

Music & Musical Performance

Issue 5

March 2024

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Recommended Citation

Marshall, Robert L. "Mozart's Jewish Librettist: A Brief History of a Poorly Kept Secret." *Music & Musical Performance: An International Journal*. Issue 5, article 3 (March 2024): 1–14.

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Mozart's Jewish Librettist: A Brief History of a Poorly Kept Secret

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Abstract

Lorenzo da Ponte, the librettist of Mozart's three greatest Italian operas, was born a Jew, a fact rumored about during his lifetime but not definitively established until 1900. The treatment (or not) of Da Ponte's Jewish origins as documented from his time to the present constitutes a history of concealment, rumor, discovery, denigration, and exploitation. Its nadir was reached during the Nazi period, its zenith most recently, as the poet, hitherto a secondary player in the Mozart biographies, has emerged as the colorful protagonist in substantial biographies of his own.

Keywords: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Lorenzo Da Ponte, biography, Judaism and music, Michael Kelly, Georg Nikolaus Nissen, Edward Holmes, Otto Jahn, Angelo Marchesan, Ludwig Schiedemair, Erich Schenk, Alfred Einstein

The poet Lorenzo Da Ponte (1749-1838) wrote the libretti for three of Mozart's greatest operas: *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan tutte*. If a modern music lover knows anything at all about him, it is likely to be that he was born a Jew. A particularly well-informed enthusiast will also know that he converted to Catholicism, was ordained as a priest, and, after an unusually turbulent and colorful existence, eventually landed in America where he spent his last decades as, among other things, the first professor of Italian at Columbia College (now University). Da Ponte's Jewish origin was not generally known before the twentieth century. How the fact was handled over the centuries constitutes a history of concealment, rumor, discovery, denigration, and exploitation.

Da Ponte himself was at pains throughout his life to hide his Jewish background. His *Memoirs* (first published in New York, in Italian, in 1823), begin with a fair warning on the first page. He declares, "I shall speak but little of my family, my neighborhood, my early years, as of matters . . . of scant moment to the reader. . . . I was born on the tenth day of

This essay, in essentially its present form, appeared in the *Newsletter of the Mozart Society of America* 27, no. 2 (Fall 2023): 4-9. A substantially shorter version appeared in the April 2023 issue of *Commentary* magazine.

March in the year 1749 in Ceneda, a small but not obscure city of the Venetian State. When I was five years old, my mother died. Fathers, as a rule, give little heed to the early years of their children.”¹ Neither here nor anywhere else in the *Memoirs* does Da Ponte name his parents or mention that they were Jewish. This glaring omission has been noted by biographers ever since.

It is not clear whether Mozart ever knew that Da Ponte was a converted Jew. He certainly harbored suspicions about Da Ponte’s character—owing to the fact that he was an Italian! As he wrote to his father after making his future poet’s acquaintance, “Our poet here is now a certain Abbate da Ponte. . . . He has promised . . . to write a new libretto for me. But who knows. . . . For, as you are aware, these Italian gentlemen are very civil to your face. Enough, we know them.”²

Mozart had arrived in Vienna in March 1781; Da Ponte arrived later that same year. The two apparently met for the first time in early 1783 at the home of Raimund Wetzlar (1752–1810), Mozart’s sometime landlord, one of his patrons, and the godfather of his firstborn son. In letters to his father Mozart referred to him variously as “the rich converted Jew” (November 24, 1781), “a rich Jew” (January 22, 1783), “an honest friend” (May 21, 1783).³

One assumes that both Wetzlar and Da Ponte were aware that the other was a Jewish convert and that their shared background played a role in establishing their relationship, but that is not known for certain. A similar question arises regarding the relationship between Da Ponte and the emperor. Da Ponte claims in his memoirs that, from the beginning, he was a particular favorite of Joseph II who had appointed him (instead of other ambitious aspirants) poet of the newly revived Italian court opera beginning with the April 1783 season. Just a year earlier, on January 2, 1782, Joseph had issued his Edict of Tolerance that emancipated the Jews of Vienna and allowed them to practice their faith openly. Could it be that Joseph was aware of, or at least suspected, Da Ponte’s Jewish origins and this fact had predisposed the enlightened despot in favor of the newly arrived and quite inexperienced poet?⁴

Joseph II died on February 20, 1790—less than a month after the premiere of *Così fan tutte*. With Joseph’s death Da Ponte lost his all-powerful protector. His successor, Leopold II, proved to be just as antagonistic to the poet as Joseph had been benevolent. In March

1. *Memoirs of Lorenzo Da Ponte*, translated from the Italian by Elisabeth Abbott, edited and annotated by Arthur Livingston, with a new preface by Thomas G. Bergin (New York, originally published 1929; reprint New York: Dover Publications, 1967), 31.

2. Letter of May 7, 1783. Emily Anderson, ed., *The Letters of Mozart and His Family*, 3rd edition (London: Macmillan Press, 1985), 848.

3. Anderson, ed., *Letters*, 779–80, 838, 849, respectively.

4. Sheila Hodges, claiming that Da Ponte’s “Jewish origins were well known,” raised this possibility in her *Lorenzo Da Ponte: The Life and Times of Mozart’s Librettist* (London: Granada Publishing, 1985), 48.

1791—less than a year after his accession to the throne—Leopold dismissed Da Ponte from his post. By the end of May, as the consequence of a series of intrigues by his enemies but mostly on account of diplomatic missteps by Da Ponte himself, the new emperor ordered him to leave Vienna. In 1805, after more than a dozen years in England, a bankrupt Da Ponte fled to America, where he remained for the rest of his life.

The first biographies to appear soon after Mozart's death in December 1791—by Friedrich Schlichtegroll (1794) and Franz Xaver Niemetschek (1798)—do not mention Da Ponte at all. In the year 1828, Georg Nikolaus Nissen, the new husband of Mozart's widow, Constanze, published a massive biography of the great composer.⁵ In it he refers to the librettist of *Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* as “Abbate da Ponte” (498). Nissen does not name the author of *Così fan tutte* at all. But, since he dismisses the *Così* libretto as “ein schlechter Text” (544), it may be that he wished to spare the feelings of Da Ponte, who, in 1828, was still alive.

In the Mozart-related literature, the earliest reference, in print, to Da Ponte's Jewish origins—one in which, to be sure, the claim is presented as a rumor—appears in the *Reminiscences* (1826) of the Irish tenor, Michael Kelly (1762–1826). Kelly sang in the 1786 premiere of *Figaro* and knew both Mozart and Da Ponte personally. He notes, “It was said that originally [Da Ponte] was a Jew, turned Christian, dubbed himself an Abbé, and became a great dramatic writer.”⁶

Isolated published references to Da Ponte's Jewish origins, invariably hostile, had appeared before then. Particularly pertinent, perhaps, in the year 1795 a nasty pamphlet ridiculing the *poeta ebreo*, composed by a prominent librettist and journalist, Carlo Francesco Badini, evidently an Italian Jesuit living in London, made the rounds in the English capital.⁷ But Kelly seems to indicate that he was already aware of the rumor in Vienna decades earlier.

Da Ponte himself, in his published writings, made a single unambiguous reference to his origins. In a verse addressed to a friend and patron of his youth, one Pietro Zaguri, the poet recalls an incident when his enemies cried out: “Let him be crucified. . . . Let us stick him back in the ghetto, whence came his guilty race.”⁸ These lines are Da Ponte's only

5. Georg Nikolaus Nissen, *Biographie W. A. Mozart's* (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1828), facsimile reprint with a foreword by Rudolph Angermüller (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1972). The page references are to this edition.

6. *Reminiscences of Michael Kelly of the King's Theatre and Theatre Royal Drury Lane*, new introduction by A. Hyatt King (New York: Da Capo Press, 1968; originally published in London, 1826), 1:232.

7. Giampaolo Zagonel, “Lorenzo Da Ponte: jüdische Kindheit und italienische Rezeption,” in Werner Hanak (ed.) *Lorenzo Da Ponte: Aufbruch in die Neue Welt* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2006), 128. Zagonel cites other early documents attesting to Da Ponte's Jewish background.

8. According to Rodney Bolt, the letter was written in 1785 (Bolt, *The Librettist of Venice: The Remarkable Life of Lorenzo Da Ponte* [New York: Bloomsbury, 2006], 128). It appeared in print as part of a collection

acknowledgment that he was aware of the rumors of his Jewish origin. For the rest, as one modern biographer has noted, “When he mentions Jews, which he very rarely does, it is always from a distance, without reference to himself or his background, and sometimes in a faintly derogatory way.”⁹ Indeed, on one occasion in his *Memoirs*, Da Ponte refers to “the fat-pursed descendants of Abraham.”¹⁰

Who, then, could have been spreading the rumors of Da Ponte’s Jewish origin? Perhaps some acquaintances from his boyhood who remembered his baptism ceremony and had followed his later rise to fame. As we have just seen, Da Ponte himself had confirmed the fact of his Jewish background to Pietro Zaguri, whom he got to know in Venice in the mid-1770s—and through whom he made the acquaintance of Giacomo Casanova. About a year after Da Ponte’s marriage, in August 1792, to Nancy Grahl, the daughter of an English merchant, John Grahl (a German immigrant who, it has been speculated, may himself have been a Jewish convert), Zaguri wrote to Casanova claiming that Da Ponte had married a Jewess “in a synagogue according to Jewish rites.”¹¹ Another conceivable source: Could it be that Lorenzo Da Ponte, an admitted libertine and seducer, may have been betrayed, inadvertently or deliberately, by one (or more) of his paramours—women with literally intimate knowledge of the true state of affairs?

With Da Ponte’s death at the age of eighty-nine, he finally became an historic figure, one destined, for the most part, to play a subordinate role in the stream of Mozart biographies. One such study, which appeared shortly after Da Ponte’s death—the *Life of Mozart* (1845) by the British author Edward Holmes—claimed that the singer Michael Kelly had described Da Ponte as “originally a Jew.”¹² But, as we have seen, Kelly’s *Reminiscences* remarked only that “it was *said* [emphasis added] that originally [Da Ponte] was a Jew.” In any event, Holmes’s claim failed to take root. It is notably absent, for example, from the first truly

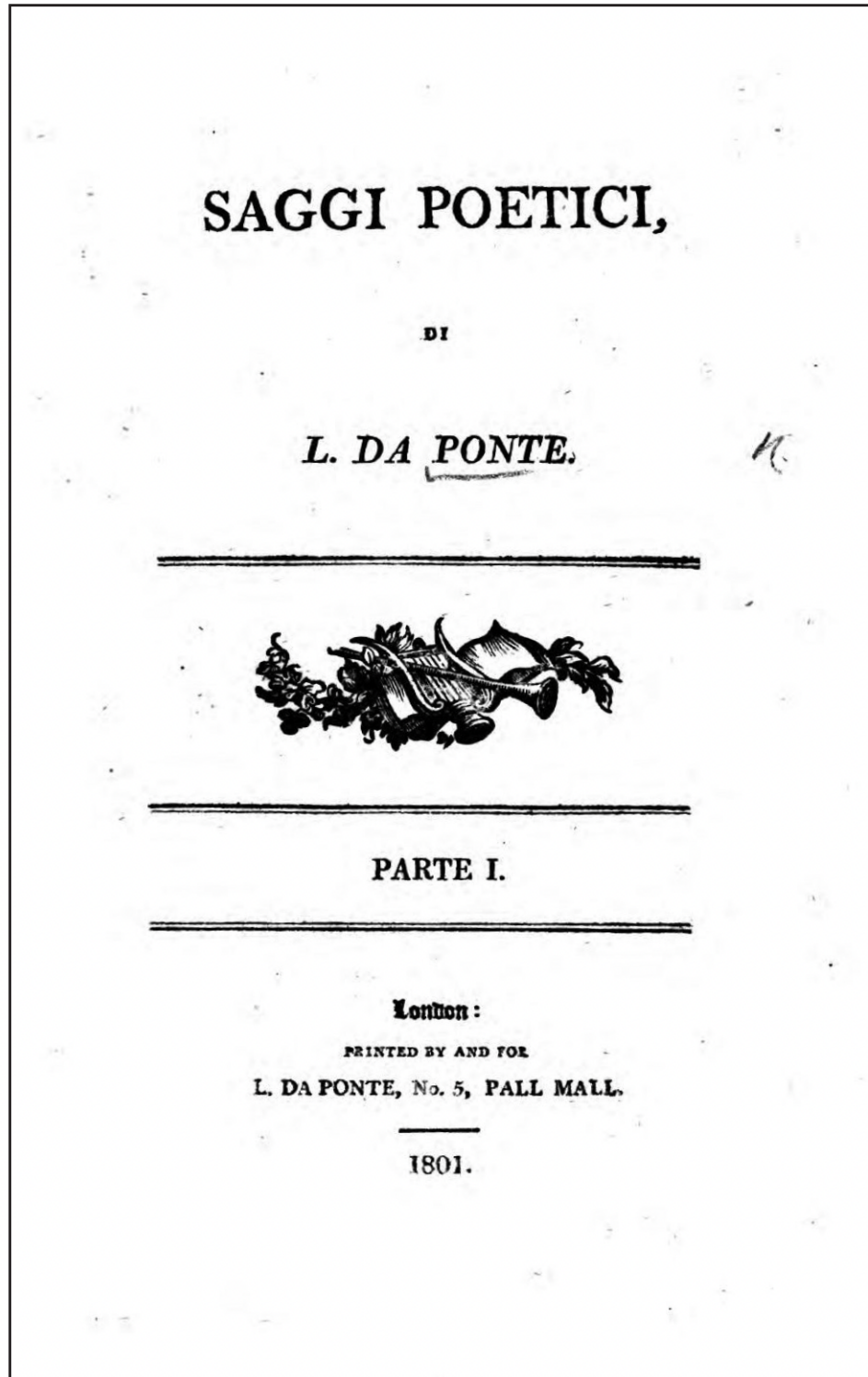
entitled *Saggi poetici*, published in Vienna in 1788. The collection was republished in London, with the same title, in 1801, under the auspices of the author. The original Italian of the passage in question, as it appears in the London edition (p. 36) reads: “*Crucifigatur* ciaschedun dicea; / Soggiungeva talun: si ficchi in ghetto, / “Donde già uscì la sua prosapia rea;” see examples 1 and 2.

9. Hodges, *Lorenzo Da Ponte*, 54–55.

10. *Memoirs*, 56. Daniel Hertz suggests that Da Ponte’s occasional references to his knowledge of Hebrew were unmistakable hints of his Jewish background. (Hertz, “Mozart and Da Ponte,” *The Musical Quarterly* 79, no. 4 [Winter 1995]: 703.) But perhaps they were meant only as boasts of his erudition.

11. The details of Da Ponte’s wedding—formal or informal, religious or secular, if any at all—are unclear—as is the ethnic background of the Grahl family. See April FitzLyon, *Lorenzo Da Ponte: A Biography of Mozart’s Librettist* (London: John Calder, 1982; originally published 1955), 179–81. Further background about the incident appears in Bolt, *The Librettist of Venice*, 227, and 381, n. 229.

12. Edward Holmes, *The Life of Mozart. Including his Correspondence*, with a new introduction by Percy M. Young (New York: Da Capo Press, 1979; originally published London, 1845), 267.



Example 1. Lorenzo Da Ponte, *Saggi Poetici*, London, 1801, title page.

Non risposi a la fatira, chè poco
 Io potea guadagnare in tale arringo,
 Ma celar non potei lo fdegno, e il foco,
 Che sapete, Signor, che rado io fingo;
 Stampo de' versi fatti in altro loco,
 Dove, in spirto profetico, dipingo
 Molti di lor, che vi trovaro in fatto,
 Senza ch' io mel sapeffi, il lor ritratto.
 Questo diè il colmo a l' ira, ed al dispetto,
Crucifigatur ciaschedun dicea,
 Soggiungeva talun, fi ficchi in ghetto,
 Donde già uscì la sua profapia rea;
 Chi mi voleva uccider, e in effetto
 Crederè si potria, che m' uccidea,
 S' io era un barbagianni, od un alocco,
 O una formica, o il matto del tarocco.
 Si tenne conciliabolo, e si fe'
 Nova, solenne, universal congiura,
 Altri sul pettin, altri sul treppiè,
 Chi fu la friglia, e chi sul basto giura;
 Mi confiscano il nome che mi diè
 Il poetico genio, e la natura,
 Cioè non voglion che più vate io sia,
 Ma ne crean cinquant' altri in vece mia.
 Stuolo non vidi mai più brutto, e sozzo
 L' aure appeftar de l' apollinea falda,

Example 2. Excerpt from Da Ponte, "A Sua Eccellenza il Signor P. Z. Patrizio Veneto e Senatore amplissimo," *Saggi Poetici* (London, 1801), I:36.

comprehensive, deeply researched biography of the composer, Otto Jahn's monumental *W. A. Mozart*.¹³ Despite his thoroughness, Jahn was apparently unaware of Da Ponte's Jewish birth. His only reference to the poet's childhood appears in a footnote that faithfully repeats Da Ponte's own representation.

It was not until the turn of the twentieth century that the facts were established. A comprehensive biography of Da Ponte, published in 1900, definitively presented specific information about the poet's Jewish origins. The book's opening sentence reads: "Lorenzo Da Ponte was born . . . into a Jewish family. His father's name was Geremia Conegliano, his mother Ghella (Rachele) Pincherle." The second sentence reminds us, "In his autobiographical memoirs Lorenzo says not a word about his Semitic origins."¹⁴ It continues by referring to Da Ponte's poem for Pietro Zaguri cited earlier. The second paragraph informs us that the boy's name was Emanuele.

The book's author, Monsignor Angelo Marchesan (1859–1932), occupied the same post at the same prestigious seminary in Treviso that Da Ponte himself had held as a young man. Marchesan's work in the archives finally put many facts of Da Ponte's early years on a firm basis. With respect to his earliest religious upbringing, however, we still know nothing beyond the fact of his Jewish birth and lineage. One assumes that the infant Emanuele had been ritually circumcised according to Jewish tradition and that, upon turning thirteen, he marked his coming of age with the traditional Bar Mitzvah celebration.¹⁵ Specifics only begin to take form in connection with the events of August 29, 1763, the day on which the fourteen-year-old Emanuele, along with his brothers and widowed father, were baptized in the Cathedral of Ceneda by the local bishop, Monsignor Lorenzo Da Ponte. The family took on "Da Ponte" as the family name. Emanuele, the oldest son, took the bishop's given name as well. Six weeks earlier Emanuele had written a letter to the priest who had been instructing him for the upcoming ceremony. In the letter, which survives, the young man declared that he "recognized the falseness of Judaism."¹⁶

Lorenzo's mother had died in 1754. This fact fed the longstanding and still prevailing assumption that his father had decided to convert only in order to be able to marry a Christian woman. The wedding, indeed, took place less than two weeks after the family baptism. The bride was one Orsola Pasqua Paietta, a much younger woman.¹⁷ But more than

13. Otto Jahn, *W. A. Mozart*, 4 vols. (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1856–59).

14. Angelo Marchesan, *Della Vita e delle Opere di Lorenzo Da Ponte* (Treviso: Premiata Tipografia Turazza, 1900), 1.

15. Sheila Hodges assumes the latter but is silent about the former. Hodges, *Lorenzo Da Ponte*, 6.

16. "Conoscere la falsità dall'Ebraismo." A facsimile of the letter, dated July 14, 1763, appears in Zagonel, "Lorenzo Da Ponte," 129.

17. Hodges, *Lorenzo Da Ponte*, 4–5. Hodges notes that the bride was "in fact little older than her stepsons."

a year earlier, in June 1762, a respected teacher of the Ceneda ghetto, one Baruch Scaramatta, had converted. The event may have precipitated Geremia's decision to follow suit; for soon thereafter, he, along with his three sons, appealed to the bishop to lead them into the Christian faith. Geremia Conegliano's conversion, then, may have been more than simply opportunistic.¹⁸

Less than two months after the baptism, Lorenzo and his brother began training for the priesthood. Ten years later, on March 27, 1773, shortly after turning twenty-four, Lorenzo Da Ponte was ordained as a priest and celebrated his first mass.¹⁹ Before the end of 1774 Lorenzo embarked on a promising career as an instructor in rhetoric at the seminary of Treviso.

While his father became a pious Catholic, the depth of Lorenzo's commitment to the faith is unclear. As he confessed in his memoirs, "My father, . . . was thinking of turning me to the Altar; though that was utterly contrary to my vocation and my character. I was therefore trained after the manner of the priests, though inclined by taste and, as it were, made by nature for different pursuits."²⁰ His adventurous and amorous lifestyle in later years abundantly confirm that self-assessment.

The fact alone of the Abbé Da Ponte's marriage, however it may have been conducted, casts considerable doubt on the seriousness of his religious vocation—if not his faith. As a priest, any formal marriage would have been illegitimate. On the other hand, when Da Ponte died in New York on August 17, 1838, a Catholic priest received his confession and gave him absolution. The fact that he himself had been a priest was not mentioned at his well-attended funeral. The Mozart biographies that appeared in the early decades of the twentieth century often briefly mention Da Ponte's Jewish background—as little more than a piquant detail—at his first appearance in the narrative. By the time the Nazis took power Da Ponte's Jewish roots were completely familiar to the classical music public. This clearly presented a significant challenge for anyone in Germany professionally involved with Mozart. The history of this episode has been extensively documented by Erik Levi.²¹ Levi explains that one solution to the problem was to render Da Ponte invisible by removing his name altogether from announcements and discussions of the works. Another was to

18. Zagonel, "Lorenzo Da Ponte," 125.

19. Daniel Heartz points out that, although Mozart always referred to his librettist as an abbate, Da Ponte had been ordained a priest and "bound not by the minor orders of an abbé but the major orders of a priest, such as saying Mass daily and living a life of chastity and celibacy." Heartz, "Mozart and Da Ponte," 702.

20. *Memoirs*, 34.

21. Erik Levi, *Mozart and the Nazis: How the Third Reich Abused a Cultural Icon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).



Example 3. Portrait of Lorenzo Da Ponte, ca. 1830, attributed to the American painter and inventor of the telegraph, Samuel F. B. Morse (1791–1872).

acknowledge his existence but to denigrate his character and his talent, asserting that the operas owed their greatness exclusively to the brilliance of the music. Mozart's genius, it was argued, compensated for the poetic weakness of the texts and the moral failings of the characters and plots—the latter, especially in the case of *Così fan tutte*, always an easy target.²² These blemishes were understood to be the inevitable product of the unscrupulous, untalented librettist's Semitic race.

A far more challenging problem for the regime was posed by the fact that, at the time, the Mozart-Da Ponte operas were invariably sung in German in the German-speaking countries. The author of the standard translation was Hermann Levi (1839–1900), best known as the conductor of the premiere of *Parsifal* at the first Bayreuth festival. Since Levi was Jewish, it was of course intolerable that his translations should continue to be printed, even more so that they should be sung in opera houses in Germany and, after the *Anschluss*, in Austria. An effort was made to replace them. Various authors volunteered for the task. The sticking point was that singers, accustomed to performing the Hermann Levi translation, were reluctant to learn new texts. The entire enterprise became moot after the

22. Levi reminds the reader that critics have condemned the plot of *Così* since the first Mozart biography appeared in 1798. *Mozart and the Nazis*, 56.

war, since the operas henceforth were increasingly performed everywhere with the original Italian words.

The scholarly treatment of Lorenzo Da Ponte since World War II has, not surprisingly, been varied. Some notable patterns reflect the personal experiences of the authors. For example, two noted Mozart authorities, Ludwig Schiedemair and Erich Schenk, whose writings during the Nazi years had been colored with nationalist and racist ideology, continued to publish after the war.²³ But their treatment of Da Ponte's background became more cautious. Schiedemair, in the second edition of his Mozart biography, mentions that the poet "belonged to the Jewish Conegliano family." He then observes: "But his Southern temperament, owing to adventures and love affairs, constantly drove him from place to place"²⁴—one unflattering ethnic stereotype, then, replacing another. Erich Schenk, in the second edition of his Mozart biography, restricted his remarks on Da Ponte's heritage de minimis to "Da Ponte, the son of Jewish parents, was born in Ceneda."²⁵

Another German-born Mozart scholar, Alfred Einstein (1880–1952), was a Jew and prominent target of the Nazi persecution.²⁶ His *Mozart: His Character, His Work* became one of the most widely read studies of the composer. His brief summary of Da Ponte's career from his birth through his meeting with Mozart is complete and balanced: neither ignoring nor exaggerating the importance of his Jewish parentage, conversion, or the adventures and misadventures of his youth.²⁷

A massive French Mozart biography by Jean and Brigitte Massin, first published in 1959, provides a good example of the new normalization governing the treatment of Da Ponte's origins. It reports that the composer made the acquaintance of the Abbé Lorenzo Da Ponte in the home of Baron Wetzlar and that his original name was Emmanuel Conegliano. An appended footnote, citing no source, informs that he was "d'origine juive."²⁸

In more recent decades some important publications, once again, are silent about Da Ponte's Jewish roots—not, this time, because the facts were unknown but, on the contrary, because they were so well known that they could be taken for granted. Maynard Solomon,

23. Their scholarly activity during the Nazi period is documented by Erik Levi. Re Schiedemair, see pp. 29–30, 64, 152–53; re Schenk, pp. 13–15, 245.

24. Ludwig Schiedemair, *Mozart: Sein Leben und seine Werke*, zweite, umgearbeitete und vermehrte Auflage (Bonn: Ferdinand Dümmlers Verlag, 1948), 306.

25. Erich Schenk, *Mozart: Sein Leben — seine Welt* (Vienna: Amalthea Verlag, 1975), 528.

26. Levi, *Mozart and the Nazis*, 121–25.

27. Alfred Einstein, *Mozart: His Character, His Work*, trans. Arthur Mendel and Nathan Broder (London: Cassel, 1946), 420–22.

28. Jean and Brigitte Massin, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* (Paris: Club Français, 1959; second edition, Paris: Fayard, 1970), 411.

for example, in a Mozart biography notable for its psychological approach, makes no mention of Da Ponte's Jewish background.²⁹ Similarly, John A. Rice's comprehensive *Antonio Salieri and Viennese Opera*, while dealing extensively with Da Ponte's opera texts for Mozart's rival, limits his treatment of the librettist's origins to reporting only that he was "born in 1749 . . . in Ceneda . . . [where he] fell in love with literature," and so on.³⁰ Rice almost defiantly omits the almost obligatory clause alluding to Da Ponte's Jewish parentage and original name. The author, no doubt, concluded that the now all-too-familiar biographical detail was irrelevant to understanding the writer's work—perhaps even a distraction. In so doing, of course, he follows the example of Da Ponte himself.

Other recent writers, however, have pursued the matter of Da Ponte's origins quite passionately. Volkmar Braunbehrens, for example, discovers in them a crucial key to his character. We read: "One has the impression that throughout his life, Da Ponte profited from the abilities that an oppressed and persecuted people develop early on: self-assertiveness, the fortitude to start again from scratch periodically, and the inventiveness to cope with a humiliating outsider's existence, drawing strength from the knowledge of being special."³¹

Wolfgang Hildesheimer (1916–1991), like Volkmar Braunbehrens, was a German-born author. Unlike Braunbehrens (born 1941), who is a musicologist and was a child during the war, Hildesheimer was a creative writer and musical amateur. He was also a Jew who fled Germany in 1933. In his *Mozart* he colors the matter of Da Ponte's Jewishness with a touch of bitterness. "Who was Da Ponte? . . . He is always described as an 'ambiguous personality' . . . 'without character,' 'without scruples,' an opportunist and adventurer. . . . And somewhere, covertly but unmistakably, anti-Semitic feeling usually crops up."³²

Robert W. Gutman, whose *Mozart: A Cultural Biography* emphasizes Mozart's friendly relations with Jews, describes Da Ponte as "this baptized Jew" and does not fail to mention that the two "met in a circle of converted and ennobled Jews."³³

A remarkable development in the years since the war has been the proliferation of full-length biographies devoted explicitly to Lorenzo Da Ponte. (Several have been cited in these

29. Maynard Solomon, *Mozart: A Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995).

30. John A. Rice, *Antonio Salieri and Viennese Opera* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 332.

31. Volkmar Braunbehrens, *Mozart in Vienna 1781–1791*, trans. Timothy Bell (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), 205.

32. Wolfgang Hildesheimer, *Mozart*, trans. Marion Faber (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1982), 216.

33. Robert W. Gutman, *Mozart: A Cultural Biography* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1990), 620. On Mozart's relations with the Jewish community in Vienna see also Hertz, "Mozart and Da Ponte," 700–703; and Christoph Wolff, *Mozart at the Gateway to His Fortune: Serving the Emperor, 1788–1791* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012), 58–59.

pages.) A particular landmark was the publication of the luxuriously illustrated essay collection, *Lorenzo Da Ponte: Aufbruch in die Neue Welt*.³⁴ It was commissioned by the Jewish Museum of Vienna, in association with the Da Ponte Institute of Vienna, on the occasion of an exhibition of the same name presented in the Mozart year 2006. The contribution of thirteen authors illuminates numerous facets of Da Ponte's life—most especially many details of his Jewish heritage, seeking to determine the nature and extent of its role in shaping his treatment at the hands of history.

This development attests that Da Ponte himself has captured the imagination of posterity. One wonders whether any other librettist active before the twentieth century has received so much posthumous attention. After countless previous incarnations—Jew by birth, Catholic convert and priest, adventurer, libertine, classicist, poet, bookseller, grocer, pedagogue, professor, impresario—Lorenzo Da Ponte has assumed one last identity. The gifted writer of opera texts is no longer relegated to play forever, like Leporello to Don Giovanni, a supporting role in the life of the immortal Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. He has, finally, become the leading protagonist in his own right.

34. Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2006.

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