



REVIEW: RECORDING

Salieri & Beethoven in Dialogue

**Antonio Salieri (1750–1825), Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)
Heidelberger Sinfoniker / Timo Jouko Herrmann (director) / Diana Tomsche,
Joshua Whitener, Kai Preußker (soloists)
Hänssler Classic HC20067, 2021; one disc, 48 minutes**

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When thinking of Antonio Salieri and his contemporaries, Ludwig van Beethoven's name might not appear at the top of the list of associations. However, as highlighted by Timo Jouko Herrmann and the Heidelberger Sinfoniker in the new recording *Salieri & Beethoven in Dialogue*, the two composers were, in fact, closely aligned in musical style in Vienna at the turn of the nineteenth century. A note in Salieri's house, found by Ignaz Moscheles (another of his pupils), read 'The pupil Beethoven was here!', and Herrmann takes this evidence of their encounter as the starting-point for this recording. The works selected represent the interdependent nature of their teacher–student relationship in the development of both composers' sound worlds, and the recording focuses on bringing attention to some of the hidden gems of their repertoires.

It is believed that Salieri and Beethoven would have first met in the mid-1790s, and so the recording features works from within the following decade, spanning the years 1800–1805. This provides a time frame within which the 'dialogue' between the two composers can take place and allows for a close comparison between their compositional styles. In addition, *Salieri & Beethoven in Dialogue* contains three world-premiere recordings, all of which are of works by Salieri – part of a wider project by Herrmann to highlight some of the composer's forgotten oeuvre. The recording follows on from Herrmann's 2020 release *Salieri: Strictly Private* (Hänssler Classic HC19709), which was nominated for three OPUS KLASSIK awards. In the current recording, Herrmann guides the ensemble in interpreting these works in a manner that reflects their origin: the Heidelberger Sinfoniker are renowned for a style rooted in historical performance practice, shaped by previous direction from Nikolaus Harnoncourt and Thomas Fey.

The choice of works also reflects the notion of 'dialogue', with three vocal pieces complementing their three instrumental counterparts. Soprano Diana Tomsche (also featured on last year's *Strictly Private*) returns, collaborating with fellow singers Joshua Whitener and Kai Preußker. Each boasts an impressive breadth of experience in operatic music from this period and beyond, which is evident throughout the recording. A well-balanced sound between the soloists and accompanying orchestra emphasizes the varied textures in Beethoven and Salieri's music, as both composers demonstrate a mature understanding of orchestral colour, instrumental interplay and sectional layering that underpins melodic material. The vocalists navigate this textural backdrop with clear intonation and dramatic flair.

Owing to entrenched performance and scholarly narratives, one would expect the large orchestral offerings to come from Beethoven, and the vocal works from Salieri. However, this recording takes the opposite approach: here, Salieri is the orchestral master, and his pupil Beethoven the vocal composer. Indeed, though Salieri's instrumental output has received minimal attention in both scholarly and performance settings, he was involved in a wide array of musical genres as Viennese Imperial Kapellmeister (1788–1824) and Director of the Italian Opera (1774–1792). These included

symphonies, ballets, serenades and overtures, amongst other smaller chamber works. Furthermore, only two Beethoven tracks are featured, against the four offerings from Salieri, which once again strays from expectations. Beethoven becomes nestled between the bold statements of his teacher, and the recording highlights his often-sidelined penchant for operatic vocal works. *Salieri & Beethoven in Dialogue* thus presents both composers from a new angle: Salieri is raised up from his position as a Viennese ‘Kleinmeister’ to sit alongside his often inimitable pupil Beethoven, who is grounded through such a close association with his senior contemporary.

When deciding which of Salieri’s more obscure works to record, Herrmann selected two world-premiere cantata overtures (*Habsburg* and *L’oracolo muto*) and the operatic overture to *Cesare in Farmacusa*. These introduce listeners to Salieri’s instrumental compositions while also situating the composer within his better-known sphere of dramatic music. The works display an expansive style of orchestration that is atypical of much of Salieri’s known instrumental oeuvre, highlighting Beethoven’s influence during this period. In *Habsburg* (track 1), the Heidelberger Sinfoniker and Herrmann immediately set the tone for the whole disc. Featuring an extended orchestra, at least by the standards of Salieri, with additional trumpets, timpani and military drum, the ‘imperial splendour of the overture leaves no doubt as to the laudatory character of the composition’, as Herrmann puts it (19). A moment of trumpet fanfare is particularly striking, heralding the building of musical texture to the point where we first hear the full orchestra playing as one force and highlighting the ‘exciting and yet nuanced’ performance style that the liner notes attribute to the Heidelberger Sinfoniker (21). This militaristic feeling is itself indicative once again of the ‘dialogue’ between the two composers: Salieri, a staunch loyalist to the Habsburg dynasty on account of having spent his entire career at the Viennese court since his arrival with Gassmann in 1766, is here poised for the perfect comparison with Beethoven. *Habsburg* was composed in 1805, during a period when Beethoven, by contrast, was known to have had somewhat of a revolutionary spirit and composed music with similar military connotations for a very different purpose.

The overture to *Cesare in Farmacusa* further highlights this mutually influential relationship between the composers. Premiered in 1800, the work was a recycled overture taken from a much earlier work in Salieri’s career, *Europa Riconosciuta* (1778). Expansive orchestration and increased melodic complexity are the main markers that set *Cesare in Farmacusa* apart from its earlier counterpart, perhaps showcasing the influence of Beethoven and the ‘dialogue’ of their musical languages, as Salieri made various changes to existing musical materials. Alongside dramatic *sforzando* passages that are common throughout Salieri’s overtures, this musical style makes for exciting listening alongside Beethoven’s vocal offerings.

In *Tremate, empi tremate*, Op. 116 (track 4), Beethoven flexes his compositional muscles, creating music that brings together his own dramatic, sweeping manner with the tempered and elegant Italian vocal style for which his teacher Salieri was so renowned. In the liner notes, Herrmann draws the listener’s attention to a short descending four-note motive (a descending major third, major second and minor second) that has previously been identified by John A. Rice as peculiar to Salieri (liner notes, 17). Tomsche, Whitener and Preußker all sing with strong musical conviction and dramatic intent throughout the recording. In the closing passage (‘*si fiera crudeltà*’) the vocalists appear to teeter on the verge of losing their melodic unity in the execution of some descending melismas: it might have been worthwhile to linger over those moments. However, on the whole the vocalists and orchestra move in complete alignment with each other.

L’oracolo muto: Ouverture (track 5), is the chronological midpoint of Salieri’s works as featured in this recording. Premiered in 1802, the overture encapsulates much of Salieri’s orchestral style, with juxtaposed loud and soft sections that are characterized by instrumental contrast. The oboe plays a prominent role, a practice that is commonplace across Salieri’s instrumental oeuvre and creates both textural and aural interest within the music. Herrmann highlights the Beethovenian influence once more, drawing the listener’s attention to the oboe’s melodic material throughout the

overture, which ‘sounds quite natural . . . [but is] a deliberate motivic elaboration’ (18) akin to Beethoven’s intensive concentration on motivic argument.

The CD closes with Salieri’s alternative finale for *La riedificazione di Gerusalemme: Qual densa notte! Qual silenzio!*. This finale lends a sense of completion to the disc; as Herrmann notes, the movement represents an impressive example of the varied orchestral writing and imaginative free rein that affected Salieri following the interactions with Beethoven. Featuring an extensive orchestral introduction followed by a full choral movement, *La riedificazione di Gerusalemme* is the largest-scale piece on the recording. The orchestra and soloists alternate moments of exposure, weaving together the vocal and instrumental principles introduced in the preceding tracks of the recording in a final, fifteen-minute culmination of Salieri’s music as influenced by Beethoven.

Salieri & Beethoven in Dialogue presents the works of these two Viennese masters in a new light, highlighting the mutual influence in sound and style that emerged as a consequence of their teacher–student relationship. The Heidelberger Sinfoniker and soloists give a highly compelling interpretation of the music, bringing to life long-forgotten works that contributed to the sound world of Vienna at the turn of the nineteenth century. This is instructive listening for those wishing to become more acquainted with Antonio Salieri and his most famous student.

Ellen Stokes is a PhD student researching the instrumental manuscripts of Antonio Salieri at the University of Huddersfield, where she is funded by the Steinitz Scholarship in Musicology. She has also been awarded funding by the German History Society for research in Vienna. Previously, she studied at Bangor University, achieving a first-class BMus degree in 2017, and a distinction for her MA in 2018, the latter focusing on the music of Salieri. Ellen is also an accomplished flautist, and her other research interests include folk and traditional Celtic music, and music for film and theatre.