

# A MOZART DUET IN A SARTI OPERA: ‘LÀ CI DAREM LA MANO’ IN UDINE, 1793

JOHN PLATOFF



Giuseppe Sarti's opera buffa *Fra i due litiganti il terzo gode* was one of the great operatic successes of the late eighteenth century. First performed in Milan in September 1782, the opera was quickly taken up by theatres in other cities. In 1783 it began a long run at the Burgtheater in Vienna, where it had been performed more than sixty times by 1790. The opera was produced everywhere from Barcelona to Copenhagen, from Rouen to St Petersburg, in languages including German, French and Danish. By 1800 *Fra i due litiganti* had been given more than eighty productions across all of Europe.

If the setting, cast of characters and plot of the opera seem familiar, it is because they are echoed in Mozart and Da Ponte's *Le nozze di Figaro*, which was premiered in Vienna three years later, in 1786. The libretto of *Fra i due litiganti* is an anonymous revision of Carlo Goldoni's earlier *Le nozze*, which was set to music by Baldassarre Galuppi in 1755. At its heart, as signalled by the title ('While two dispute, the third enjoys [the prize]'), is a love quadrangle: Dorina, a chambermaid in the house of the Count and Countess Belfiore, is pursued by three suitors. The Count supports his manservant Titta – apparently hoping to get access to Dorina himself – while the Countess backs the gardener Mingone. But in the end the third suitor, the estate agent Masotto, outsmarts his rivals and wins Dorina's hand. In the Milan production two of the leading roles were created by singers who went on to major careers in Vienna, where in 1783 they portrayed the same characters: Nancy Storace as Dorina and Francesco Benucci as Titta.

As was typical of the time, *Fra i due litiganti* was subjected to substantial alterations wherever it was produced. Some numbers were cut; others were replaced by pieces that better suited the needs of local singers. Frequently, as in the Vienna production, as many as a third of Sarti's original arias were replaced by other music, without any public announcement of the fact. The substitutions were almost invariably arias rather than ensembles.

But for the 1793 production in Udine, a duet from another opera was inserted into the second act, to be sung by Titta and Dorina. The duet is of particular interest to us today because it turns out to be none other than 'Là ci darem la mano', the duet for Don Giovanni and Zerlina from Mozart and Da Ponte's *Don Giovanni*.<sup>1</sup> [Figure 1](#) shows the title-page of the Udine libretto. As can be seen in [Figure 2](#), the Mozart duet appears at the end of a scene for Titta and Dorina in which he invites her to walk with him in the garden.

How and why did Mozart's now-famous duet find its way into a production of Sarti's opera in a small town some eighty miles northeast of Venice? The question is interesting for at least two reasons. First, as I have said, the substitution of ensemble numbers was exceedingly rare (I have found only two such substitutions in the opera's extensive production history). And second, Mozart's operatic music was by no means well known in Italy at this time. In fact, this 1793 production that included 'Là ci darem' appears to be the first performance

---

<[john.platoff@trincoll.edu](mailto:john.platoff@trincoll.edu)>

<sup>1</sup> The duet had already been borrowed at least once before: it was used by William Shield in 1790 for his English opera *The Czar*, in which it was sung in English as 'Should worldly cares oppressing'. It is not known how Shield got access to the music. See Roger Fiske, *English Theatre Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 541.

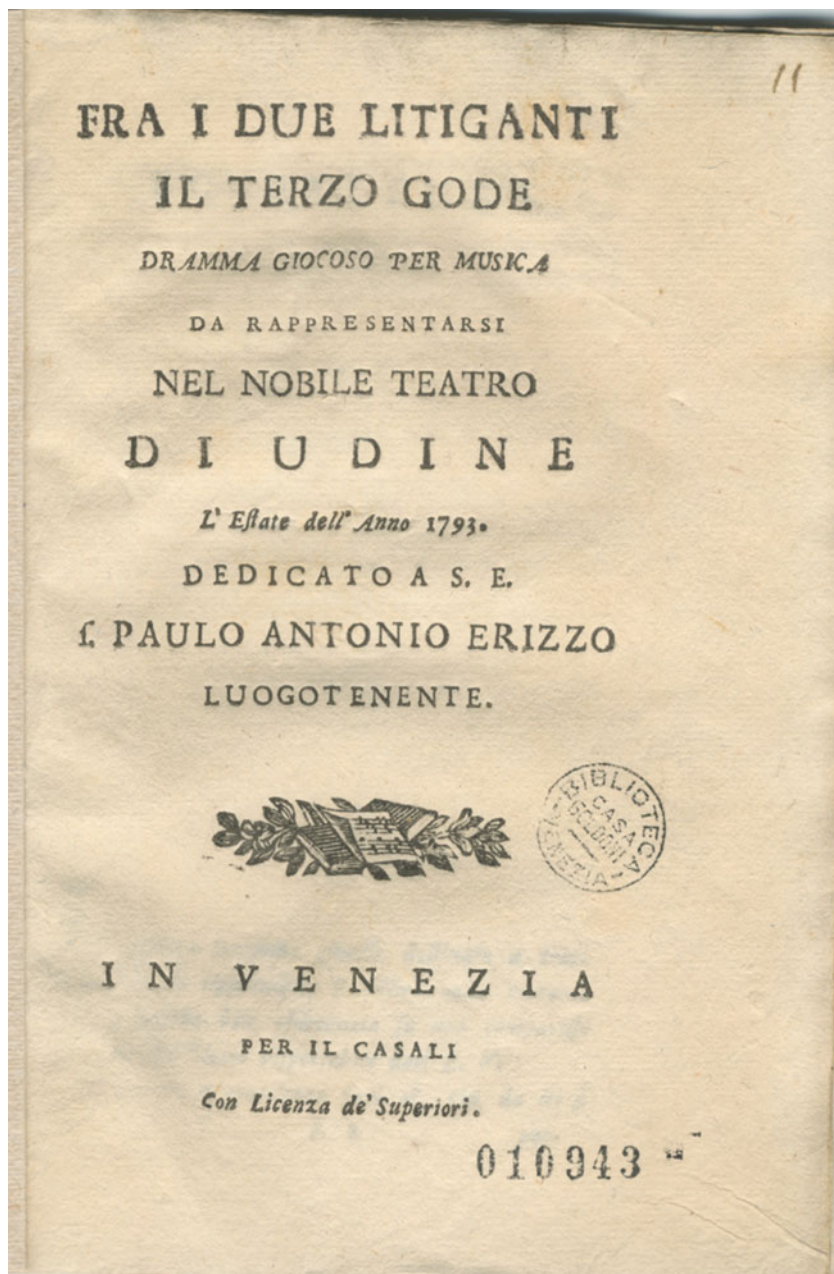


Figure 1 (Colour online) Title-page of the libretto of *Fra i due litiganti il terzo gode*, Udine, 1793 (Venice: Il Casali, c1793). Venice, Biblioteca Casa di Goldoni Centro Studi Teatrali, Correr Udine 274. Used by permission

in Italy of any music from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. A production of the complete opera did not take place for nearly another twenty years, in Rome in 1811.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Pierluigi Petrobelli, 'Don Giovanni in Italia: la fortuna dell'opera ed il suo influsso', in *Colloquium 'Mozart und Italien'* (Rom 1974), ed. Friedrich Lippmann (Cologne: A. Volk, 1978), 30. Claims of an earlier performance, at Florence in

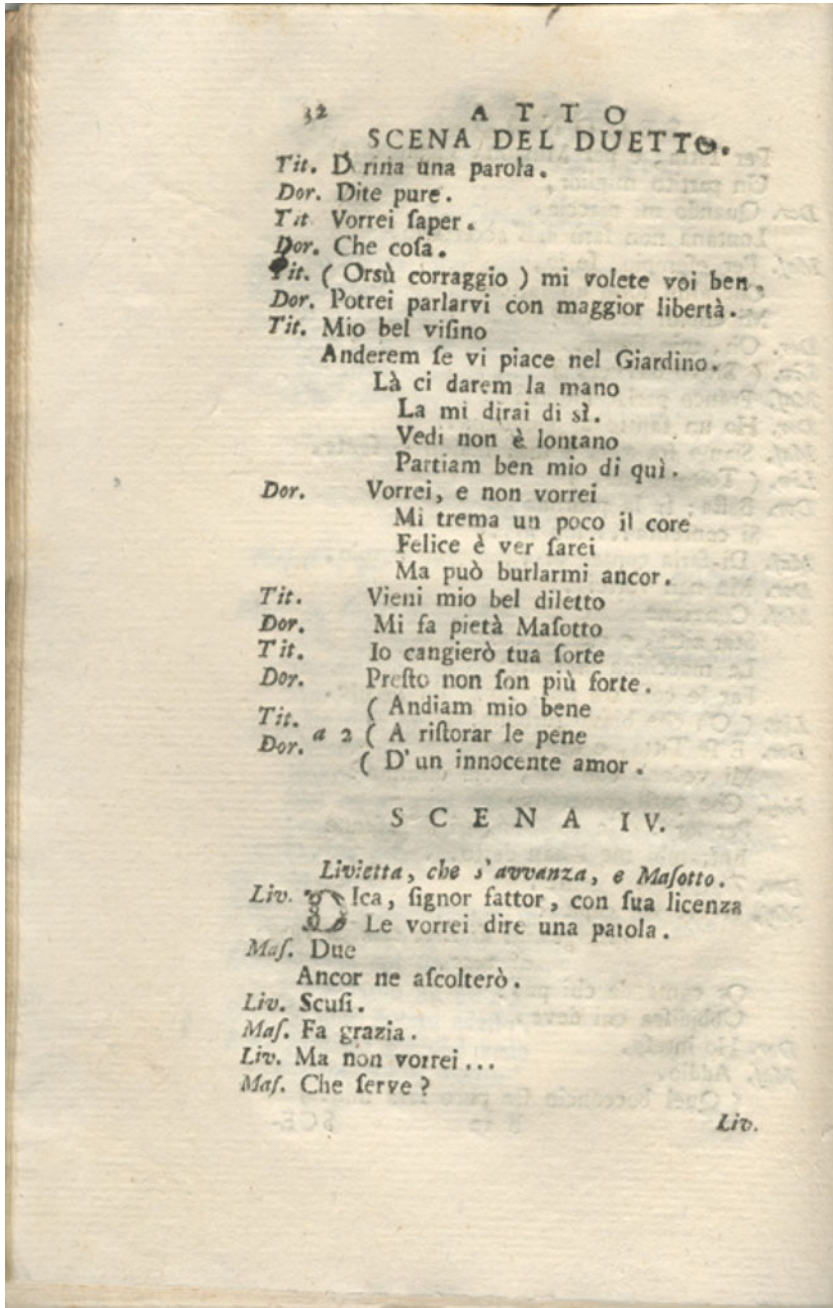


Figure 2 (Colour online) Page 32 of the libretto of *Fra i due litiganti il terzo gode*, Udine, 1793

Fortunately, the cast list in the Udine libretto provides a compelling explanation for the presence of the duet (see [Figure 3](#)). The role of Titta was sung there by the bass Felice Ponziani, who played Leporello in the

1792, are extremely doubtful. See Alfred Loewenberg, *Annals of Opera, 1597–1940*, two volumes (Geneva: Societas Bibliographica, 1943; second, revised edition, 1955), volume 1, 454, and Petrobelli, 'Don Giovanni in Italia', 32–33.

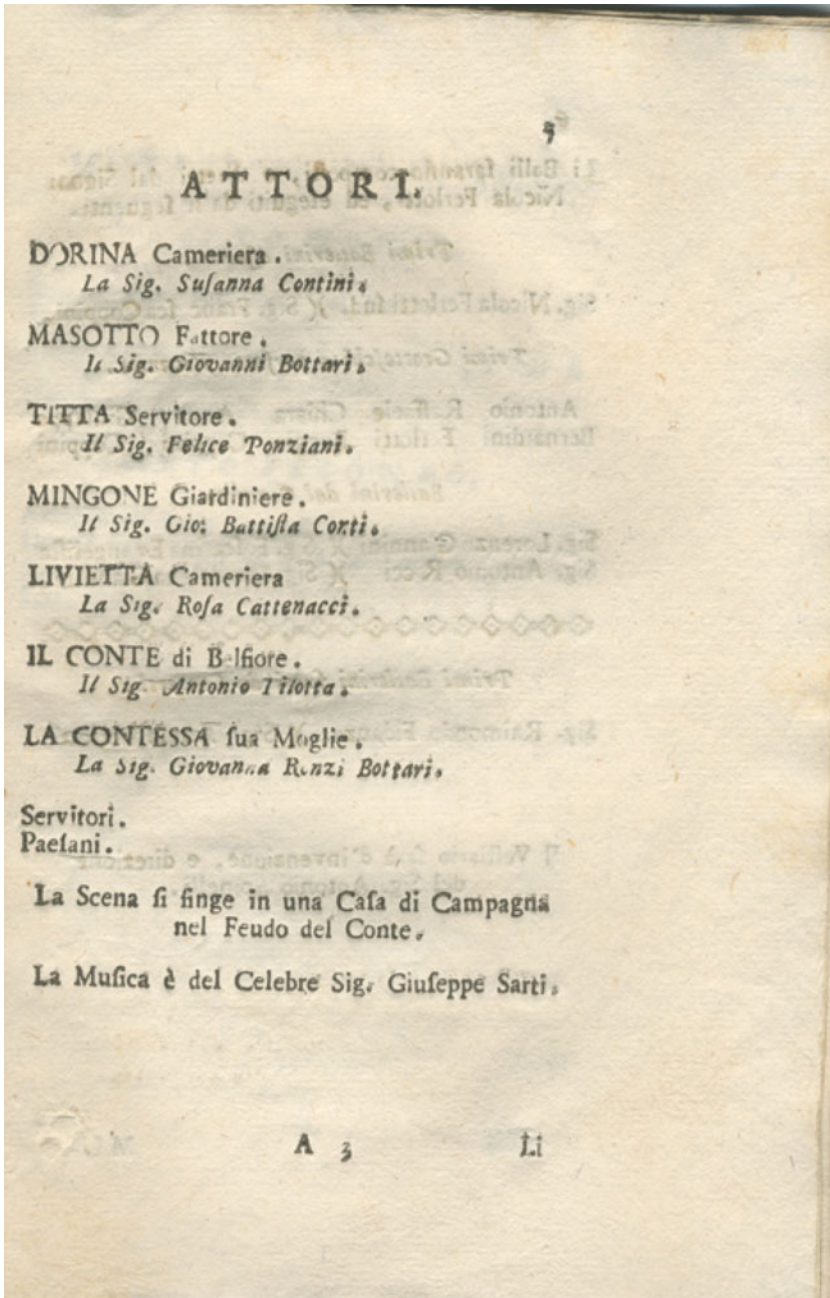


Figure 3 (Colour online) Cast list of the libretto of *Fra i due litiganti il terzo gode*, Udine, 1793

original production of *Don Giovanni* in Prague in 1787. It was surely Ponziani who brought 'Là ci darem' to Udine and urged its inclusion in Sarti's opera.



Originally from Rome, Felice Ponziani had a career lasting more than two decades as a *buffo caricato* (a comic bass, often playing a foolish or deluded lover).<sup>3</sup> He performed in smaller Italian cities between 1778 and 1780 before singing at least two roles in Bologna in 1781. From 1782 to about 1791 Ponziani served as one of the leading singers in the Italiänische Opera-Virtuosen, an ensemble based in Prague that was directed by Pasquale Bondini and Domenico Guardasoni. With this company Ponziani also regularly performed in Leipzig, and in Warsaw in 1790/1791. In 1786 he played Figaro in the highly successful Prague production of *Le nozze di Figaro*, before creating the role of Leporello the following year. Ponziani also sang numerous other comic roles for the Bondini/Guardasoni company, including Titta in *Fra i due litiganti*. In the 1790s he sang throughout Italy, including in Venice in 1792/1793 and again in 1797/1798, in Rome in 1796 and in Florence in 1797. He also maintained ties to the Prague company, however; in 1800 he participated in a disastrous performance of the Mozart Requiem, in which the soloists were opera buffa singers ill suited to the style of the work.

Ponziani must have been an excellent comic performer. An early review from 1782 claimed that he 'has few equals, as he combines strength with softness of voice, and has in addition the merit that one can understand every word even in the fastest singing. Excellent as he is as a singer, he is equally praiseworthy as an actor. He always catches the spirit of his character and represents it with truth.'<sup>4</sup> According to Hermann Abert, 'contemporary reports stress the evenness of his voice throughout its whole range, as well as his excellent enunciation.'<sup>5</sup> Since Titta is a thoroughly comic character, a blustering fool who thinks rather too highly of himself and his talents, it is easy to imagine that Ponziani achieved great success in the role.

The appearance of Mozart's duet in Sarti's opera raises several points worth noting. First, it is striking what an easy fit it is. Taken out of its original context, 'Là ci darem' reads like a fairly typical seduction duet, one that could be worked comfortably into nearly any opera-buffa story of the time. Its words, in fact, are quite general. In this case it was used as an attempt to woo Dorina by Titta, whose romantic ineptitude is mocked throughout the opera.

Because Titta's chief rival is named *Masotto*, only one letter removed from the *Masetto* of Mozart's opera, the duet fitted effortlessly into its new context. It may even be the case that Da Ponte originally chose the name Masetto with Sarti's opera in mind.<sup>6</sup> Not only was *Fra i due litiganti* widely known, but Da Ponte would have supervised its staging in Vienna, as part of his duties as librettist to the Italian opera company,<sup>7</sup> and he probably wrote the texts of the various new arias that were inserted into the opera during its Viennese run.

We should remember that Ponziani himself never sang this duet in *Don Giovanni*, since he played Leporello and not the title role. The fact that he brought 'Là ci darem' to Udine as a number for himself to sing implies that he had seen it succeed with the public in Prague, and felt that he could have success with it as well.

The appearance of 'Là ci darem' in its new context creates a wonderful dramatic irony, though it would have been evident only to those who knew Mozart's opera. In *Don Giovanni*, of course, the irresistibly lyrical duet serves as Giovanni's interrupted seduction of Zerlina. But in *Fra i due litiganti* the duet's meaning is quite different. It would have been sung and staged for comic effect, with Titta believing he had won Dorina while she pretended to succumb to his advances, no doubt indicating to the audience by gestures and facial expressions that she was actually mocking him. (There is in fact a trio in Act 3 of *Fra i due litiganti* that does

3 Ponziani is said to be Roman by Claudio Sartori, *I libretti italiani a stampa dalle origini al 1800: catalogo analitico con 16 indici*, seven volumes (Cuneo: Bertola & Locatelli, 1990), volume 7, 530. Most of the information in the following two paragraphs derives from Sartori and from Ian Woodfield, *Performing Operas for Mozart: Impresarios, Singers and Troupes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), especially 168–172.

4 Woodfield, *Performing Operas for Mozart*, 65. Original German version in *Litteratur- und Theater-Zeitung* 5 (1782), 605.

5 Hermann Abert, *W. A. Mozart*, trans. Stewart Spencer, ed. Cliff Eisen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 1022.

6 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

7 Daniel Hertz, 'The Poet as Stage Director: Metastasio, Goldoni, and Da Ponte', in *Mozart's Operas*, ed. and with contributing essays by Thomas Bauman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 89.



much the same thing: Titta woos Dorina, who pretends to go along, while behind his back she and Masotto comment on his foolishness.)

The widespread popularity of 'Là ci darem' in the first half of the nineteenth century is attested to by the number of composers who wrote variations on it. These include Beethoven, Franz Danzi, Paganini, Berlioz, the German composer and pianist Helene Liebmann (1796–after 1835),<sup>8</sup> and most famously Chopin and Liszt. Chopin's 'Variations on a Theme by Mozart', his Op. 2 (written in 1827), was praised by Robert Schumann in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* in 1831, in a celebrated review that included the words 'Hats off, gentlemen, a genius!'. Liszt's *Réminiscences de Don Juan* (1841) used the duet's music extensively, along with other important themes from Mozart's opera. This unusual number of adaptations makes clear how much of a familiar piece the duet had become.

The insertion of 'Là ci darem la mano' into a production of *Fra i due litiganti* in 1793, which made it the first music from *Don Giovanni* to be performed in Italy, is significant for several reasons. First, this was no typical 'suitcase aria', carried by a singer from one theatre to another as a carefully chosen showpiece for himself to sing. It not an aria at all, of course, and not a number that draws any special attention to the virtuosity of the performers. Moreover, the duet had not even been sung by Ponziani in the original production of *Don Giovanni*. He must have inserted it into the Udine *Fra i due litiganti* for its musical merits and because of its previous popularity, rather than because it showed him to particular advantage. And, strikingly, Ponziani must have foreseen that Mozart's ensemble, written as a seduction duet, would also please audiences when recast as a farcical failed seduction by a *buffo* lover.

The substitution, finally, reminds us of something well known to scholars: that eighteenth-century operas were not at all the fixed texts that became the rule a century later, and that audiences today have come to expect. In Mozart and Sarti's time, once an opera reached the stage, its shape and content ceased to be the sole province of the original composer and librettist. Ponziani's addition of 'Là ci darem' to Sarti's opera underscores the central role of the singers in determining how operas were altered and reshaped after their initial performances – a role that was only appropriate, since it was not composers but star singers who drew audiences to the opera house.

---

8 Beethoven's variations, for two oboes and English horn, were written in 1796 (WoO 28). Danzi's fantasy for clarinet and orchestra was published as 2<sup>e</sup> *Pot Pourri pour la Clarinette* (Bonn and Cologne: N. Simrock, no date (c1818)). Parts can be found at the *Petrucci Music Library* website <[imslp.org/wiki/Clarinet\\_Potpourri\\_No.2,\\_P.246\\_\(Danzi,\\_Franz\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Clarinet_Potpourri_No.2,_P.246_(Danzi,_Franz))> (26 July 2016). Paganini's capriccio for violin and orchestra, written in Vienna in 1828, is now lost; see Edward Neill, 'Paganini, Nicolò', in *Grove Music Online* <[www.oxfordmusiconline.com](http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com)> (26 July 2016). Berlioz's variations, for guitar, were published in 1828 and are now lost; see Kern Holoman, *Catalogue of the Works of Hector Berlioz (Hector Berlioz: New Edition of the Complete Works, volume 25)* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1987), 56 (H30). Liebmann's variations appear in the final movement of her Cello Sonata, Op. 11; see Nancy B. Reich, 'Liebmann [née Riese], Helene', in *Grove Music Online* <[www.oxfordmusiconline.com](http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com)> (26 July 2016). Parts can be found at the *Petrucci Music Library* website <[imslp.org/wiki/Cello\\_Sonata,\\_Op.11\\_\(Liebmann,\\_Helene\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Cello_Sonata,_Op.11_(Liebmann,_Helene))> (26 July 2016).