



# OPERA SERIA: Mozart's Version

by Katy Lindhart

Detail of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart from Mozart family portrait by Johann Nepomuk della Croce

What were you doing when you were fourteen? If you're Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, you were hard at work on an operatic commission for Milan: *Mitridate, re di Ponto*. Composed in 1770, *Mitridate* is a remarkable synthesis of Baroque virtuosity and Classical clarity and expressiveness, showcasing the young composer's exuberance and emerging voice, while still existing within the confines of the Italian opera seria ("serious opera") genre.

The virtuosic vocal writing in *Mitridate* demonstrates an understanding of the Baroque traditions Mozart inherited, reminiscent of the florid, intricate vocal writing of his predecessors, like George Frideric Handel and Antonio Vivaldi. By composing this way, the teenage Mozart paid homage to the conventions of opera seria, infusing them with dramatic expression and a fresh, forward-looking sensibility.

*Mitridate* was Mozart's first foray into serious opera, but it wouldn't be his last. With *Mitridate*, Mozart started down a path that would define his operatic writing. Opera seria played a larger role in his earlier works than any other subgenre, and its influence can still be felt deeply in the rest of his operatic canon. Mozart was brought up on opera seria, and an opera seria — *La clemenza di Tito* — was one of his last stage works.

## The Mozarts go to Italy

For the Mozarts, music was the family business. His father, Leopold, was Kapellmeister at the prince-archbishop's court at Salzburg and authored a popular violin manual. Both Mozart and his older sister, Maria Anna (nicknamed Nannerl), were child

prodigies, and Leopold capitalized on their talent, taking them on an extended European tour in 1763. Nannerl was twelve and Wolfgang was just seven years old. They performed at nearly every cultural center in Europe, where Mozart was exposed to the music of his elder contemporaries. He was, naturally, influenced by the style of the time, which he soaked up like "musical blotting paper."<sup>1</sup>

By 1769, Nannerl had come of age, ending the duo's performance career. But Leopold was eager to continue his son's education, and in Europe in 1769, that meant only one thing: Italy. It was an essential destination for any young composer, especially for those interested in opera. For nearly two hundred years, Italy had been the world's operatic tastemaker. Operatic commissions were "the late eighteenth-century composers' honeypots,"<sup>2</sup> according to Mozart biographer Stanley Sadie, and a mastery of the style could help ensure Mozart's commercial success and financial security. And so, high off his recent appointment as Konzertmeister to the Salzburg court, the thirteen-year old Mozart (along with his father) made his way to Italy.

## The virtuosic Baroque

Western music history is often taught as if it were split up into neat and orderly time periods, but music itself rarely obeys those rules. While Mozart sits firmly in the Classical period (roughly 1750-1820), the style and sound of the late Baroque (1680-1750ish), exemplified by composers like George Frideric Handel, J.S. Bach, and Antonio Vivaldi, was incredibly influential — not just on Mozart's music, but on the music of those who mentored him. Vivaldi's *The Four*

*Seasons*, which will be reimagined at Boston Lyric Opera by countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo and playwright Sarah Ruhl later this season, illustrates perfectly what the late Baroque was all about.

Baroque music is virtuosic and challenging, with many opportunities to show off a soloist's technical prowess, but it also exists within a strict structure — in the case of *The Four Seasons*, the concerto form. Each of the four violin concertos that make up this piece contains three movements that follow a fast-slow-fast structure. Operating within the concerto framework certainly didn't hinder Vivaldi's ability to compose an expressive, groundbreaking work. Like Mozart, Vivaldi was a young musical prodigy — a violinist — and his talent is reflected in *The Four Seasons'* punishingly difficult violin solos. Centuries before programmatic music became a popular convention in orchestral writing, Vivaldi's virtuosic writing in *The Four Seasons* was able to evoke the sweetness of a bird's song and the drama of a summer storm.

On the operatic stage, this paradoxical pairing of form and flash thrived. Opera seria was the dominant genre of the 18th century, until it began to fall out of fashion in the late 1770s. These operas were usually based on mythological or historical stories, utilizing a three-act structure. In opera seria, the solo voice reigned supreme, and most of these operas used duets, trios, and other vocal ensembles — which Mozart would later become known for — sparingly. Instead, they alternated recitative — speech-like passages that moved the plot — and arias — solos that allowed the character to express their feelings while simultaneously providing opportunities for artists to show off their virtuosity. The da capo aria, consisting of an A section, a contrasting B section, and a repeat of the A section with added embellishments and ornamentation (tasteful or not), was the hallmark of opera seria. It was within this framework that Mozart composed his second full-length opera (and first serious opera), *Mitridate, re di Ponto*.

## Making *Mitridate*

In 1770, Italy was not yet a unified nation, consisting of separate states, many of which were under Austrian rule. In Milan, Count Karl Joseph von Firmian held much of the power. A powerful supporter of the arts, Firmian was also the director of the Teatro Regio Ducale, and it was his patronage that secured the commission of *Mitridate, re di Ponto*. To prevent outrage over the hiring of a fourteen-

year-old, Firmian set up a public audition of sorts for Mozart, challenging him to compose three new arias setting texts by Pietro Metastasio, a poet and one of the era's most prolific writers of opera seria libretti. Mozart proved himself and left Milan three days later, contract in hand.

When *Mitridate* was written, it was common practice for recitatives to be composed first. Arias were written closer to the premiere, so the composer could better tailor them to the voices of the individual singers. Unfortunately, Mozart's age and nationality didn't endear him to the cast, and several of the singers requested at least one rewrite. The tenor, Guglielmo d'Ettore, was the worst offender, demanding four sketches for *Mitridate's* first aria, "Se di lauri il crine adorno," each very different from the last. In a particularly sharp blow, he replaced the character's final aria, "Vado incontro al fato estremo," with a version by Francesco Gasparini, who had written his own version of *Mitridate* years earlier. However, the majority of the cast was eventually won over. In a letter home, Leopold Mozart wrote that, "Since the first rehearsal night, all these people have been silenced, and they left without a word."<sup>3</sup>

In *Mitridate*, Mozart's ability to define and differentiate characters musically is on full display, demonstrating both a musical and an emotional maturity far beyond his years. While each role contains elements of the virtuosic — florid coloratura, octave leaps, and an often punishingly high tessitura — they are employed in a variety of ways, tailored to the personality and situation of each individual character. In "Al destin che la minaccia," Aspasia, the woman at the center of the power struggle between father and sons, pleads with fate to let her control her own destiny. Her music is bold and heroic, with strong coloratura lines that demonstrate her strength. The music of Ismene, the opera's only other woman character, also demands a command of vocal gymnastics. However, her coloratura comes in the form of extended triplets, complemented by the sweet and graceful melodic lines that give her aria, "In faccia all'oggetto" a more girlish character. *Mitridate's* entrance aria, "Se di lauri il crine adorno," befits a defeated king, controlled and noble. The music of the two brothers, Farnace and Sifare, couldn't be more different from each other. Farnace's declamatory, driving music demands frequent leaps of an octave or more, as displayed in "Venga pur, minacci e frema," while Sifare's music



Teatro Regio Ducale in Milan

requires sustained, expressive singing, beauty of tone, and the energetic coloratura of a young man in love. When the lovers, Sifare and Aspasia, sing in the opera's only duet, "Se viver non degg'io," the two exchange florid coloratura, until they come together in unison, expressing their desire to die together.

With so much on display, it should be no surprise that *Mitridate, re di Ponto* was a hit, resulting in 21 performances. After opening night, Leopold wrote that "... after almost all the arias there was extraordinary applause and cries of 'Viva il Maestro! Viva il Maestrino!'"<sup>4</sup>

### Opera seria's lasting influence

From an early age, Mozart was an adaptable composer, with a talent for assimilating to new musical forms and styles, saying in 1778 in a letter to his father, "As you know, I can more or less adopt or imitate any kind and style of composition."<sup>5</sup> But while Mozart felt the influence of the composers and pedagogues that surrounded him in Italy, it was his ability to transcend whatever genre he was emulating that makes him so beloved today. He wisely used this gift to his advantage — becoming "assimilator, perfector, and innovator."<sup>6</sup>

While Mozart moved on to opera buffa (comic opera), *dramma giocoso* (a serious opera with comic elements), and the German *Singspiel* (an opera with spoken dialogue, typically comedic), the influence of opera seria was never far away. In operas like *Don Giovanni*, he seamlessly integrates seria-style characters like Donna Anna and Don Ottavio with traditional buffa characters like Zerlina and Leporello, marrying the virtuosic, florid music of the Baroque with the simpler, clearer melodies that defined the Classical period. While *Mitridate* displays a more obvious emphasis on virtuosity, his later operas demonstrate a more mature, integrated approach, where technical brilliance enhances musical expression and dramatic impact.

Mozart's early immersion in opera seria's demanding vocal techniques and dramatic flair profoundly shaped his compositional style. The virtuosic elements he mastered became essential tools in his musical arsenal, not only defining the characters in his operas, but also elevating the emotional and dramatic stakes of his works. *Mitridate, re di Ponto* was not just a milestone in Mozart's career; it was a foundation upon which he built a legacy that continues to captivate audiences today.

<sup>1</sup>Lindsay Kemp, "How Mozart Loved Handel," *Gramophone*, January 1, 2015. | <sup>2</sup>Stanley Sadie, *Mozart: The Early Years 1756-1781* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). | <sup>3</sup>"Mozart's Biography: Early Operas and Italy (1770-1773)," *Classic FM*, September 20, 2013. | <sup>4</sup>*Ibid.* | <sup>5</sup>David Cairns, *Mozart and His Operas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). | <sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 17.