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## Christian Gottlob Neefe and the early reception of Figaro and Don Giovanni

When he became Elector of Bonn in 1784, Joseph II's youngest brother, the music-loving Maximilian Franz, inherited a financial crisis as a result of which he had to close the stage.<sup>1</sup> During the five-year theatrical hiatus that ensued, Bonn missed out on public productions of the new wave of popular Viennese operas by Salieri, Martín y Soler, Mozart and Dittersdorf. The delay was merely temporary as once the stage re-opened at the start of 1789, this repertoire dominated the schedules. In the meantime, the commercial dissemination of Viennese opera was entirely unaffected, the local retailer Nikolaus Simrock having active links with copyists such as Sukowaty and Lausch. The range of what he had on offer is very clear from the advertisement he published in Münster where Maximilian Franz was Prince-Bishop late in 1786.<sup>2</sup> By the start of 1787, he was already at work on Figaro. On 14 May 1787, he reported in a letter to his erstwhile colleague Gustav Friedrich Wilhelm Großmann that a score he had been preparing was almost ready.<sup>3</sup> The opera was complete, but he was now engaged in making a further copy.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A research project into the operatic scores of Maximilian Franz is currently being undertaken at the University of Vienna entitled: 'The Music Library of Maximilian Franz, Elector of Cologne: an Identification and Analysis of its Surviving Music-dramatic Sources.'

<sup>2</sup> Münsterischen Intelligenzblatt (15 December 1786), no.100: 'Beym Hofmusikus Simrock in Bonn .... Ferner kann man von den besten und neuesten Opern den Klavierauszug haben, als Mozarth, die Entführung aus dem Serail, und die Dorfdeputirten [by Teyber], gestochen, geschrieben und mit deutschem oder italienischem Text. Salieri, La Grotta di Trifonio [sic]. Paisiello, der König Theodor, und den Barbier von Sevilien. La Condatina [sic] di Spirito. Salieri, Il Ricco d'un giorno. Sarti, Fra due littigandi il terzo gode. Cimaroso [sic], il Cittore [sic] Varigino [sic]. Mozart, La [sic] Nozza [sic] di Figaro. Storace, gli Sposi malcontenti. Dittersdorf, der Apotheker und der Doktor. Von allen diesen Opern ist der Preiß verschieden.'

<sup>3</sup> The Großmann correspondence is discussed in Michael Rüppel, Gustav Friedrich Wilhelm Großmann 1743-1796: Eine Epoche deutscher Theater- und Kulturgeschichte (Wehrhahn, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Leipzig, Universitätsbibliothek, Sondersammlungen, Sammlung Kestner, I C III 118: Simrock to Großmann, 14 May 1787: 'Le Nozze di Figaro ist bald fertig, und wird sogleich abgeschickt werden .... 'La nozza di Figaro ist bereits fertig, ich müß aber solche auch für mich noch einmal abschreiben lassen'. On the first occasion, the spelling 'Le' seems to have been altered from 'La'. As amply demonstrated in the Münster advertisement, Simrock was prone to misspell Italian title such as La condatina in corte [sic]. This letter is reproduced in Ian Woodfield, 'Christian Gottlob Neefe and the Bonn National Theatre, with new light on the Beethoven family', Music & Letters, vol.93 (2012), 304.

In preparing Singspiel versions of popular Viennese opere buffe for sale, Simrock worked closely with Christian Gottlob Neefe who had been music director until the closure of the stage. His activities as an arranger mirror changing tastes in Bonn. In 1786, he was still preoccupied with original Singspiele and arrangements of opéra comique, but the following year, he turned his attention to Mozart. Neefe's first mention of Figaro came in a letter of 13 November 1787 in which he wrote that after much prompting he was thinking about making an arrangement of 'Nozze di Figaro' - he usually omitted the article - and he asked whether Großmann yet had a translation. If that were the case, then he proposed a swap.<sup>5</sup> The timing is significant; almost exactly one month after the festive performance in Prague on 14 October, Neefe in Bonn felt himself coming under pressure to begin work on a German version. Großmann was also interested in Mozart's new opera, but there was a significant delay because the translation he had decided to use (by his daughter) was still not finished. In the event, it was not given in Hannover until 18 May 1789.<sup>6</sup> Neefe asked about its progress on 18 December 1787.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, he felt obliged to pass on a message from Simrock apologising for the inaccuracy of the score supplied, the result, he explained, of a faulty original.<sup>8</sup> When he replied on 31 December, Großmann pointed out,

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<sup>5</sup> Leipzig, Universitätsbibliothek, Sondersammlungen, Sammlung Kestner, I C II 283: Neefe to Großmann, 13 November 1787: 'Jetzt denk ich mich auf vieler Aufforderung an Nozze di Figaro zu machen. Solten Sie aber schon eine Übersetzung davon haben, so senden Sir mir sie, ich schick Ihnen eine andre dagegen.'

<sup>6</sup> Dexter Edge, 'Figaro in Lübeck (spurious document)', in Mozart: New Documents, edited by Dexter Edge and David Black, first published 12 June 2014, accessed 30 July 2015, clarifies the muddled interpretations in the literature concerning this performance.

<sup>7</sup> Leipzig, Universitätsbibliothek, Sondersammlungen, Sammlung Kestner, I C II 283: Neefe to Großmann, 18 December 1787: 'Ist Nozze di Figaro noch nicht fertig?'

<sup>8</sup> Ibid: 'Simrock entschuldigt seine fehlerhafte Kopie mit ähnlichen Originalien. Adieu, Ihr ergeben Neefe.' This seems to have been a common problem as on several occasions Simrock became aware of the large number of errors in his source copy from Vienna. He began his letter of 14 May 1787 with the admission that the score of Der Apotheker by Dittersdorf was inaccurate in many places, something he claimed to have discovered only after it had been sold. Großmann would be well advised to have it checked before the parts were copied. Leipzig, Universitätsbibliothek, Sondersammlungen, Sammlung Kestner: I C II 385: Simrock to Großmann, 14 May 1787: 'Den Doktor und Apotheker habe ich bereits abgeschickt und Sie werden solchen nun schon erhalten haben. Ich finde in der Partitur woraus ich solchen abcopiren lies viele Fehler. Lassen Sie also die Partitur vorher Corigiren, sonst werden die ausgeschriebene Stimmen unkorrekt.' Perhaps the accuracy of Viennese commercial copies was no better or worse than the average, but the demand for them was so acute that checking procedures seem sometimes to have been omitted in the interests of rapid transmission.

reasonably enough: 'Le nozze di Figaro is still not ready; it is a difficult piece of work.'<sup>9</sup> With progress on Figaro on hold pending the receipt of a translation from Großmann, Neeffe's main priority in 1788 was to prepare German versions of other festive works certain to be requested by Maximilian Franz once the stage reopened. Martín y Soler's new opera L'arbore di Diana naturally took precedence as it had been presented at the Vienna gala. Its transmission time to Bonn was very fast. Only two months after the première on 1 October 1787, Neeffe was already at work.<sup>10</sup> Simrock acquired the score, listing it among the new operas he now had in stock on 21 November 1788, just six weeks before it received its first Bonn performance.<sup>11</sup>

In late 1788, Neeffe turned his attention to Don Giovanni, commissioned as a festive work for the arrival of Maria Theresia in Prague, although not ready in time. Although the Vienna performance run was underway, he acquired a score of the Prague version.<sup>12</sup> By the end of November, Simrock was able to include Don Giovanni in a list of recent operas now available: 'a quite new [opera] by Mozart, Don Juan or the Stone Guest, which was yesterday ready with the translation; it is also very large, yet still more beautiful than Nozze di Figaro'.<sup>13</sup> His evaluation of the two works in favour of the latter - perhaps the earliest such comparison on record - clearly reflects the views of his colleague who was one of the first musicians in Germany to engage seriously with the new work. On 21 December, Neeffe

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<sup>9</sup> Leipzig, Universitätsbibliothek, Sondersammlungen, Sammlung Kestner, I C III 118: Großmann to Neeffe, Hannover, 31 December 1787: 'Nozze di Figaro sind noch nicht fertig. Es ist ein schwer Stück Arbeits.'

<sup>10</sup> Leipzig, Universitätsbibliothek, Sondersammlungen, Sammlung Kestner, I C II 283: Neeffe to Großmann, 18 December 1787: 'Ich übersetze izt die neuester Oper von Martini: L'arbore di Diana.'

<sup>11</sup> Leipzig, Universitätsbibliothek, Sondersammlungen, Sammlung Kestner, I C II 385: Simrock to Großmann, 21 November 1788: 'Neue Opern habe ich ... L'arbore di Diana von Martin der Verfasser des Cosa rara, von Neeffe übersetzt'.

<sup>12</sup> Possibly he was influenced by Großmann who informed him that he had established a cheaper conduit ('ein wohlfeilern Kanal') with Prague than he had with Simrock. Leipzig, Universitätsbibliothek, Sondersammlungen, Sammlung Kestner: I C II 118: Großmann to Neeffe, Hannover, 31 December 1787.

<sup>13</sup> Leipzig, Universitätsbibliothek, Sondersammlungen, Sammlung Kestner, I C II 385: Simrock to Großmann, 21 November 1788: 'ein ganz neue von Mozart Dom Juan, oder das Steinerne Gastmahl, welche[s]r Gestern mit der Uebersezung fertig geworden, sie ist aber auch sehr groß, aber noch schöner als Nozze di Figaro'.

offered a copy of his new translation to Großmann, accompanied with a clear expression of his high esteem for Mozart's music: 'I have an opera Don Giovanni with excellent music by Mozart, and perhaps not unhappily translated. I offer you the manuscript of the translation for four ducats.'<sup>14</sup> He felt it necessary to explain that the reason for its high price was the prevalence of pilfering (i.e. copyright theft). A bookseller in Cologne had recently been pleased to print his version of Salieri's La grotta di Trofonio entitled Zauberhöhle des Trofonio. While not formally a festive work, this opera had been given its première on the name-day of Maximilian Franz during his visit to Vienna. How the rogue trader came by the manuscript, Neefe did not know, but there was little to be done.<sup>15</sup> The only effective response to the certainty of losses through piracy was to recoup costs up-front.

While Neefe displayed unusual perception in his early enthusiasm for Mozart's operas, it is nonetheless clear that his intensive engagement with Le nozze di Figaro, L'arbore di Diana and Don Giovanni was prompted by the anticipated re-opening of the Bonn stage, after which Maximilian Franz would expect performances of the festive works. When the inaugural season of the Bonn National Theatre finally got underway in 1789, it was split into two sections beginning in January and October, and with obvious symbolism, each was headed by one of the works commissioned by the emperor for the wedding festivities for Maria Theresia. The reception accorded to Martín y Soler's new work, given first to preserve its higher festive status as the Vienna commission, was good.<sup>16</sup> Comparisons with Una cosa

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<sup>14</sup> Leipzig, Universitätsbibliothek, Sondersammlungen, Sammlung Kestner, I C II 283: Neefe to Großmann, 21 December [1788]: 'Ich habe wieder eine Oper Don Giovanni nach der vortrefflichen Mozartischen Musik, und vielleicht nicht unglücklich übersetzt. Ich bitte Ihnen das Manuscript die Übersetzung für Vier Dukaten an.' He also sold his translation of Don Giovanni to Mannheim, where the opera was given on 27 September 1789. Deutsch, Mozart: a Documentary Biography, 352.

<sup>15</sup> Leipzig, Universitätsbibliothek, Sondersammlungen, Sammlung Kestner, I C II 283: Neefe to Großmann, 21 December [1788]: 'Die Diebereien zwingen mich zur Erhöhung des Preißes. Es hat einen Buchhändler in Kölln beliebt, meine Zauberhöhle des Trofonius zu drücken. Wie er zu der Handschrift gekommen ist, mag ich nicht untersuchen, weil ich doch nun den Drück nicht ungedrückt machen kann ... Vielleicht aber ist er auch unschuldig u. hat dieses M[anu]s[cr]ipt bona fide gedrückt – Denn mag er mir verzeihen.'

<sup>16</sup> Gazette de Bonn (4 January 1789), no.3: DE BONN, le 4 Janvier: 'Hier on a représenté ici ..... une pièce intitulée: L'ARBRE DE DIANE, traduite de l'italien en allemand, musique du célèbre Martin. L'affluence de spectateurs, & le coup d'oeil de la nouvelle deposition de la Salle, ont rendu ce spectacle très brillant.'

rara were inevitable. In view of the success of the earlier work, much was expected of Der Baum der Diana, but while certainly far from a failure, it did not enjoy quite the reception of its predecessor. Großmann was already aware of this, writing on the last day of 1787: 'Una cosa rara is supposed to be even better than L'arbore di Diana'.<sup>17</sup> The Bonn première of Mozart's most recent opera marked the re-opening of the theatre after the summer pause. Although short on detail, a long review rated the new work a triumph.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Leipzig, Universitätsbibliothek, Sondersammlungen, Sammlung Kestner, I C III 118: Großmann to Neefe, Hannover, 31 December 1787: 'Una cosa rara soll noch besser seyn als L'arbore di Diana'. Along with this rare letter from Großmann to Neefe are two lengthy accounts of the Berlin performances of Una cosa rara (Lilla) and L'arbore di Diana (Der Baum der Diana), sent by Severin Romersberg to Madame Viktoria Großmann on 22 and 29 December 1789.

<sup>18</sup> Gazette de Bonn (15 October 1789): DE BONN, le 15 Octobre: '..... Ce seroit assez faire l'éloge de cette musique de nommer son auteur, si l'on ne devoit ajouter, qu'il a employé toutes les ressources de son art et de son génie pour faire de cette pièce, la plus riche et la plus brillante composition de musique, qui soit au theatre ..... La partie de la musique, quoique du genre le plus difficile et le plus compliqué, n'a surtout rien laissé à desirer, tant de la part des acteurs, que du côté de l'orchestre; le tout a été exécuté avec autant de brillant que de justesse et de précision.'