

LA CLEMENZA DI TITO

Background

The despot Vitellius has been deposed and assassinated by followers of Vespasian. Vespasian's son, Titus, is the new ruler. Titus' long-term mistress, Berenice, is unpopular because she is a foreign subject, a Judean. Reluctantly, Titus agrees to send her away and to choose a Roman bride.

ACT 1

Vitellia – daughter of Vitellius – is determined to regain power for her faction by marrying Titus. Hearing that he is to marry his Jewish mistress Berenice, she persuades his best friend and comrade-at-arms **Sextus**, (who is desperately in love with her) to lead her supporters in an insurrection, to kill Titus and burn the city.

Vitellia hesitates when she hears that Berenice has been sent away. Despite her anger, she is attracted to Titus. But when Titus then chooses Sextus' sister **Servilia** instead, Vitellia renews her vengeful demands on Sextus.

Titus, who has rejected the urgings of his followers (led by his adviser **Publius**) to be proclaimed a god, wishes that rulers could retain private lives with sincere friendships and affections. He hopes that in marrying Servilia he will at least be in a position to raise up his friend Sextus. But Servilia, who is already betrothed to **Annius**, (a noble friend of Sextus and supporter of Titus), tells Titus the truth, and he blesses her choice.

Titus next choice of bride is Vitellia – but Vitellia's plot has already been set in motion and, before she can call Sextus back once again, the city is burning and the murder of the Titus is announced.

MOZART

ACT 2

Sextus confesses his guilt to Annius, who reassures him that Titus has escaped assassination, and persuades him that, since no plot has yet been uncovered, he need not flee. On the other hand, Vitellia urges him to leave, fearing that he may confess thus betray her part in the conspiracy. It is too late; his accomplices have named Sextus and he is arrested. Vitellia can only think of the trial to come where she is certain to be exposed and lose her chance to regain the throne.

Sextus remains silent and is condemned to death. Titus questions Sextus alone, hoping to discover some reason to grant him a pardon. Sextus assures Titus that his motive was not treasonous but refuses to say why he acted – or for whom. Titus, changing from friend to judge, signs the death warrant. Alone, moments later, he follows 'the promptings of his heart' and tears up the warrant.

Vitellia's conscience overwhelms her as she contemplates the death of the man who, out of love for her, would have killed Titus, who is now her husband-to-be. She confesses everything. Titus, who would have absolved Sextus despite his terrible crimes, here confronts an even greater conspiracy. Remarkably, he pardons them both, thus healing factional dissent.

A CLOSER LOOK AT LA CLEMENZA DI TITO

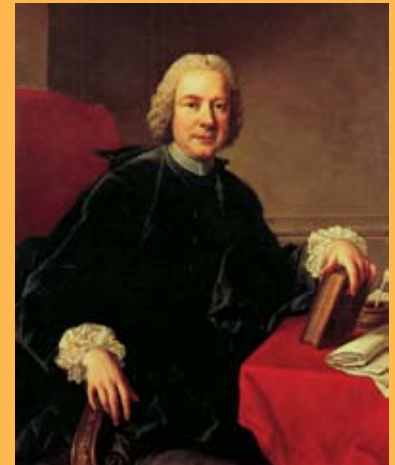
Hapsburg History

Mozart's penultimate opera, was written in 1791 for a highly theatrical occasion: the coronation in Prague of the Hapsburg emperor Leopold II and his wife Maria Louisa as King and Queen of Bohemia. The enlightened absolutism of the Hapsburgs was in crisis. The popular, centralising reforms made by Leopold's brother Joseph II had alienated the Bohemian and Hungarian nobility; moreover, the Austrian Netherlands were in revolt, and the French revolution was threatening absolute monarchy all over Europe. Leopold's coronations were important demonstrations of strength and majesty, dramatising the choice of his diverse subjects to be ruled by him, and the privileges they thereby secured.

"The enlightened absolutism of the Hapsburgs was in crisis"

It was apposite that for the principal entertainment Mozart was commissioned by the impresario Guardasoni to set a great libretto on the subject of a benevolent monarch whose reason and clemency triumphs over the forces of revolution, and over the dangers of passion. The libretto was Metastasio's *La clemenza di Tito*, first performed in 1734 (to music by another composer, Caldara) in honour of Leopold's grandfather, the emperor Charles VI.

Metastasio had skilfully integrated episodes from the history of emperor Titus Vespasianus (whose reign AD78-81 included the building of the Colosseum and the eruption of Vesuvius that destroyed Pompeii, as well as a great fire in Rome) with raucous fictions derived from dramas of Corneille and Racine.



Pompeo Batoni, *Ritratto di Pietro Metastasio*, Florence, private collection

Between 1734 and 1774 many other composers set Metastasio's libretto in the service of other rules – but it remained most firmly associated with the Hapsburgs. The commission to Mozart was the first setting of this text in 16 years, during which tastes in opera had changed. Leopold's other brother, Joseph, favoured comic opera, and Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* found favour; Leopold, meanwhile cherished the more traditional opera seria while he was Grand Duke of Tuscany, and as emperor he restored it in favour in Vienna and Prague.

Mozart and Metastasio

At this point in the story it would be easy – and misguided – to trot out the commonplace that Mozart was compelled to compose an opera on a text that was already out of date in 1791, and that is why he did not succeed. In support of this commonplace, at least three claims are made: he wrote in haste and did not even bother to compose the recitatives himself; the result is static; the opera is/was not popular.

The last of these accusations is non-historic, the other two nonsensical. Unfortunately, Mozart's Tito was disliked by Leopold and his wife, and by a couple of other chroniclers of the first performance: however, it ran on at Prague, until the première of his last opera, *Die Zauberflöte*. It was frequently performed in Prague, Belgium, Frankfurt, Dresden, Paris; in 1817 it came to St Petersburg (in Russian), Vienna (in German), Milan and London (the first of Mozart's operas to be performed there), and it remained popular until the 1840s, when a different kind of opera took over.

Mozart's correspondence shows that he always wanted to write 'true' opera, opera seria, but he was rarely commissioned to do so. It now seems clear that he had started to set *La clemenza di Tito* some 18 months before he received the commission.

"he always wanted to write true opera"

Mozart composed much of the opera swiftly. This was his practice, almost incomprehensible now. But Mozart, like Handel, Rossini and Donizetti, had a deep understanding of the theatre, and undeniable facility as a composer. Opera was the musical and dramatic main event of the day: skill and fluency in its composition is hardly a sign of lack of interest or application. It is likely, that Mozart's pupil and assistant Sussmayr did compose many of the recitatives: this was an entirely normal practice, and no indication of Mozart's distaste for recitative. That the recitatives are longer in this than his other operas is a reflection of Leopold's taste, and Mozart's judgement: for many years after it was written it was especially esteemed inasmuch as it offered singers the chance to act! Recitative was meant to be essentially simple and conventional in a musical sense, in order to highlight the beauty and authority of the text.

Mozart's collaborator was Catenio Mazzolà, a venetian specialist in comic opera, and a contemporary of Mozart's great collaborator Da Ponte. Mazzolà

freely trimmed the three secondary roles, and simplified the plot. Working closely with Mozart, he wrote texts for arias that could be composed in the modern *rondò* form, and rearranged texts so that action could take place during many new ensembles – 3 duets, 3 trios, a quintet and a sextet (both with chorus). The result was terrific concentration of arias and ensembles, but these were set off against many noble recitatives of Metastasio that were untouched, deliberately, such as the monumental scene between Sesto and Tito in the second act. With extreme care that belies any accusations of haste, Mozart and his collaborator Mazzolà shaped the emotional climaxes of the opera, balancing sensational and introspective (and 'long' and 'short' in terms of scenic depth) moments.

"The result was terrific concentration of arias and ensembles"

Stasis and Seriousness

The third commonplace complaint about *La clemenza di Tito* is that it is 'static'. I am often mystified by the use of the word 'static' (and its supposed opposite, 'dynamic') in talk of theatre. Curiously, I understand it better in discussion of two dimensional art, like paintings or photographs! I gather that static is bad, dynamic is good – yet I wonder. The most moving film sequence I saw last year (in Beauvois's *Of Gods and Men*) was a long series of slow close-ups (increasingly close) of the faces of a group of monks seated at a table, afraid of death. The thrill of *opera seria* is that characters interact, in matters of life, death, honour and love, and that we are then privileged to see them dramatise their spiritual states in arias and ensembles. I say dramatise, although the singing character may move little, or in a stylised way (as the duration is not 'natural', naturalistic movement looks plotted and, often foolish). Ideally the singer's physical expression is poetic, reflecting text and music in a way that commands attention and invites feelings. It may not be recognised immediately, just as

the text may not reveal itself immediately – in fact, it's all the better if it elicits no relaxed sigh that says 'I recognise that tune' or 'I recognise that text' – but that is in keeping with the duration of the aria, the twists and turns of the *rondò*, the repetition with difference in the finale. If I am given to understand that something is 'static', I get a perverse feeling that it may be serious and beautiful, addressing complex truths, with movement that is poetic, coming from within, relating to the music, the environment, the other performers on or off the stage, or to memory.

Guardasoni's Singers, Mozart's Characters

The two singers specified in the commission to Mozart are the prima dona Maria Marchetti Fantozzi (Vitellia) and the musico (primo donno) Domenico Bedini (Sesto), both of whom had long, distinguished careers in *opera seria*. Everyone liked Fantozzi's acting of strong women, and many liked the fullness of her voice (in relatively small theatres, by today's standard). It is likely that both of these artists played the same characters in other settings of *La clemenza di Tito*. Bedini had been singing in the best homes for 30 years when he created Mozart's Sesto, so he was no slouch, either.

Some ink has been spilled in an effort to assert that Mozart would have preferred a tenor (read, more manly) Sesto, and a baritone Tito. Why? The evidence amounts to mind reading. Sesto is a magnificent male role for a soprano, and Tito no mean stretch for a lyric tenor. Tito was written for Antonio Baglioni – Mozart's original Ottavio in *Don Giovanni*, and a regular interpreter of Basilio (*Le nozze di Figaro*) and Fernando (*Così fan tutte*).

Vitellia is a compelling character, the entirely fictional daughter of the horribly real Vitellius, emperor for a short time before killed at the orders of Vespasian, Titus' father. Orphaned and cut off from power by Titus' family, she is understandably bent on revenge on Titus, and unfortunately smitten by love for him. That's a good start – but what is really exciting is that she changes onstage. In the first scene, she clearly views herself as a mighty victim. It's hard not to slight the daughter of an assassinated and discredited military ruler, after all. Her self absorption, especially in the two trios, shows that she is wrestling with something, but that she is imprisoned by her own history. She is ready to abandon the apparently guilty Sextus, and to flee Rome before she is discovered as his accomplice – but something in Sextus' unwavering fidelity (even though he knows she will abandon him) and Titus' bewildering clemency (though he knows his



Igor Mitoraj, Testa Addormentata, Bronze, Canary Wharf, London



Emperor Titus, Roman
sculpture in marble, c. 80 A.D.

friend betrayed him) makes her stop, really stop. She cannot be unchanged – so she goes to Titus to confess her share in the plot, despite the likelihood that she and Sextus will be fed to wild beasts in the arena. This is no unaccountable change, but it is a change of heart – she stops defining herself as the instrument of her father’s revenge, and recognises that she loves braver, complex Sextus, and esteems strangely political, forgiving Titus.

Opera of character

Titus has two defining moments in this story. The first borrowed from French drama (Racine’s *Bérénice*) precedes the action of the opera; the second forms the longest scene of recitative, one of the very few scenes of Metastasio’s drama unaltered by Mazzolá and Mozart.

In the first, Titus sends Berenice away. We know from Suetonius that the historical Titus met Berenice when he and his father Vespasian put down a rebellion in AD66. A Jewish descendant of Cleopatra, and the sister of Herod Agrippa II, she was clearly unsuitable for a senior Roman officer; moreover, she was 13 years his senior, 38 when they met. Nine years later she joined him in Rome, causing some scandal by living openly with him; she elected to leave in order to preserve his reputation, but he recalled her as soon as he became emperor in AD79. Romans would not accept her as his wife, so he was forced to send her away (at the same time he sent away his favourite foreign boys, though this is not the subject of any play or opera!). She was 51, he 38.

Titus starts the drama having sent away his long term lover/companion. In his first scene he asks his subjects (the same ones who rejected Berenice) not to turn him into a God, and says that the one good thing about being an emperor is that he can grant honours and privileges to his loyal friends, like Sextus. What he doesn’t know is that while he has set aside

thoughts of passionate attachment – apart from his own, great friendship – Sextus has discovered it with the blind zeal of a convent.

“You know if you love La clemenza di Tito if you can love Sextus”

Titus is a little bewildered by the time it takes to get a new wife, a little saddened by the loneliness of senior position, and a little disillusioned by his worshipful subjects – but nothing prepares him for the wanton insurrection, and apparently causeless betrayal of Sextus. Mozart and Mazzolá bring this on stage, in full horror, and make it clear that Sextus believes he has killed Titus. We all think so, at the end of the first act. But Titus cannot condemn his friend without knowing why he should want to kill him. Their great, anguished scene is the measure of Titus’ saddened humanity, and Sextus conflicting, immense feelings.

Like Vitellia, Sextus is created by Metastasio, and subtly transformed by Mozart and Mazzolá. You know if you love *La clemenza di Tito* if you can love Sextus. We all love Annio and Servilia, the virtuous people with endearing frailties and an inclination to have a mortgage and a family; the more we like Titus, the more we pity the isolation such nobility creates: but Sextus tests us. ‘How long has this been going on’ is the song he is missing, stricken by love for Vitellia, magnificent and incomplete. The more she whips, the more he loves: we can disapprove, but we can’t pretend we don’t know how it feels. And how he feels! He feels each foolish choice, each rejection, betrayal, each new depth of character – and finally, he faces the consequences of his actions without anaesthetic without excuse, without plea for anything except acknowledgement that he has loved (Titus, as well as the unmentioned Vitellia) not little, but badly.

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