Citation:

Printed: Thu, 19 Nov 2026

Edge, Dexter. . “A review of the first Viennese revival of *Le nozze di Figaro* (29 Aug 1789).” In: *Mozart: New Documents*, edited by Dexter Edge and David Black. First published . [direct link]

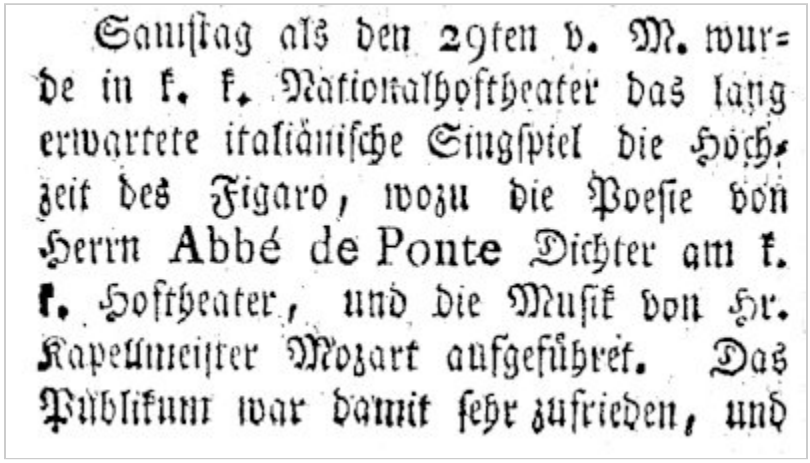
A review of the first Viennese revival of *Le nozze di Figaro* (29 Aug 1789)

Dexter Edge

***Preßburger Zeitung*, no. 70, 2 Sep 1789**

[634]

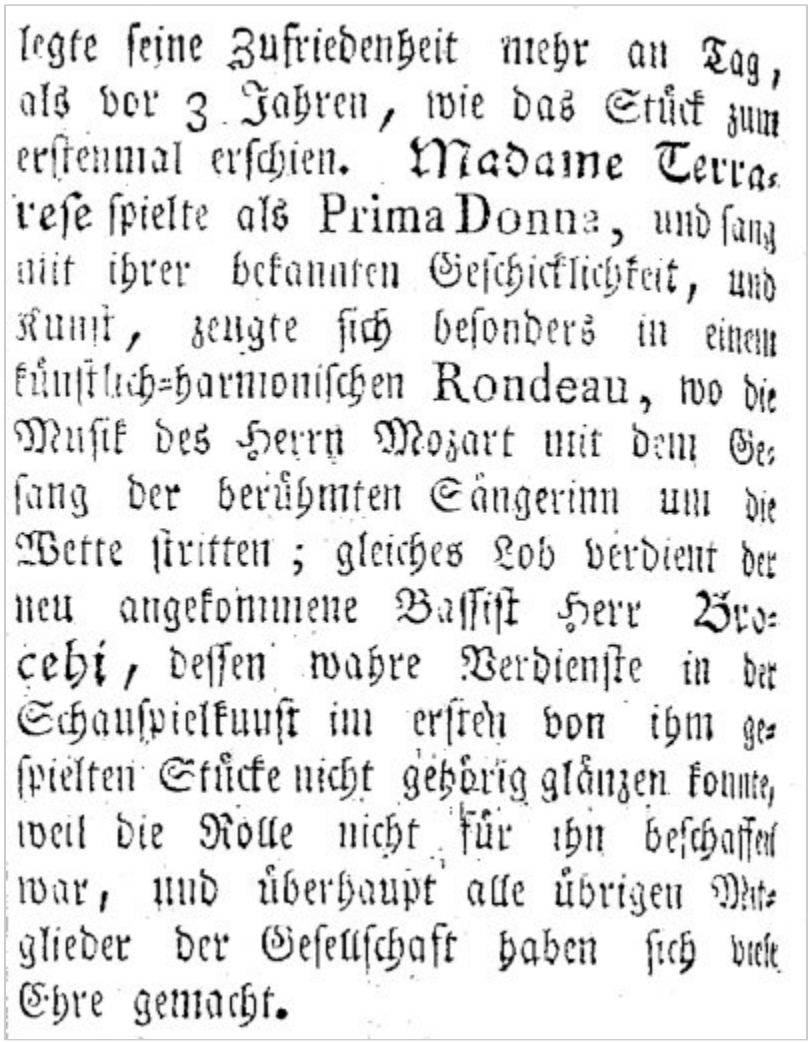
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[translation:]

Saturday, the 29th of last month, the
long-awaited Italian singspiel *Die Hochzeit*
des Figaro, with libretto by *Abbé Da Ponte*,
the poet of the court theater, and music by

Kapellmeister Mozart, was given in the imperial royal National Theater. The public was very pleased with it and displayed its pleasure more openly than three years ago, when the piece was first given. **Madame Ferrarese** played the *prima donna*, and sang with her well-known dexterity and art, shown especially in an artfully harmonious *Rondò*, in which the music of Herr Mozart vied with the singing of the famous singer. The newly arrived bass **Herr Brocchi** earned equal praise, as his true merit as an actor could not shine sufficiently in the first piece in which he performed because the role was not created for him. And in general all the other members of the ensemble did themselves much credit.

Commentary

This report in the *Preßburger Zeitung* reviews the premiere of the first Viennese revival of Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* on 29 Aug 1789, a production with which the composer was directly involved, making substantive changes for the new singers in his cast.

Figaro had first been performed by the court theater in Vienna on 1 May 1786 and had nine performances in all in the Burgtheater during its initial run; it was also performed once at the court's summer place in Laxenburg that season, probably on 3 Jun. Documentation of the opera's initial reception is sparse, but suggests that public opinion was divided. A correspondent's report from Vienna dated 3 May, published in the *Münchner Zeitung*, gives a negative view:

> Das Stük gefiel nicht so allgemein, als man es wohl hätte erwarten sollen; denn man sezte daran aus, daß die Musik zu gekünstelt, und folglich langweilig anzuhören seie.
>
> The piece did not please as generally as one probably would have expected; this was attributed to the music being too contrived, and consequently being boring to listen to.

Another report from Vienna, this one dated 16 May and published in the *Bayreuther Zeitung*, suggests that some in the audience had taken it upon themselves to tell Mozart what was wrong with the opera, and that he had made revisions accordingly:

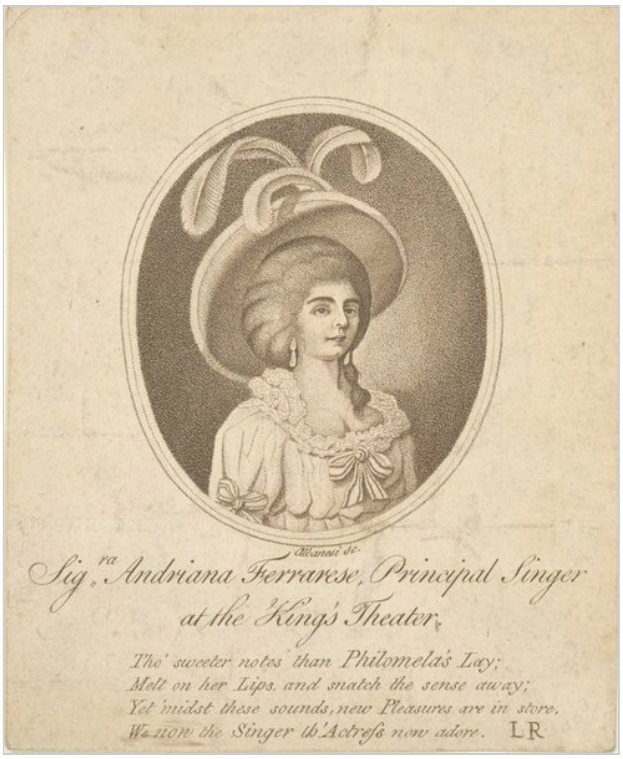
> Die zur Oper gemachte *Nozza del Figaro [sic]* von Hrn. Mozzart gefällt nur halb, und die Kenner haben verschiedenes daran ausgesezt welches der geschickte Herr Compositor zu verbessern sich vorgenommen hat

> The opera made from *Le nozze di Figaro* by Herr Mozart pleased only by half, and connoisseurs have pointed out various things that the skillful composer has undertaken to improve.

After attending the premiere of *Figaro*, Count Zinzendorf, echoing the correspondent to the *Münchner Zeitung*, wrote in his diary that the opera "bored" him ("l'opera m'ennuya"; *Addenda*, 50).
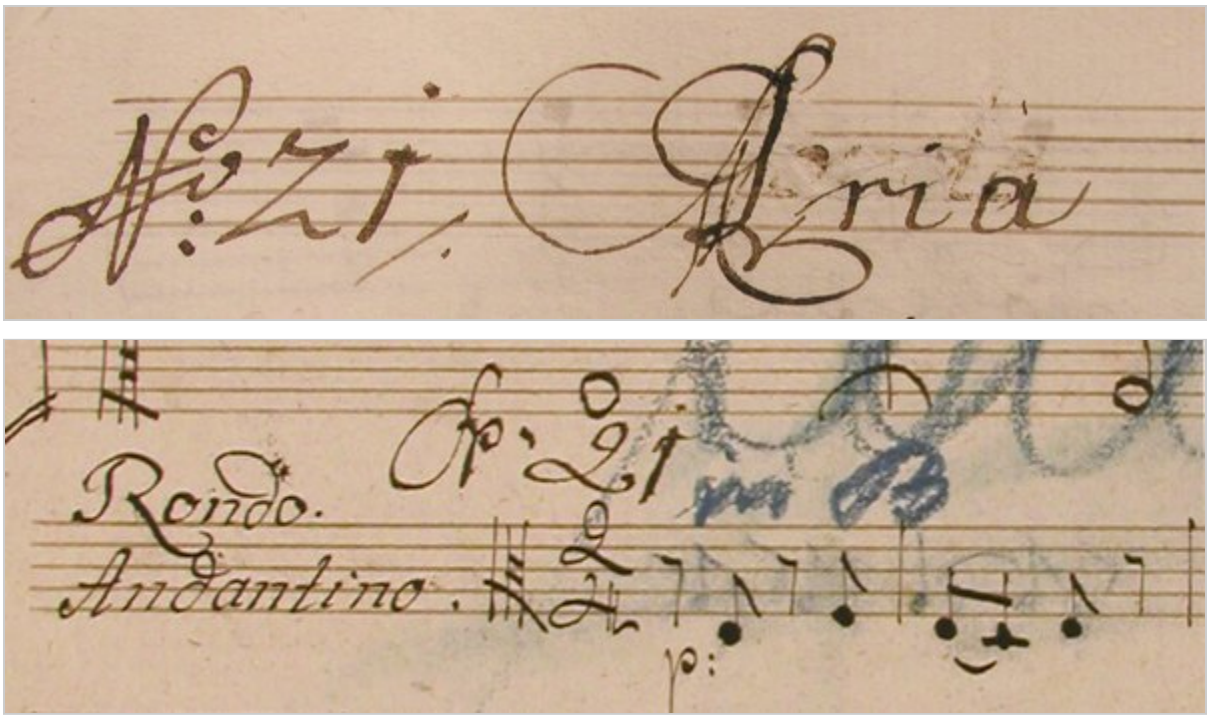
On the other hand, a report from Vienna dated 7 May 1786, published in the Florentine *Gazzetta universale*, noted that the opera "ha incontrata l'universale approvazione" ("has met with universal approval"). And it seems certain that the decree instituted on 9 May by Joseph II banning encores of operatic ensembles was a direct reaction to encores demanded by the public at the earliest performances of *Figaro* (see our entry for 10 May). A review in the Viennese *Realzeitung* on 11 Jul 1786 (a week after the fifth performance) writes of immediate appreciation by connoisseurs, a noisy claque at the premiere, and initial uncertainty but growing esteem among the public at large; the reviewer calls the opera a "Meisterstück" ("masterpiece"; *Dokumente*, 243–44). In any case, for whatever reason, the initial run of *Figaro* was relatively short, and following the final performance of the run on 18 Dec 1786, the opera was not performed by the Viennese court theater for over two and half years. The first performance of the revival took place on 29 Aug 1789, and is the subject of this report in the *Preßburger Zeitung* published four days later.

The history of Mozart's revisions for the revival is complex: evidence suggests that he made significant changes at least twice and possibly three times during the run of the revival, which saw 29 performances in all over two seasons (on Mozart's revisions, see principally Edge 2001, 1668–1742). It is certain, however, that the performance on 29 Aug 1789 included the new rondò "Al desio di chi t'adora," K. 577, replacing Susanna's "Deh vieni, non tardar" in Act IV; "Al desio" was tailored to the new singer in that role, Adriana Ferrarese del Bene, whose vocal strengths were quite different from those of Nancy Storace, the role's creator in 1786. It is also highly likely that a revised version of the Countess's "Dove sono" was already incorporated into the opera at the beginning of the revival for the new singer in that role, Catarina Cavalieri.



Sigra. Andriana [sic] Ferrarese, Principal Singer at the King's Theater,
Angelo Albanesi, ca. 1785
(NYPL)

The *Preßburger Zeitung* reports that Ferrarese was the "prima donna" and sang a "Rondeau," referring to "Al desio." There was a vogue for the two-tempo vocal rondò in Viennese opera buffa in the 1780s. It was often assigned to the principal soprano, the prima donna; an opera usually had only one rondò, which was often placed near the dramatic high point of the opera. (On the two-tempo rondò in Vienna, see Rice 1998, esp. 354–61, and on rondòs written for Ferrarese, 479–87, also Rice 2016.) "Deh vieni," the aria that "Al desio" replaced, was not a rondò, but the original version of the Countess's "Dove sono" in 1786 had been a rondò in all but name. In fact, Mozart's autograph score of the aria and the original orchestral parts show that it had indeed originally been called a "Rondò," but this designation was erased and replaced in the autograph and most of the orchestral parts with "Aria"; the change was probably made to placate the vanity of Mozart's first Susanna, Nancy Storace, who evidently wanted to be regarded as the prima donna in that production, and did not want the other lead soprano (Luisa Laschi as the Countess) to have a rondò. (On the complicated history of the relative roles of the Countess and Susanna in *Figaro*, see Edge 2001, 1560–85; on the erasure of "Rondò" in "Dove sono," 1579–82.)



Le nozze di Figaro, opening of "Dove sono," Basso 2, and Viola 1.
Original orchestral parts from 1786 (ÖNB, OA 295, Stimmen)

The first image shows the opening of "Dove sono" in copy 2 of the basso part, where "Rondò" has been scratched out and replaced with "Aria". This change was made in most but not all parts: the second image shows the opening of "Dove sono" in the first-desk viola part, with the original designation "Rondo".

Mozart revised "Dove sono" for the new production in 1789, adding a bravura element in the fast section tailored to Cavalieri's strengths, and eliminating the return of the opening material in the opening slow section, perhaps to make the aria seem less explicitly a rondò, given that "Al desio" now filled that role. Cavalieri's vanity was apparently not threatened; she had been a mainstay of the Viennese court opera since her debut in 1775, and had outlasted several more highly paid sopranos.

The principal surprise of the report in the *Preßburger Zeitung* is its garbled reference to "Brocehi"—Giovanni Battista Brocchi, who evidently sang Figaro in the first performance of the revival. Up to now it has been assumed that Francesco Benucci, still a member of the court theater ensemble in 1789, reprised the role that he had created in 1786.

Brocchi is most notable for having created the role of Figaro in the premiere of Paisiello's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* in St. Petersburg in 1782. However, next to nothing has been known about his time in Vienna: prior to the discovery of this report in the *Preßburger Zeitung*, only three documentary references were known bearing on Brocchi's activities there. Lorenzo da Ponte mentions Brocchi in passing in a memorandum submitted to the directorate of the court theater

in Dec 1790. In the memorandum, Da Ponte argues at length for the continued employment of Ferrarese by the court theater the following season, 1791–92 (see the transcription of the memorandum in Michtner 1970, 441–43). He reminds the directorate of the difficulties the preceding year (probably referring to the season 1789–90), when delays in acquiring new singers (he names Brocchi, among several others) forced the theater to continue programming weak productions that earned little—he names Seydelmann's *Il turco in Italia* and Cimarosa's *I due suppositi conti*, *I due baroni*, and *Il falegname*.

Two other documents refer to Brocchi's debut in Vienna. A notice on the poster for a performance of Martín y Soler's *Una cosa rara* in the Burgtheater on 27 Jul 1789 states: "Herr Johann Baptist Brocchi wird heute die Ehre haben in der Rolle des Lubino zum erstenmal aufzutreten" ("Today Herr Johann Baptist Brocchi will have the honor of appearing for the first time in the role of Lubino"; see Edge 1996, 98, note s, and Link 1998, note 226). And Count Zinzendorf, who attended that performance, wrote in his diary: "Puis a l'opera Una Cosa rara. Le nouvel acteur Brochi est un peu un gros Lubin" ("Then to the opera *Una cosa rara*. The new actor Brocchi is a bit of a 'gros Lubin'"; Link 1998, 337; on the implication of "un gros Lubin," see the *Notes* below). It is almost certainly Brocchi's appearance as Lubino that the *Preßburger Zeitung* is referring to when it states:

> *[...]* gleiches Lob verdient der neu angekommene Bassist Herr **Brocehi** *[sic]* dessen wahre Verdienste in der Schauspielkunst im ersten von ihm gespielten Stücke nicht gehörig glänzen konnte, weil die Rolle nicht für ihn beschaffen war *[...]*
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> The newly arrived bass Herr **Brocchi** earned equal praise, as his true merit as an actor could not shine sufficiently in the first piece in which he performed because the role was not created for him.

These references all suggest that Brocchi had been hired as a member of the Italian opera company in the court theater in Vienna, making his debut around four months into the season 1789–90. But they give us no information on how long he was employed. (The theater's account books for the seasons 1789–90 and 1790–91 are missing, so we cannot check the payment records.) Up to now, this is all that had been known about Brocchi in Vienna. The article on Brocchi in the *Großes Sängerlexikon* (Kutsch & Riemens 2003, i:597), currently the principal reference on his career, does not even mention Vienna.

Yet there is a significant gap in our knowledge of Brocchi's career over precisely this period. After leaving St. Petersburg, Brocchi's name turns up in Italian libretti in the years 1786–1789 (Sartori 1990–94); the latest of these is from Genoa in spring 1789. After the Viennese references, Brocchi is next documented singing Pistolfo in Paisiello's *La molinara* in Parma in carnival 1791; he then turns up in Paris, where he made his local debut as Blasio in Salieri's *La scuola de' gelosi* on 20 May 1791 (Gregoir 1888, i:105). So apart from the references to Brocchi's performances in Vienna in Jul and Aug 1789, his career is otherwise undocumented from the spring of 1789 until at least the end of 1790. Since he is not known to have been singing anywhere else during that span, it may be that he was employed in Vienna for the last seven months of the season 1789–90 (from the end of

Jul 1789 until the death of Joseph II on 20 Feb 1790). And there is some evidence to suggest that he may have remained in Vienna for at least part of the season 1790–91.

Two references on posters from the Burgtheater in the summer of 1790 indicate that a bass other than Benucci had been singing Figaro that season. A notice on the poster for *Le nozze di Figaro* on 26 Jun states: "Wegen Unpäßlichkeit des Herrn Benucci kann die bereits angekündigte Oper: Una cosa rara, nicht gegeben werden" ("Owing to the indisposition of Herr Benucci, the previously announced opera, *Una cosa rara*, cannot be given"; see Edge 1996, 104, note aw, and Link 1998, 154). Thus Benucci was certainly not singing Figaro in that performance. A month later, a notice on the poster for Figaro on 24 Jul states that Benucci *would* be singing the role of Figaro, suggesting that he had not been doing so up to that point (Edge 1996, 104, note ax). It may be, then, that Brocchi was still singing Figaro and was still a member of the court theater ensemble for at least the first part of the season 1790–91. As it happens, Paisiello's *La molinara* was first performed by the court theater in Vienna on 13 Nov 1790 and was given nine times in all by the end of the year, so it is conceivable that Brocchi learned the role of Pistolfo in Vienna before singing it in Parma during carnival 1791.

The report in the *Preßburger Zeitung* indicates that the revival of *Figaro* had been "long awaited" and that the opera was received with more open enthusiasm by the Viennese audience than it had been in 1786:

> Samstag als den 29ten d. M. wurde in k. k. Nationalhoftheater das lang erwartete italiänische Singspiel die Hochzeit des Figaro, wozu die Poesie von Herrn *Abbé de Ponte* Dichter am k. k. Hoftheater, und die Musik von Hr. Kapellmeister Mozart aufgeführet. Das Publikum war damit sehr zufrieden, und legte seine Zufriedenheit mehr an Tag, als vor 3 Jahren, wie das Stück zum erstenmal erschien.
>
> Saturday, the 29th of this month, the long-awaited Italian singspiel *Die Hochzeit des Figaro*, with libretto by *Abbé Da Ponte*, the poet of the court theater, and music by Kapellmeister Mozart, was given in the imperial royal National Theater. The public was very pleased with it and displayed its pleasure more openly than three years ago, when the piece was first given.

The receipts from the first performance of the revival were a respectable 376 fl 49 kr, the tenth highest for any opera in the season 1789–90, and the only opera performance in the dog days of August to appear in the top twenty. (On the Burgtheater receipts for the seasons 1789–90 and 1790–91 and their implications for the reception of Mozart's operas, see Edge 1996.)

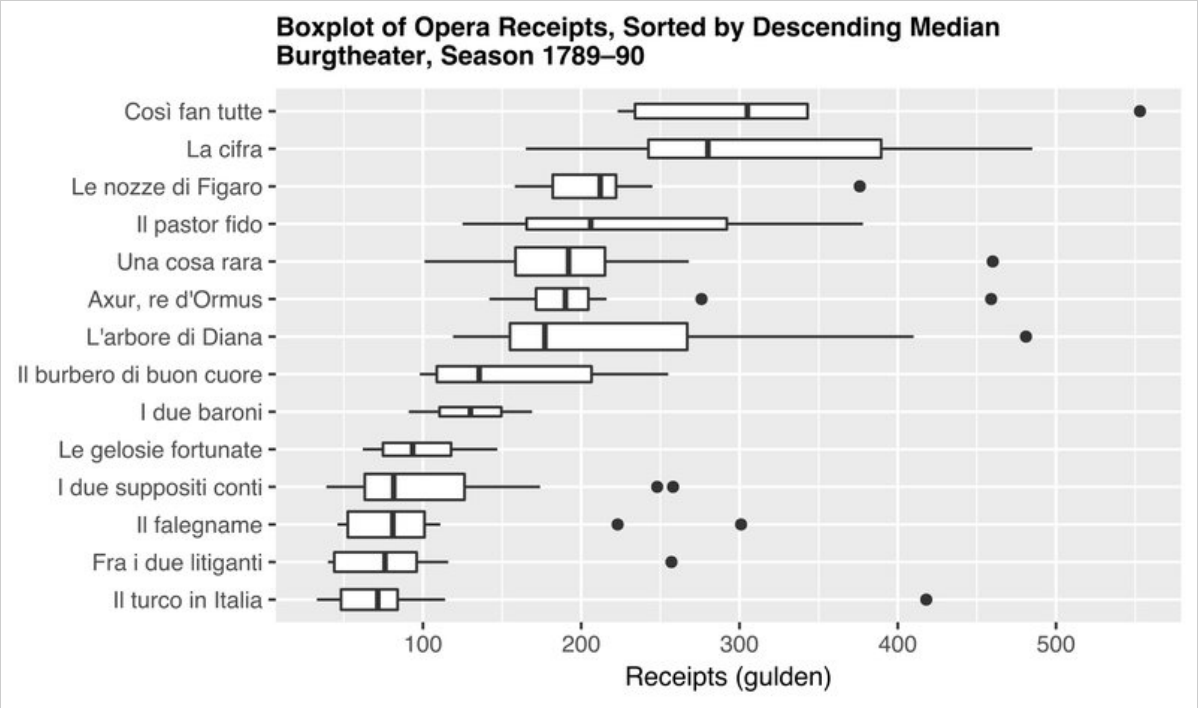
Top 20 Opera Performances by Box-Office Receipts
Vienna, Burgtheater, Season 1789–90
(from Vienna, Österreichisches Theatermuseum, M 4000)

Rank	Date	DOW	Month	Title	Composer	fl	kr
1	1790-01-26	Tue	Jan	*Così fan tutte*	Mozart	553	19

Rank	Date	DOW	Month	Title	Composer	fl	kr
2	1789-12-11	Fri	Dec	*La cifra*	Salieri	485	21
3	1789-06-29	Mon	Jun	*L'arbore di Diana*	Martîn y Soler	481	9
4	1789-12-13	Sun	Dec	*La cifra*	Salieri	463	38
5	1789-09-15	Tue	Sep	*Una cosa rara*	Martîn y Soler	460	30
6	1789-09-23	Wed	Sep	*Axur, re d'Ormus*	Salieri	459	0
7	1789-04-28	Tue	Apr	*Il turco in Italia*	Seydelmann	418	59
8	1789-06-27	Sat	Jun	*L'arbore di Diana*	Martín y Soler	410	55
9	1789-10-18	Sun	Oct	*Il pastor fido*	Salieri	378	42
10	1789-08-29	Sat	Aug	*Le nozze di Figaro*	Mozart	376	49
11	1789-12-27	Sun	Dec	*La cifra*	Salieri	365	34
12	1790-02-07	Sun	Feb	*Così fan tutte*	Mozart	343	6
13	1790-01-10	Sun	Jan	*L'arbore di Diana*	Martín y Soler	308	57
14	1790-01-28	Thu	Jan	*Cosi fan tutte*	Mozart	305	11
15	1789-07-15	Wed	Jul	*Il falegname*	Cimarosa	301	13
16	1789-12-21	Mon	Dec	*La cifra*	Salieri	282	23
17	1789-12-15	Tue	Dec	*La cifra*	Salieri	278	15
18	1789-09-27	Sun	Sep	*Axur, re d'Ormus*	Salieri	276	27
19	1789-07-01	Wed	Jul	*L'arbore di Diana*	Martín y Soler	273	8
20	1789-07-27	Mon	Jul	*Una cosa rara*	Martín y Soler	268	44

The receipts from Martín y Soler's *Una cosa rara* on 27 Jul 1789, Brocchi's debut, were 268 fl 44 kr, the highest from any of the six performances of the opera in the season up to that point, suggesting that his debut was a special draw.

Of the fourteen operas performed by the Viennese court theater in the season 1789–90, *Figaro* had the third highest median receipts, 212 fl 8 kr, and the fifth highest mean (average) receipts, 218 fl 40 kr. (*Così fan tutte* led the season by both metrics, and Salieri's *La cifra*, the second highest, was, like *Così*, a brand new opera that season.)



The vertical line inside each box marks the median receipts for that opera in the season 1789–90. The left and right boundaries of a box show the 25th and 75th percentiles of the receipts, and the thin lines (known as "whiskers") show the range of values below and above the 25th and 75th percentiles. Dots are outliers more than 1.5 times the interquartile range (the range between the 25th and 75th percentiles) below or above the median.

Thus, for example, the plot for *Figaro* shows that the median receipts were 212 fl 8 kr. The range between the 25th and 75th percentiles is just under 40 fl, suggesting relative stability of audience size. The whisker to the left extends down to the lowest receipts for *Figaro* that season, 158 fl 23 kr (on 27 Nov 1789), and the whisker to the right extends to 245 fl 54 kr, the opera's second highest receipts for the season. There is one outlier: 376 fl 49 kr from the premiere on 29 Aug 1789.

The width of each box is proportional to the number of performances, 13 in the case of *Figaro*. *Una cosa rara*, performed 19 times that season, has the widest box, and the narrow boxes for Cimarosa's *I due baroni* and Salieri's *Il pastor fido* indicate 2 and 3 performances respectively.

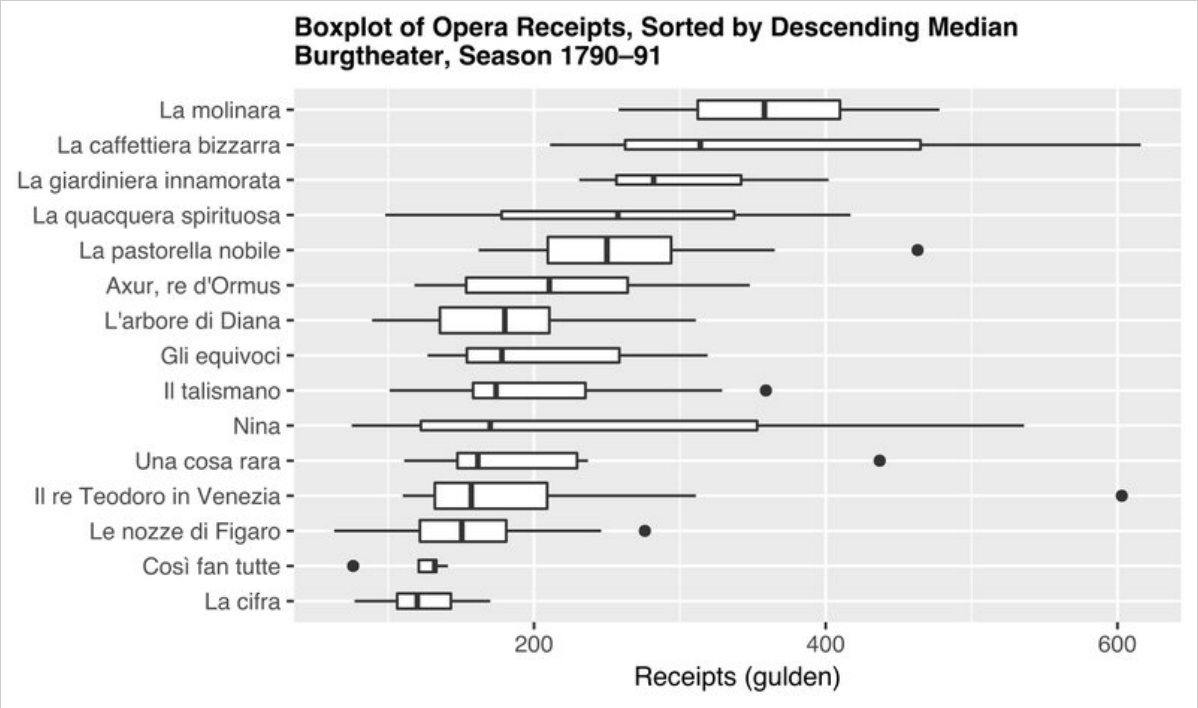
This graph suggests that the revival of *Figaro*, while arguably not a huge hit, was consistently popular in the season 1789–90, with a profile quite close to that of *Una cosa rara*. The operas that Da Ponte named in his memorandum as weak performers are at or near the bottom of the ranking: the relatively wide boxes for three that he named—*I due suppositi conti*, *Il falegname*, and

Il turco in Italia—show that they were indeed performed often, in spite of poor receipts (all three have median receipts considerably under 100 fl).

A gradual but fundamental change in the repertory began the following season (1790–91), the first under the new ruler, Leopold II. Leopold began almost immediately to implement what John Rice has aptly called the "Neapolitanization" of the Viennese operatic repertory, through the programming of recent works that had been written specifically for Neapolitan theaters (Rice 1998, 507ff). As Rice explains:

> These [Neapolitan] operas are light, delicate works, in turn sentimental and gently comic. Their plots, which lack the complex interplay of comic and serious characteristic of many Viennese operas of the 1780s, revolve around the sweet young woman referred to in the title. Serious or mock-serious characters, such as Eugenia in *La molinara*, are of little importance in the drama; and their music offers few opportunities for singers trained in serious opera fully to display their virtuosity. The two-tempo rondò, so much a part of Josephinian opera buffa, is completely absent. [Rice 1998, 509]

The change is already evident in the repertory and box-office receipts for the season 1790–91, in which Viennese operas from the 1780s, including *Figaro*, competed for favor with operas from Naples. The first premiere that season was Paisiello's *Nina* on 13 Apr 1790, an opera originally commissioned by the King of Naples (whose wife Maria Carolina was Leopold's sister). *Nina* was substantially revised for its Viennese production by Da Ponte and composer Joseph Weigl, who wrote seven new numbers, including a rondò for Ferrarese. This heavily revised version was not a success: it received just three performances, and the receipts from the premiere of 536 fl 2 kr plummeted to 75 fl 31 kr at the third and final performance ten days later. But Guglielmi's *La pastorella nobile*, first performed in Naples in 1788 and premiered in Vienna on 24 May 1790, was a solid success with the local audience. And Paisiello's *La molinara*, likewise first performed in Naples in 1788, was a hit.



The long thin boxes and long whiskers for *La caffettiera bizzarra*, *La quacquera spirituosa*, and *Nina* are characteristic of flops: they had few performances and precipitous declines in receipts. *La giardiniera innamorata*, which premiered late in the season and was performed just three times, does not show the same precipitous decline, but it was nevertheless dropped from the repertory the following season.

In contrast, the three leading operas from the previous season, *Le nozze di Figaro*, *Così fan tutte*, and Salieri's *La cifra*, all fell to the bottom of the ranking of box-office receipts. But *Figaro* remained a solid earner, roughly on a par in numbers of performances (16) and median receipts with the revival of Paisiello's *Il re Teodoro in Venezia* (given 23 times). It appears, too, that *Figaro* was brought back into the repertory in Jan and Feb 1791 (after not having been performed since 11 Oct 1790) specifically for the return visit to Vienna of the King and Queen of Naples, who attended the final performance of the revival of *Figaro* on 9 Feb 1791; that *Figaro* was brought back into the active repertory suggests that the directorate of the theater considered it worth showing off. (See our entry for 9 Feb 1791. On the musical events associated with the visit of the King and Queen of Naples, and Mozart's possible role in them, see Edge 1996, 88–93; see also our entry for 13 Feb 1791 on the King's and Queen's attendance at a performance of *Der Stein der Weisen* in the Theater auf der Wieden.)

Even though it continued to find an audience throughout its revival, *Figaro* was not performed again by the court theater in Vienna until 10 Jul 1798.

Notes (⇧)

So far as we are aware, this report in the *Preßburger Zeitung* on the revival of *Figaro* was first mentioned by Simon Keefe in his book Mozart in *Vienna: The Final Decade* (2017, 411–12, and note 13). Keefe's transcription of the report is only partial and includes two errors: he gives "Ferrarese" instead of "Terrarese" (the incorrect "T" was evidently an error by the *Preßburger Zeitung*'s typesetter) and "bekanntlichen" instead of "bekannten." The reference to Brocchi is also recorded in the Portheim catalog in the Wienbibliothek (its creator, Max von Portheim, died in 1937).

Keefe translates the phrase "in einen künstlich=harmonischen *Rondeau*" as "in a harmonically artificial Rondeau" (Keefe 2017, 411), which has a negative connotation to a modern ear. It is true that today "künstlich" means "artificial," with the negative connotations of that word in English. However, a late eighteenth-century German-English dictionary makes clear that the word had not yet taken on an exclusively negative spin by that point:

> **Künstlich**, *adj*. artificial, artful, curious, elaborate, accurate, made with Art.
> **ein künstliches Werk**, a curious, and artificial Work: a Work made with Art: an ingenious Work.
> **künstlich, nach der Kunst**, scientifical, learned, according to Art. *[...]*
> **eine künstliche Sache**, a Thing made with great Skill or Industry. *[...]*
> [Ebers 1796–1798, ii:454]

Because the overall tone of the review in the *Preßburger Zeitung* is positive, it is likely that the writer meant "künstlich-harmonisch" as a compliment, and for that reason we have translated it as "artfully harmonious"; another possibility would be "ingeniously harmonious."

The erasure of the designation "Rondò" for "Dove sono" is visible in two places in the color facsimile of Mozart's autograph score of *Le nozze di Figaro* issued by The Packard Humanities Institute (Mozart 2007). At the top of the first page of the score of "Dove sono" (ii:402), the word "Aria" is clearly written over an erasure, although the erased word is not legible in the facsimile. At the end of the preceding accompanied recitative (ii:401), in the instruction "Segue L'Aria della Contessa:", the word "L'Aria" is likewise written over an erasure and the color of ink used to write "L'Aria" is distinctly darker. Again, the original word is not legible in the facsimile, but the corresponding changes to the orchestral parts show that the original designation had been "Rondò".

Edge (2001, 1675) incorrectly assumes that Benucci reprised the role of Figaro in the revival of 1789–91, suggesting that he may have been replaced by Ignaz Saal when Benucci was unavailable. However, the report in the *Preßburger Zeitung* makes clear that Brocchi sang the role in the first performance of the

revival, and on the current state of evidence, it seems plausible that he continued to sing Figaro in most performances of that opera through at least the middle of 1790.

After seeing Brocchi's debut as Lubino in *Una cosa rara* on 27 Jul 1789, Zinzendorf writes: "Le nouvel acteur Brochi est un peu un gros Lubin." Zinzendorf could have meant this literally, something like "Brocchi is a bit fat for Lubino", or "a bit of a large Lubino." But the phrase "gros Lubin" occurs fairly often in French sources in the 17th and 18th centuries, sometimes associated with a character in a play (such as Lubin in Molière's *George Dandin ou Le Mari confondu*, 1668), but sometimes on its own, with a connotation of an oafish country bumpkin. It seems quite possible, then, that Zinzendorf was making a play on words between the role name "Lubino" (who was a country boy) and the phrase "un gros Lubin"; for that reason, we have left the phrase untranslated. (We are grateful to Bruce Brown for this point.)

The discussion above uses an opera's median box-office receipts to compare the reception of operas performed in the Viennese court theater in the seasons 1789–90 and 1790–91; in contrast, Edge (1996) uses the mean (average) receipts to make this comparison. The median of a set of numerical data is the number in the middle when the numbers are sorted from lowest to highest, or the average of the two numbers in the middle when the number of data points is even. The median is usually a better indicator of the central tendency than the mean if there are outliers in the data, which is often the case with box-office receipts, where the premiere of an opera or the first performance of a revival will often have much higher receipts than are typical of the run as a whole. The differences between the median and the mean are usually not large in the box-office data analyzed here, but they are sometimes large enough to change the ranking slightly. Thus *Le nozze di Figaro* ranked third by median receipts in the season 1789–90, but fifth by average receipts, or fourth if one omits operas performed fewer than four times (as was done for the ranking in Edge 1996, Table 5.5a, 112).

The graphs in this commentary were produced using the R language and the tidyverse family of packages, including (most importantly here) Hadley Wickham's dplyr and ggplot2.

We are grateful to John Rice for his help with research on Brocchi's career and for his comments on a draft of this commentary. We would also like to thank Bruce Brown for his summary of Da Ponte's "Memoria" (Vienna, HHStA, Vertrauliche Akten, Karton 40, Cose dell'Abate Lorenzo Da Ponte, fol. 23-24, transcribed in Michtner 1970, 441–43).

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First Published:

Citation:

Edge, Dexter. . "A review of the first Viennese revival of *Le nozze di Figaro* (29 Aug 1789)." In: *Mozart: New Documents*, edited by Dexter Edge and David Black. First published . [direct link]