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On the reception of *Mitridate* (16 Jan 1771)

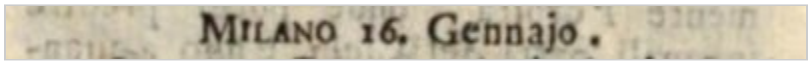
Dexter Edge

***Notizie del Mondo*, no. 8, 26 Jan 1771**

[61]

MILANO 16. Gennajo.

[...]



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Sabato venturo 19. del corr. sara posto su queste scene il Dramma la Nitteti messo in musica dal Sig. Carlo Monza Milanese, e sperasi che avrà maggiore applauso dell' altro intitolato il Mitridate. *[...]*



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[translation:]

MILAN, 16 January.

[...]

Next Saturday, the 19th of this month will be performed on the stage here the drama La Nitteti, set to music by Sig. Carlo Monza, a Milanese, and it is hoped

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that it will have greater applause than the
other, entitled Mitridate. *[...]*

Commentary

Mozart's *Mitridate* was premiered in the Regio Ducal Teatro in Milan on Wed, 26 Dec 1770. It was the first of two opere serie for the carnival season; the second was Carlo Monza's *La Nitteti*. Up to now, documentation of *Mitridate*'s reception was limited to a few references in the letters of Leopold and Wolfgang Mozart, and two newspaper reports of the premiere. We are able to add two other reports, both from *Notizie del Mondo*, that shed further light on the opera's reception. One documents a performance on New Year's Day 1771 attended by Franceso III d'Este, Duke of Modena and governor-general of the province of Austrian Lombardy, and his granddaughter Maria Beatrice d'Este (see our entry for 1 Jan 1771). The other is the notice transcribed above, reporting the forthcoming premiere of *La Nitteti*, the second carnival opera, on Sat, 19 Jan.

The libretto for *Mitridate* was written by the Turinese poet Vittorio Amedeo Cigna-Santi (1728–1799), based on a translation by Giuseppe Parini of Racine's French tragedy *Mithridate* (1672). Cigna-Santi's libretto was first set by Quirino Gasparini (1721–1778), as the second opera of the carnival season 1766–1767 at the Teatro Regio in Turin. The published libretto of the Milan production with Mozart's setting is dedicated to Francesco III d'Este.



MITRIDATE
RE DI PONTO,
DRAMMA PER MUSICA
DA RAPPRESENTARSI
NEL REGIO-DUCAL TEATRO
DI MILANO
Nel Carnovale dell' Anno 1771.
DEDICATO
A SUA ALTEZZA SERENISSIMA
I L
DUCA DI MODENA,
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Title page of the libretto of the Milan production of *Mitridate* (1770–1771)
(Internet Culturale)

Most of what we know about the premiere production of Mozart's *Mitridate* in Milan comes from Leopold Mozart. In a letter of 29 Dec 1770, he mentions performances on 26, 27, and 29 Dec. The only other precisely dated performance took place on 1 Jan 1771, as reported in *Notizie del Mondo*, but the opera may have been given as many as 20 times in all (see the hypothetical reconstruction of the calendar of performances below). Up to now, the only known published report touching on the reception of *Mitridate* was one that appeared in *Gazzetta di Milano* on 2 Jan 1771; this report may have been written by Parini, the paper's editor, soon to become the librettist of Mozart's *Ascanio in Alba* (see our entry for 17 Oct 1771).

> Mercoledì scorso si è riaperto questo Regio Ducal Teatro colla rappresentazione del Dramma intitolato il Mitridate, Re di Ponto, che incontrata la pubblica soddisfazione sì per il buon gusto delle Decorazioni, quanto per l'eccellenza della Musica, ed abilità degli Attori. Alcune Arie cantate dalla Signora Antonia Bernasconi esprimono vivamente le passioni, e toccano il cuore. Il giovine Maestro di Cappella, che non oltrepassa l'età d'anni quindici, studia il bello della natura, e ce lo rappresenta adorno delle più rare grazie Musicali. [*Dokumente*, 117]

> Last Wednesday the Regio Ducal Teatro here reopened with the performance of a drama entitled *Mitridate, Re di Ponto*, which met with public satisfaction, both for the good taste of the scenery, and for the excellence of the music and the skill of the actors. Some arias sung by Signora Antonia Bernasconi vibrantly expressed the passions and touched the heart. The young *maestro di cappella*, who is not yet fifteen years old, studies what is fine in human nature, and portrays it to us with the most uncommon musical grace.

Bernasconi, one of the most famous singers of the time, sang the lead soprano role of Aspasia in Mozart's *Mitridate*. In a letter to Padre Martini in Bologna on 2 Jan 1771, Leopold Mozart reported that during preparations for the opera, someone—Wignall (1995, 65) has suggested tenor Guglielmo D'Ettore, who sang the title role—tried unsuccessfully to convince Bernasconi to substitute Gasparini's settings of Aspasia's arias and her second-act duet with Sifare:

> uno ha avuto l'habilità di portare alla prima Donna tutte le sue Arie, come ancora il Duetto, tutto della Compositione del Abbate Gasparini di Torrino, cio é le Arie fatte à torrino, con persuaderla di mettere queste Arie, e di non accettare nulla di questo Ragazzo, chi non sarà mai capace di scrivere un sola buona Aria. Mà la prima Donna si dichiaró, di voler vedere prima le Arie del mio figlio: e avendo le vedute si dichiaró contenta, anzi arcicontenta *[...]* [*Briefe*, i:413]

> One man had the resourcefulness to bring to the *prima donna* all of her arias, as well as the duet, all composed by Abbate Gasparini in Turin, that is to say, the arias made in Turin, in order to persuade her to insert these arias, and not to accept any by this Boy, who will never be capable of writing a single good aria. But the *prima donna* declared that she wanted first to see the arias by my son; and having seen them, she declared herself to be content, in fact most highly content.

Leopold goes on in the same letter to say that all doubts among the performers about the ability of the young German to write Italian opera were dispelled at the first orchestral rehearsal.

In his letter of 29 Dec, Leopold describes the boisterous reception at the first and second performances:

> Gott sey gelobt die erste Aufführung der Opera ist den 26ten mit allgemeinen Beyfall vorsich gegangen: und zwey sachen, die in Mayland noch niemals geschehen, sind dabey vorgegangen; nämlich, daß |: wieder alle Gewohnheit der ersten Sera :| eine Arie der prima Donna ist wiederhollt worden, da man sonst bey der ersten production niemals fora rufft, und zweytens, daß bey fast allen Arien, kaum ein paar Arien delle ultime Parti ausgenommen, nach der Arie ein erstaunliches Händeklatschen und Viva il Maestro, viva il Maestrino ruffen erfolget.
>
> den 27ten sind 2 Arien der prima donna wiederhollt worden: und da es donnerstag war, folglich, da es in den freytag hineingieng, so muste man suchen kurz davon zu kommen, sonst würde auch das Duetto wiederhollt worden seyn, denn der Lerm fieng schon an. Allein die meisten wollten noch zu hauß etwas Essen, und die opera mit 3 balletten dauert seine 6 Starke stund: man wird aber itzt die Ballett abkürzen den sie dauern 2 Starke stund. *[...]*
>
> Niemals war bey Mannsgedenken eine solche Begierde die erste opera in Mayland zu sehen, als disses mahl; indem bevor ein so erschröcklicher widerspruch war, und da zwey sagten daß die opera gut sein werde, schon 10 andere waren, die zum voraus wusten, daß es eine Dalkerey, andere, daß es ein Mischmasch, andere aber daß es eine deutsche barbarische Musick seyn werde. *[...]* [*Briefe*, i:411–12]

[translation:]

> God be praised, the first performance of the opera took place with universal applause: and two things happened that have never before taken place, namely that (contrary to all custom on the first evening) an aria of the *prima donna* was encored, because one otherwise never shouts fora at the first production; and second, that for almost all the arias except for a few in the last part, there was astonishing applause following the aria, with shouts of "Viva il Maestro, viva il Maestrino."
>
> On the 27th two arias of the *prima donna* were encored, and becauseit was Thursday, and since it was going into Friday, they had to try to keep it short, otherwise the duet would also have been encored, for the clamor had already started. But most wanted still to eat something at home, and the opera with 3 ballets lasts a good 6 hours: they will, however, shorten the ballets, as they last a good 2 hours. *[...]*
>
> Never in human memory had there been such desire to see the first opera in Milan, as this time; for beforehand there had been such shocking contrast, and where two said that the opera will be good, 10 others knew ahead of time that it will be silliness, others a mishmash, and yet others barbaric German music. *[...]*

According to Leopold, before the premiere the opinions of the Milanese public had been strongly divided, with the majority scoffing at the notion that this young German boy could produce an acceptable Italian opera. But Leopold paints a picture of an astonished and wildly enthusiastic

audience, who demanded encores of Bernasconi's arias. Leopold was hardly an impartial witness, and we should also allow for the possibility of claques—Wolfgang's commission had, after all, been promoted by Count Firmian, the Habsburg minister plenipotentiary and de facto ruler. Nevertheless, it seems fairly certain that the premiere of *Mitridate* was an unexpected success, and one that aroused exceptional public interest.

In a letter to his wife on 2 Jan 1771, Leopold referred again to the reception of Wolfgang's opera:

> Die Opera unseres Sohnes gehet mit allgemeinen Beyfall forth, und, wie die Italiener sagen: ist *alle Stelle!* [*Briefe*, i:414]
>
> Our son's opera continues with universal acclaim, and, as the Italians say: to the stars!

And on 12 Jan he wrote:

> Gott Lob, die opera hat einen solchen zulauf, daß das Theater täglich voll ist. [*Briefe*, i:415]
>
> Praise God, the opera is so popular that the theater is full every day.

Wolfgang echoes his father's observation in a postscript to his sister Nannerl in the same letter:

> Die opera gott lob und danck gefält indeme alle abend daß theater voll ist, welches auch alle in verwunderung setzet in dem vielle sagen, daß sie so lang sie in Mayland sind kein erste opera so voll gesehen als diesmahl. [*Briefe*, i: 416]
>
> The opera, praise and thank God, pleases so much that every evening the theater is full, which amazes everyone, so that many say that it has been a very long time since they have seen a first opera in Milan as full as this time.

On 9 Jan 1771, Count Firmian sent a letter of recommendation for Mozart to Count Lascaris di Castellar in Turin that also alludes to the opera's reception:

> [Mozart] ha composta la Musica dell' Opera, che attualmente si rappresenta con pubblico applauso in questo Teatro *[...]*
>
> [Mozart] composed the music of the opera that is currently being performed to public applause in the theater here *[...]*

(For the full letter with commentary, see our entry for 9 Jan 1771.) As yet another indication of the success of *Mitridate*, by mid March, just a few weeks after the opera's final performances, Wolfgang had received three commissions for major vocal works: an oratorio for Padua (*Betulia liberata*); a serenata for the wedding of Archduke Ferdinand and Princess Maria Beatrice d'Este that coming autumn in Milan (*Ascanio in Alba*); and another *opera seria* for the carnival season in Milan in 1772–1773 (*Lucio Silla*).

In contrast to this preponderance of evidence of a positive reception, the report in *Notizie del Mondo* writes ambiguously:

> Sabato venturo 19. del corr. sara posto su queste scene il Dramma la Nitteti messo in musica dal Sig. Carlo Monza Milanese, e sperasi che avrà maggiore applauso dell' altro intitolato il Mitridate.
>
> Next Saturday, the 19th of this month will be performed on the stage here the drama *La Nitteti*, set to music by Sig. Carlo Monza, a Milanese, and it is hoped that it will have greater applause than the other, entitled *Mitridate*.

This can be read as saying either that *Mitridate* had little applause, and it is hoped that Monza's opera will have more; or that *Mitridate* was well received and it is hoped that Monza's will achieve even greater glory. Although it is inherently risky to read too much into such brief passages, the reference to local hero Carlo Monza may suggest that the correspondent was partisan and intended the former rather than the latter. If so, this is currently the only known reference to *Mitridate* hinting at anything other than a positive reception by the Milanese audience.



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Title page of the libretto of *La Nitteti* (Milan 1771)
(LOC, Schatz Collection)

Some sources give the date of the premiere of Monza's *La Nitteti* as Mon, 21 Jan 1771, based on a review in the *Gazzetta di Milano* two days later (Hansell 1979, 53 and note 75; we have not had the opportunity to consult this review). The report in *Notizie del Mondo*, on the other hand, places the intended premiere on Sat, 19 Jan 1771. In either case, the date would place a constraint on the number of performances *Mitridate* could have received. The following calendar shows the days on which Mozart's opera might have been performed between its premiere and 19 Jan. There were no performances on Fridays, a fast day, a fact that Leopold alludes to in his letter of 29 Dec 1770.

Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
	December 1770	26 premiere of *Mitridate* 1	27 2	28	29 3	30 4
31 5						
January 1771	1 6	2 7	3 8	4	5 9	6 10
7 11	8 12	9 13	10 14	11	12 15	13 16
14 17	15 18	16 19	17 20	18	19 premiere of *La Nitteti*?	20

Italic numbers in the lower-right of each cell indicate days on which *Mitridate* could have been performed (excluding Fridays). Green shows documented performances (26, 27, and 29 Dec, and 1 Jan). Red shows days for which we currently have no documentation. If *Mitridate* was performed on every possible day before 19 Jan, it would have been given 20 times. This number is often cited in the Mozart literature as if it were a fact, but it is only an inference based on the general practice for carnival operas in Milan. The Mozarts left for Turin on 14 Jan. If *Mitridate* was given on every possible day and they attended every performance before their departure, they would have seen it 16 times. However, the number 20 should not be taken as proven: this schedule would have been very tiring for the singers, as it included three runs of six consecutive performances without a break. Even if *La Nitteti* was premiered on 21 rather than 19 Jan, it is unlikely that *Mitridate* would have been performed after 17 Jan, to allow for rehearsals of Monza's opera.

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