)"<sup>45</sup>.

---

<sup>41</sup> Einstein, Alfred. *Mozart: His Character His Works*. 398

<sup>42</sup> Gutman, Robert W. *Mozart: A Cultural Biography*. 287

<sup>43</sup> Sadie, Stanley. *A Note on Mozart's First Serious Opera*. 2

<sup>44</sup> Glasow, Thomas E. *Mitridate, re di Ponto*. 154

<sup>45</sup> Sadie. 1

## Bibliography

- Anderson, Elspeth. *Harper Collins French Dictionary*. Harper Collins Ltd. New York. 1990.
- Blom, Eric. *Mozart* Pellegrini and Cudaby Inc. New York, NY. 1949.
- Castel, Nico. *The Libretti of Mozart's Completed Operas: Volume II*. Leyerle Publications. Mt. Morris, NY. 1998. p. 191 - 278
- Einstein, Alfred. *Mozart: His Character His Works*. Oxford University Press, London. 1945. p. 390, 396-398
- Glasow, Thomas E. *Mitridate, re di Ponte*. *The Opera Quarterly*, 8, no. 3 (Fall 1991). p. 154
- Gutman, Robert W. *Mozart: A Cultural Biography*. Harcourt Brace & Company. New York, NY. 1999. p. 283, 286-287, 292
- Keys, A. C. *Two Eighteenth-Century Racinian Operas*. *Music and Letters*. Vol. 59 No. 1 Jan. 1978. p. 1-4
- Melzi, Robert C. *The Bantam New College Italian & English Dictionary*. Bantam Books. New York. 1976.
- Sadie, Stanley. *A Note on Mozart's First Serious Opera*. *The Musical times*. Vol. 113, No. 1547. Jan. 1972. p. 1-2
- Solomon, Maynard. *Mozart: A Life*. Harper Collins Publishers. New York. 1995. p. 78-80, 84

A Brief Look at Mozart's Treatment of the Libretto in *Mitridate, re di Ponto*

By

James Sproul

Oklahoma City University

Opera History

December 2006