

# The Metropolitan Opera Guild

## *La Clemenza di Tito* Lecturer Dr. Jasmin Bey Cowin Piano: Margrit Zimmermann

*La Clemenza di Tito* (III, 7)

*To take away life is a power which the vilest of the earth have in common; to give it belongs to gods and kings alone.*<sup>1</sup> - Metastasio (pseudonym of Antonio Domenico Bonaventura Trapassi Pietro)



Titus Flavius Sabinus Vespasianus  
Louvre, Roman Art



Pietro Metastasio

In August 1791, Mozart received a commissioned to compose an opera celebrating the coronation of Emperor Leopold II as King of Bohemia at Prague. The coronation, scheduled for early September, left Mozart with little time to complete the work. Under pressure, Mozart finished the opera in just 18 days, completing some parts in the carriage on the way to the Prague premiere. The opera, *La Clemenza di Tito*, is a setting of an old libretto by Metastasio, reworked by Caterino Mazzola to reflect the sensibilities of the day. It tells the story of the betrayal of the Roman Emperor Titus and his ruling as an *enlightened* monarch. *La Clemenza* is an *opera seria* or “serious opera,” as opposed to *opera buffa* or “comic opera;” Mozart, however, adds some *opera buffa* elements to *La Clemenza*, including a number of ensemble finales.

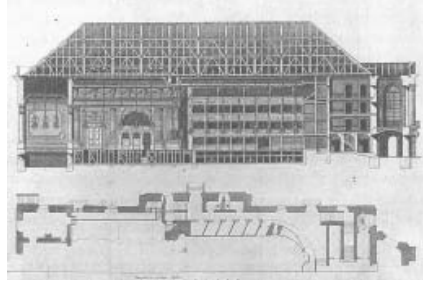
The roots of the Enlightenment lay in the 16th and 17th century revolution in understanding the world. Central to this new era was the scientific revolution that culminated in the work of figures like Isaac Newton and the breakdown of the old religious view of the world which had dominated feudal society. Voltaire hammered away at the superstitions and irrationalities of the old order; Montesquieu wrote his highly influential *Spirit of the Laws*, advocating a reformed, more rational political order with a balance of powers between king and aristocracy; and the Genevan philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau produced his *Social Contract* with its famous opening sentence, *'Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains.'*

Parker made the following observation about audiences of opera in the eighteenth century:  
*Opera-going was an activity reflecting personal interests or taste, as is evident from the polemics about it, but within a framework of social status and convenience. Court opera was attended by court members without payment and in deference to the ruler. Next came the large group of aristocratic or patrician patrons with their friends and guests (rarely their wives), who may have*

<sup>1</sup> *It., Il torre altrui la vita. E facolta commune. Al piu vil della terra; il darla e solo. De' Numi, e de' Regnanti.*

had sponsoring interests or who valued opera for social contact; this group has also left most of the written documentation of the practice. These people went to the opera as many times as possible and, if they traveled, in as many places as possible. Middle-class spectators were rare in court opera, as they could not afford the tickets, although there was the occasional free performance for ‘all citizens’ at such courts as Vienna or Brunswick. Servants could usually attend, free, in the gallery. (Roger Parker, Opera, Grove Music Online, ed. L. Macy. <http://www.grovemusic.com>)

“The role of opera seria had an impact on its structure and musical form. It was backed by the ruling class and was therefore financially well supported. It therefore tended to attract the most technically gifted singers and soon came to have vocal lines demanding virtuosity in technique and with plenty of opportunities to show off. . Each singer had a set number of arias depending on their place in the pecking order— four or five for the leading singer, perhaps one for the least important.”<sup>2</sup>



## **LONGUM BONA FIDEM AFRICANUM THEATRO FLAVIANO**

*The plot for La Clemenza di Tito* is built around a fictional event in the life of the Roman Emperor Titus Flavius Sabinus Vespasianus (Tito), who ruled from 79 to 81 A.D. Vitellia, daughter of the Emperor Aulus Vitellius (ruler of Rome in the year 69 A.D. and succeeded by Tito’s father, the Emperor Vespasian), is obsessed with regaining the throne, either by marriage, or by assassination and revolution. As the action begins, Tito is the current ruler of Rome and the target of her conspiratorial designs. The conspiracy to take the throne-an invention of the poet not based on the real history of Titus-is the central conflict of the drama.

The key figure in the opera is, of course, Tito. Tito is portrayed as an enlightened ruler; Charles VI for whom Metastasio originally wrote this libretto was referred to in letters of the time as an “enlightened monarch” as well. Brunelli sees Annio’s speech in Act I, scene 5, as an attempt on the part of the Poet Laureate to render an allusion to Charles VI. Brunelli says the Emperor is “. . . quasi impersonato nel nobile carattere di Tito (almost personified in the noble character of Tito).”<sup>3</sup>

*In this speech Annio says:*

Né padre sol, ma sei  
Suo nume tutelar. Più che mortale  
Giacché altrui ti dimonstri, a’ volti altrui  
Comincia ad avvezzarti. Eccelso tempio  
Ti destina il Senato; e là si vuole  
Che fra divini onori  
Anche il nume di Tito il Tebro adori.

You are not only your country’s father,  
but her guardian God. Since you  
demonstrate yourself to be beyond  
mortality, begin to accustom yourself to  
other’s vows. The senate has decreed  
a stately temple, where your name  
shall stand enrolled among the honored  
divinities, even the Tiber worships Titus, the God.

<sup>2</sup> Paul McGarr (1991), Article “Mozart: Overture to Revolution”

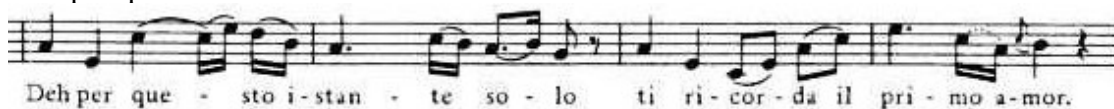
<sup>3</sup> The Role of Metastasio’s Libretti in the Eighteenth Century: Opera as Propaganda, David Adam Kirkpatrick, Dissertation, Florida State University, p.35

Unrestrained praise is heaped upon Tito throughout the opera. The chorus appears as the Roman populace who, in Act I, and in the two final scenes of the Act III, show their distinct admiration for the goodness of their Emperor. Tito is portrayed as magnanimous, clement, and tolerant throughout the drama. According to Suentonius, the real-life Titus once reflected over dinner that he had done nothing for anyone that day and said: “My friends, I have lost a day.” Metastasio alludes to this famous quote in Act I, scene 1, line 62 when Sesto speaks about Tito saying: “Perduto il giorno ei dice, in cui fatto non ha qualcun felice.” (He says the day is lost in which he has not made someone happy.) While the conspirators are portrayed as ignoble and fatally flawed, Tito appears like a god: just, virtuous, moral, and forgiving. Even Sesto, who is plotting against Tito, cannot help but praise the great Caesar. A vision of the monarch that is divine and grand is promoted. Unaware of Sesto’s plot, Tito tells Sesto that he will give him a position of honor in the kingdom saying: T’innalzerò, che resterà ben poco dello spazio infinito, che frapperò gli dèi fra Sesto e Tito.” (I will exalt you, that there will remain but little of the infinite space that the gods have place between Sesto and Tito.) Here, Tito mentions as a matter of fact that the gods have placed him in his position of authority. With this verse, Metastasio propagates the idea of *the Divine Right of Kings*. Sesto, feeling guilty for his imminent betrayal of the emperor, begs Tito to moderate his kindness. Tito (Metastasio version) responds with a short recitative and aria that ends the scene saying:

<p>Ma che! se mi negate          che benefico io sia, che mi          lasciate?          Del più sublime soglio          L’unico frutto è questo:          Tutto è tormento il resto,          E tutto è servitù.          Che avrei, se ancor perdessi          Le sole ore felici          Che ho nel giovar gli oppressi,          Nel sollevare gli amici,          Nel dispensar tesori          Al merto e alla virtù?</p>	<p>But what! If you take away my          ability to be beneficent, what do you          leave me?          The only fruit of the most exalted          office (Caesar) is this.          Everything else is torment and          servitude.          Would you have me lose the only          happy moments I have: cheering up          the oppressed, lifting up my friends,          and dispensing riches to the worthy          and virtuous?</p>
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The aria “Deh, per questo istante solo” appears deep into the second of the opera’s two acts, where Sesto, the failed assassin, confesses to the amazed Titus that he is indeed guilty and begs him, as a final favor, to appreciate that his vile act was inspired by love.

Deh per questo istante solo - Sesto



## Mozart’s Last Year

1791 Chronology:

- May 09: Mozart appointed unpaid assistant to the Kapellmeister of St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna, with right of succession to the paid position at the Kapellmeister's death
- Summer: messenger brings anonymous request for a Requiem (for Walsegg's wife). Mozart asks for 50 ducats (half the price of an opera) and receives 25 in advance, the remainder payable on completion

- ca. August 25: Mozart and Süßmayr travel to Prague for premier of Mozart's opera *La clemenza di Tito* (K. 621)
- mid September: Mozart returns to Vienna and begins the Requiem
- September 30: Premier of *The Magic Flute* (K. 620)
- mid November: Mozart returns to the Requiem but becomes ill
- December 5, ca. 1:00 a.m.: Mozart dies
- December 10: [parts of?] Requiem performed at a Mass for Mozart, with instrumental parts added to the Kyrie by F. J. Freystädler

Mozart's inheritance was

Four sofas	A Fortepiano
18 chairs	A spinet
Five cupboards	Kitchen equipment
Five tables	Servant's equipment
A billiard-table	A coach including horse
A secretary	
A manuscript cupboard	
Two book-shelves	And considerable debt
Four beds	

**Jasmin Bey Cowin, Ed.D.**, the German - American Fulbright Scholar, concert harpist, teacher and lecturer in music history, opera history and music appreciation has more than fifteen years of lecturing experience. She is the recipient of the distinguished William C. Musham Award for "Excellence in Teaching" at Marymount Manhattan College. Dr. Cowin teaches currently at the Continuing Education Department, Hunter College and at the Skirball Institute (Congregation Emanuel). She created a unique and popular opera lecture series that is much in demand and often sold out. In addition she is a distinguished harpist who frequently performs in the metropolitan area and abroad. As the co-founder of the New York Harp Duo<sup>®</sup>, a multi-faceted harp duo, she performs with her fellow harpist Liza Jensen, in New York State. Recent lectures took her to Yale University, University of California, Irvine, (visiting Professor) and Germany. Dr. Cowin is presently preparing for her German concert tour. Upcoming events are at the UJA Federation, Melanchthonhaus Bretten (Germany) and a fall seminar at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y. [www.operalectures.com](http://www.operalectures.com)

**Margrit Julia Zimmermann**, the Russian-born, German pianist, comes from a family whose musical traditions go back many generations. She began her studies in a music academy with Eulalia Stepanova. Already during this time she played recitals and was as a soloist with several chamber orchestras. She continued her studies at the world-renowned Tchaikovsky Conservatoire in Moscow with Dmitri Bashkirov, one of the Russian piano school's most influential and esteemed masters.

After her distinguished graduation from Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory, M.J.Zimmermann garnered engagements from Russian State Artists' Agency and began her international career as a soloist with recitals and appearances with symphonic and chamber orchestras. She has performed in Russia, England, Germany, Austria, Lithuania, and Switzerland (Vienna, Graz, Berlin, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Potsdam, Göttingen, Wilhelmshaven, Kassel, Oxford, Vilnius, Kaunas, Rotterdam).

M.J.Zimmermann was a prizewinner in the 1996 International Johannes Brahms Piano Competition in Austria and the Roma International Piano Competition 1997 in Italy.