

Sinfonia in D Major “Venezia”—Antonio Salieri

Antonio Salieri was one of the most important, successful, and talented composers in Vienna in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Along with European luminaries such as Gluck, Paisiello, Soler, Gassmann and others, his compositions helped to create the sound of late classical music. There were also two others, by the way: Haydn and Mozart. The tragedy of history is that it is reductive, and only the latter composers have come to dominate our thinking and programming. Rightly so, of course, but there’s a lot of great music by the lesser masters. Salieri was a native of northern Italy, who moved in his early maturity to Vienna, where he stayed for the rest of his life—with some side trips to successful operatic commissions in Paris—and established a formidable presence in the highest musical circles. He secured a series of Imperial appointments to the Hapsburg court, and spent his life composing operas and sacred music in that sinecure. Well paid and respected, his was a friend to many, as well as a sought-after teacher—his pupils included Beethoven, Schubert and Liszt. Not bad!

The Imperial court was conservative, made changes in appointments slowly and with care, and had great respect for steady, predictable artists. So, it is not surprising that Salieri was not thrown out on the street just because an eccentric by the name of Mozart was zipping around Vienna. Simply put, Salieri had the job and Mozart wanted it simply because no one else on earth was as brilliant. But, that’s not how the world usually works and Mozart was constantly frustrated. And all that eyewash about how Salieri plotted to kill Mozart? Forget it—typical scurrilous distortions by our current crop of writers and dramatists who are notorious for confounding truth and fiction, usually intentionally.

Salieri composed almost exclusively operas and sacred vocal music. There are a few instrumental works, including a handful of “symphonies;” “Veneziana” is one of them. It’s called a “sinfonia,” owing to its only having three, rather than the later norm of four, movements. The scoring is modest, too, using only the typical orchestration of most early symphonies of four string parts, two oboes, and two horns—the omnipresent “á 8.” Salieri did not compose these works as symphonies, *per se*, this music saw the light of day as parts of his opera overtures—not an uncommon practice, then. The first movement is from his opera, “La scuola de gelosi,” (The School for Jealousy) and the other two movements from the opera, “La partenza inaspettata” (The Unexpected Departure). Nonetheless, they hold together well in the typical sequence of fast-slow-fast movements—you probably don’t miss the absent minuet that came to be common in later symphonies. All in all, a delightful example of well-crafted music by a master who has received a—temporary, we hope—bum rap, today.

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