

2024|25 SEASON

La clemenza di Tito Keynotes

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Does the warm glow of the sun extend as far as its gravitational pull? Put another way, does a leader's grace reach as far as the ripples of their political actions?

Mozart's *La clemenza di Tito* interrogates this question. During the reign of the titular Tito, we are taken through a succession of conflicts where the breadth of Tito's humanity is tested—dissected by circumstance to reveal the limits of his clemency.

Duty, love, ambition, and deceit exert their influence to dramatic effect.

Parallel to the firmament of forces acting upon Tito over the course of the opera, Pacific Opera Victoria's 2024 production is inspired by orreries—models of our solar system illustrating the concurrent and interconnected swirls of celestial bodies. Built upon concentric orbits, orreries consider what we include in

our sun's sphere of influence and how overlapping gravities shape our paths. Paired with Mozart's operatic interrogation of clemency, we are asked how widely our concentric spheres of care and forgiveness extend.

After traversing multiple gravitational fields of influence, the ending of *La clemenza di Tito* sees Tito making the choice to grant clemency to his whole operatic solar system, bestowing forgiveness even to those who seek to overthrow him. Tito chooses to extend care and compassion to those who are outside the security of his inner orbit.

However, there is a notable tension between Mozart's Tito and

the historical Titus Caesar Vespasianus on which he is based. Living between 39-81 AD, Titus was known among the Romans for his generosity. Indeed, he provided significant aid in crisis following the eruption of Mount Vesuvius and a significant fire in Rome. Yet to others, he is "Titus the Wicked", an oppressor of the Jewish people and destroyer of the city and temple of Jerusalem.

In the Tito/Titus schism we see where Titus' leadership fell

short of his clement reputation.

Despite his domestic care, he did not choose to extend the warmth of his humanity to the edges of his political influence, to 'the other' – his outer solar system if you will. The consequence is human suffering echoing through space and time. As legacies are revisited, researched, and revised, we are often left with an initial, idealized impression and a more detailed, painful truth. An opera and a history, respectively. In the rift between the two, we learn what we



La clemenza di Tito set model by Camellia Koo

wish to bring into our own orrery, what we do not, and what new sources of light we must uncover going forward.

As with the building of spheres of care and forgiveness, this season is about choice – the choice to be better. It's about our choice between Tito and Titus—expansive care that rallies against othering or selective, bounded care. In our leaders and ourselves, will we choose to illuminate the firmament with rich constellations of care or to guard faint glimmers until they fade into the celestial void?

ALEX CHEN

Opera Seria and Mozart's *La clemenza di Tito*

Let's identify and define the three operatic genres Mozart cultivated throughout his childhood training (under his father's tutelage), apprenticeship (fulfilling commissions in various European musical centres), and professional career (largely spent in Vienna, and away from his father's tutelage):

Opera seria, which is by definition serious, we'll examine below;

Opera buffa, literally "comic" opera, gave Mozart the freedom to explore a wide variety of topics (including those addressing contemporary issues) and to push the boundaries of what music drama could accomplish. In this he enjoyed the invaluable collaboration of his greatest librettist, Lorenzo da Ponte.

Singspiel, German-language music theatre (with spoken dialogue) was favoured by Emperor Joseph (a well-documented admirer of Mozart) who established the German language as the official one of Austria.

If *opera buffa* and *singspiel* were both, in their different ways, meant to entertain a ticket-buying public, Italian opera seria was customarily the property of royalty and aristocracy.* It flourished between c. 1710 and c. 1770 partly in response to French criticism of Italian opera that it was frivolous, relying too heavily on elaborate stage machinery and vulgar humour. The subject matter of opera seria was always courtly, its plots taken from history, myth, or heroic legend, and its writing calculated to venerate royal and aristocratic leaders. The genre's most celebrated practitioner was librettist Pietro Metastasio (1698-1782), a Roman-born former lawyer who settled in Vienna as court poet in 1730 and spent the remainder of his long life there. Inspired by the morally didactic plays of French writers Corneille and Racine, Metastasio set about to refine and codify Italian-language *opera seria*. During the height of his prolific career, his many works were translated into French, English, German, Spanish, and modern Greek, and were set many times over by virtually every composer of distinction.

By the time Mozart settled in Vienna in 1781 Metastasio, a revered figurehead, was infirm and professionally inactive. Mozart established himself almost immediately as a contemporary and original operatic composer with works such as *Die Entführung auf dem Serail* (1782) and *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786), but his father Leopold had ensured that young Wolfgang was thoroughly familiar with the poetry of Metastasio, even assigning the boy passages of text to set to music as exercises. *Mitradate, re di Ponto*, an opera seria composed by Mozart when he was fourteen, was given its first performance in Milan in 1770. In 1781, *Idomeneo* – often considered Mozart's first "mature" opera and also an opera seria – premièred in Munich.

History has recorded – perhaps too strenuously – details of Mozart's precarious financial situation during the last year of his life, but at least by the summer of 1791 the composer was if anything overwhelmed with commissions. Just as work on *Die Zauberflöte* was near completion, a commission came from an "anonymous" patron – Count Walsegg von Stuppach – for a requiem mass in honour of the late Countess (Walsegg did not reveal his identity because he intended to present the requiem as his own composition). At the same time, another commission (already turned down by Antonio Salieri) came from Prague for a festival opera to honour the coronation of Leopold II as King of Bohemia. This would be *La clemenza di Tito*, a fifty-year-old libretto set many times already, and a project with a very short timeline: less than two months before the scheduled premiere.



Cécile Muhire as Cherubino, Tyler Duncan as Count Almaviva, and Donovan Singletary as Figaro in *The Marriage of Figaro*. Pacific Opera Victoria, 2024. David Cooper Photography.

Thus Mozart found himself having to put aside work on *Flute* and the Requiem to undertake a new opera seria that promised a lucrative fee and involvement in a very prestigious occasion. Dissatisfied with the libretto, Mozart had it re-written by Caterino Mazzolà, who turned it into “a real opera” (Mozart’s words). Time was so tight that Mozart completed *La clemenza* in the carriage en route to Prague, and almost certainly his student/assistant Franz Xavier Süssmayr composed most of the *secco* recitatives.

La clemenza di Tito presents a paradigmatic *opera seria* plot, with complex romances and friendships, political intrigue, treachery, and above all a wise, heroic, magnanimous ruler who forgives even the most grievous of transgressions. Clearly the idea of redemption and forgiveness was important to Mozart: it is present not only in *Mitradate*, *Idomeneo*, *La clemenza*, but also very movingly in *Figaro*, a bit more comically in *Così*, and most powerfully in *Entführung*. Considering events in Western Europe when *La clemenza di Tito* was premièred, it may also be considered didactic – the behaviour of Tito may serve as an example to a new ruler that he should govern with wisdom, humility, and humanity.

All the pomp and circumstance surrounding a coronation will inevitably make it difficult for a mere composer to score with a new work, and at first *La clemenza* failed to make much of an impression. Writing a few years after Mozart’s death, the composer’s first biographer, Franz Xavier Niemetschek, wrote:

“... IT PLEASED LESS IN GENERAL THAN ITS REALLY HEAVENLY MUSIC DESERVED. THERE IS A CERTAIN GRECIAN SIMPLICITY, A STILL SUBLIMITY, WHICH STRIKES A SENSITIVE HEART GENTLY BUT NONE THE LESS PROFOUNDLY – WHICH FIT ADMIRABLY TO THE CHARACTER OF TITUS, THE TIMES, THE ENTIRE SUBJECT, AND ALSO REFLECT HONOUR ON MOZART’S DELICATE TASTE AND HIS SENSE OF CHARACTERISATION.”

Public enthusiasm, however, built quickly: after *Flute* premièred in Vienna (a few weeks later), Mozart wrote to his wife, “It’s the strangest thing, but the same evening as my new opera was given here for the first time with such applause, ‘Tito’ had its final performance in Prague, also with extraordinary applause.”

What can we, as a 21st-century audience, expect from a production of this masterwork? A captivating and moving story with – as is usual with Mozart – characters we can relate to and understand as fellow human beings, and a virtual fireworks display of magnificent singing. Mozart never liked to begin composing an aria until he knew who was going to be singing it (“the aria must fit the singer like a perfectly tailored gown”), and Prague provided him with spectacular singers for whom he composed arias and ensembles of outstanding virtuosity and beautiful expressiveness. Pacific Opera Victoria has provided our audience with singers – and orchestral players – that promise to do Mozart’s masterpiece proud!

ROBERT HOLLISTON

* Handel wrote for a ticket-buying London audience with a wide range of sophistication and taste, and cut his operatic cloth accordingly – in many ways he can be considered *sui generis*.



Justin Welsh as Papageno in *The Magic Flute*. Pacific Opera Victoria, 2017. Emily Cooper Photography.

Upcoming Events



LA CLEMENZA DI TITO | OCTOBER 16-22

The Royal Theatre

La clemenza di Tito is a powerful opera set in, where Emperor Tito faces betrayal and must balance mercy with justice. With exquisite arias and a gripping narrative, this Mozart masterpiece explores themes of power, loyalty, and redemption. This production will welcome some major Canadian artists to the stage, including director Jennifer Tarver and tenor Andrew Haji.



INSIDE OPERA WITH ROBERT HOLLISTON | OCTOBER 4 & 6, NOVEMBER 20,

JANUARY 18, MARCH 8

Free | **The Baumann Centre**

Join us for a free, hour-long event series featuring the renowned Robert Holliston, your guide to the opera masterpieces coming up in our 2024/2025 season. You do not need to go to Pacific Opera Victoria's productions to go to Inside Opera. We encourage you to come!



THE FLAME: RAISING OUR VOICES | SEPTEMBER 23

Free | **7:00** | **The Baumann Centre**

The Flame: Raising Our Voices is an evening of stories and songs from local community members, celebrating meaningful work and inspired by the season's theme of highlighting our better selves. Hosted at the Baumann Centre, this free 90-minute events aims to strengthen bonds and spark new connections. **SOLD OUT** - email boxoffice@pacificopera.ca to be added to the wait list.



BARBARA HANNIGAN & BERTRAND CHAMAYOU | DECEMBER 2

7:30 | **McPherson Playhouse**

Join soprano Barbara Hannigan and pianist Bertrand Chamayou for an evening of Messiaen, Scriabin, and Zorn. Experience mystical, nature-inspired compositions, transcendent works, and avant-garde sound in a captivating musical journey. Book your tickets today at pacificopera.ca

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Pacific Opera Victoria works and creates on the traditional lands of the *ləkʷəŋən* speaking people, now known as the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations.