



Lorenzo da Ponte,
portrait by Samuel Morse

Say "The Marriage of Figaro" to your average arts fan, and two names leap to mind: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who wrote the music to the opera; and Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, who penned the controversial play on which it was based. Few think of Lorenzo da Ponte, the poet who adapted Beaumarchais' text into the libretto for Mozart's opera.

Da Ponte, working from the play, was able to give Mozart a libretto that truly communicated the play. But just who was this man behind the words behind the music?

Lorenzo da Ponte was born neither a Lorenzo nor a da Ponte, but Emanuele Conegliano, the eldest son of Jewish parents living in Ceneda, Italy, in 1749. After his mother died, his father remarried, but to a Christian woman, which required the entire family to convert to Catholicism. The custom of the day was for a newly baptized family to adopt the surname of the presiding bishop; thus the Coneglianos became the da Pontes, and as eldest son, Emanuele, took the bishop's first name, Lorenzo, as well.

Da Ponte tried to make a career of Catholicism by enrolling in the seminary. But though he was ordained a priest in 1773, the vow of chastity proved too difficult for him; Da Ponte's numerous dalliances with married women enraged his superiors, who exiled him from Venice in 1779.

Eventually da Ponte arrived in Vienna, where he acquired the position of court poet to Emperor Joseph II and met Mozart. In 1786, they collaborated on *Le Nozze di Figaro*, which, due to the controversial nature of the material – Beaumarchais' play had been banned from the stage for its criticism of the ruling class – had to be written in secret. Da Ponte himself took the finished product directly to the emperor, insisting that he had "cut anything that might offend good taste or public decency." A few selections of the piece were played for the emperor. The royal ear was pleased with Mozart's music, and the opera allowed to proceed.

Mozart and da Ponte repeated the success of *Figaro*

twice more, with *Don Giovanni* (1787) and *Così fan tutte* (1790), forming a group that many consider the finest operas of Mozart's career (if not all opera). During the composition of *Don Giovanni*, Da Ponte and Mozart lived in apartments across the street from each other in Prague and would shout out the window to each other as they worked. This fruitful partnership ended prematurely, however; in 1791, Mozart died and da Ponte lost his position as court poet.

From Vienna, da Ponte's life follows an even more curious route. In Trieste, he met an Englishwoman, married her, and moved to London, where he wrote for the Drury Lane Theatre, lost and regained his position several times, and finally declared bankruptcy. Impoverished, he set sail for the United States, where he pursued assorted dead-end jobs

In the United States, da Ponte settled in New York first, then Philadelphia, 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. His personal library became the core of its Italian collection. He was the first faculty member to have been born a Jew, and also the first to have been ordained a priest.

As a teacher who created the first chair of Italian language and literature at New York City's Columbia College, he brought to life Dante, Petrarch, Alfieri, Ariosto, and the Greek Classics to more than 2,500 students in America; as a bookseller and a philosopher, he personally deposited more than 26,000 Italian-language books into libraries and bookstores. He expounded on many subjects in magazines, newspapers, and gave orations; he held small cultural events for birthdays, and at age 75, he organized and financed the first American production of his opera *Don Giovanni* in 1826.

In 1828, at the age of 79, Da Ponte became a naturalized U.S. citizen.

In 1833, he personally organized and financed the first opera house in New York City. Five years later, da Ponte died in New York. His body, like that of his friend and greatest collaborator, Mozart, was buried in an unmarked grave.

This nation owes a tremendous unacknowledged debt to our immigrant son Da Ponte.

Source: *Unsung Hero* BY DAN DIETZ

Behind the music of 'The Marriage of Figaro' is Lorenzo da Ponte