Maria Antonia Kurfürstin von Sachsen

Birth name: Maria Antonia Prinzessin von Bayern
Variants: Maria Antonia Kurfürstin von Bayern, Maria Antonia Kurfürstin von Sachsen, Maria Antonia Kurfürstin von Bavaria, Maria Antonia Kurfürstin Maria Antonia Prinzessin von Sachsen, Maria Antonia Kurfürstin Maria Antonia Prinzessin von Bayern, Maria Antonia Kurfürstin Maria Antonia Prinzessin von Saxony, Maria Antonia Kurfürstin Maria Antonia Prinzessin von Saxony, Maria Antonia Kurfürstin Maria Antonia Prinzessin von Bayern, Maria Antonia Kurfürstin Maria Antonia Prinzessin von Sachsen, Maria Antonia Kurfürstin Antonia Sachsen, Maria Antonia Kurfürstin Antonia Bayern, Maria Antonia Kurfürstin Antonia Saxony, Maria Antonia Kurfürstin Antonia Saxony, Maria Antonia Kurfürstin Antonia Bavaria, Maria Antonia Kurfürstin Electress Sachsen, Maria Antonia Kurfürstin Electress Bayern, Maria Antonia Kurfürstin Electress Saxony, Maria Antonia Kurfürstin Electress Bavaria, Maria Antonia Kurfürstin of Sachsen, Maria Antonia Kurfürstin of Bavaria, Maria Antonia Kurfürstin of Saxony, Maria Antonia Kurfürstin of Bayern, Maria Antonia Kurfürstin Walpurgis Kurfürstin von Sachsen

* 18 July 1724 in München, Deutschland
† 23 April 1780 in Dresden, Deutschland

Composer, Singer, Patroness, Librettist

"Si donc on trouve réunis les arts et les vertus en une personne, est-il possible de s'empêcher de l'aimer? Cet amour n'est pas de cette espèce dont la pudeur s'effarouche, ce n'est pas cette flamme qui porte l'incendie dans le coeur des amants, mais un penchant irrésistible, accompagné d'admiration. Voilà, madame, le sentiment, que vous réveillez dans mon âme, et qu'aucune puissance n'y peut détruire."

"Hence, should one find art and virtue united in one person, is it possible not to love her? This love is not the kind of love that frightens away modesty, it is not the flame that burns in the hearts of lovers, but rather an irresistible fondness, coupled with admiration. This, Madam, is the feeling that you awaken in my soul, and which no power can destroy."


Profile

Maria Antonia Walpurigs was a princess of many talents. She was active as a composer, singer, singing teacher, painter, librettist and author, all the while supporting her husband as leader of the realm. She was accepted as a writer into the Accademia dell’Arcadia in Rome in 1747 under the name ‘Ermelinda Talea Pastorella Arcada’ and as a painter into the Accademia di San Luca.

Cities an countries

Maria Antonia was born in Munich, where she was first exposed to music and where she received her musical training. By the time she married Friedrich Christian, prince of Saxony, in 1747 and moved to Dresden, she was already an accomplished singer and pianist. In the same year she became a member of the Accademia dell’Arca-
dia in Rome. She travelled to Italy in 1772. After her husband’s death she lived in both Dresden and Munich.

Biography

Maria Antonia was born the eldest daughter of elector Karl Albert (later emperor Karl VII). Her many talents were recognised and encouraged from an early age: she was able to express herself in French, Italian and Latin while she was still very young. She played the piano very well and, at barely sixteen years of age, she was able to sing the main role in a pastoral. She also began to write poetry while still in her childhood.

In 1747 she married the elector of Saxony, Friedrich Christian. Despite the fact that their premarital relationship consisted only in correspondence, the marriage seems to have been a happy one. (This can be seen in their correspondence (Weber p. 28f, for example) and also from the fact that Christian Friedrich referred to her in his so-called ‘Secret Political Diary’, which he kept between 1751 and 1757, as his “zweites Ich” (literally ‘second self’) and the only person in whom he allowed himself to place his full trust (Schlechte, 1992, p. 10)). Seven children were born of this relationship. In the same year as her wedding, on the grounds of her poetic talent, Maria Antonia was accepted into the Accademia dell’Arcada in Rome. It was possibly Claudio Pasquini, court poet in Dresden, who opened the way for Maria Antonia’s entry into the academy. According to her publication Instrumentierte Versionen… (see below) it was her cantata for August III that led to her adoption into the academy (Fischer, 2007, p. 52), where she received the name ‘Ermelinda Talea, Pastorella Arcada’. From then on she signed her works with the initials E.T.P.A..

As a painter, she produced several self-portraits and paintings of her family, and came into contact with De Marées and Raphael Mengs. Musically, she had the best teachers of her time. During her childhood in Munich, Giovanni Ferrandini was her instructor in singing and composition and in Dresden, it was Johann Adolf Hasse who influenced her compositional work. The teacher-student relationship between the electress and Nicola Porpora, if it existed at all, could only have been short-lived (Fischer, 2007, p. 154), while her relationship with Ferrandini continued until the year of her death in 1780 (Fischer, 2007, p. 150).

In 1749 she began corresponding with Metastasio and sent him various cantata texts, an oratorio text La conversion di Sant’Agostino and the libretto for her pastoral Il trionfo della fedeltà to look over. He spoke very highly of her cantata texts, but heavily criticised the libretto for her pastoral, offending the electress deeply. Nevertheless, it was Metastasio’s version that she set to music and published. In later years she also completed translations of his texts.

When her husband Friedrich Christian ascended to the throne in 1763, he assigned the supervision of the state’s financial affairs to Maria Antonia, gaining her a most unusual position for a woman of the eighteenth century. Friedrich Christian died of small pox just two months after taking the throne. Following the loss of power, Maria Antonia continued to be active as a patron, musician, diplomat, painter and writer. Also deserving of mention is her intensive correspondence with Frederick (II) the Great.

Maria Antonia died in Dresden on 23 April, 1780.

More on Biography

Maria Antonia Walpurgis was born the eldest daughter of the elector of Bavaria, Karl Albert (later emperor Karl VII) and Maria Amalie, the youngest daughter of emperor Joseph I, on 18 July, 1724. She must have been gifted with languages as a child if one is to believe the reports that she was able to write letters in Italian and French by the age of twelve. She also came into contact with the theatre at an early age, performing Frankenstein comedies with a countess even as a child. As far as her personality is concerned, it is interesting to note that on 13 June, 1745 she founded the Ordre de l’Amitie (Weber, p. 6), for which she recruited members from her siblings and friends. The statutes of this ‘Inca Society’ or ‘Order of Friendship’ have been passed on indirectly (Riezler, 1871, Annex. 16; Lippert, 1908, p. CXXI-CXXIII, Annex. 16. These two publications form the basis for the versions by Christine Fischer (2007, p. 61f), which will be referred to forthwith). Similar to the Accademia dell’Arcadia, it was out of a desire for authenticity and an accompanying criticism of society that the order came about. However, the rules of the order did not follow the model of a pastoral society, but rather the idealised social structure of the Incas, as they were perceived in Europe at that time. Each member received their own name (the grand mistress of the order, Maria Antonia, went by the name ‘Sansquartier’) and their foremost duty was that of friendship. All meetings were subject to the strictest of secrecy and should two members fall in love, their expulsion would soon follow.

Maria Antonia’s musical training appears to have begun early, since in 1740, at not quite 16 years of age, she was...
able to play the main role of a shepherdess, Irene, in a pastoral by Giovanni Battista Ferrandini, which played at the court in Munich. Her singing and composition instructor was most certainly Ferrandini, as shown in her mother’s letter of 5 September, 1747: “surely you know already that the electoral princess is being taught by Ferrandini, although I haven’t heard any of it yet. I have my doubts, however, as to whether it will be as successful with her as it was with you, as I do not know what her voice is like and he probably won’t dare to scream “sussu” at her as much as he does with you. (cit. Fischer, 2007, p. 148, fn. 245, [transl. Trevor Pichanick]). The Hofkappellmeister at the time, Giovanni Porta, is also frequently named as her teacher (e.g. by Drewes), although no evidence for this has been produced.

Maria Antonia married the prince-elector of Saxony, Friedrich Christian in 1747, and between the years 1750 and 1761 she bore him seven children, including the eventual elector Friedrich August the Just. During the initial years of their marriage the couple had relatively few political obligations, which allowed them time to devote themselves to other interests.

By 1747 her reputation as a talented writer was already widespread and Maria Antonia was adopted under the name Ermelinda Talea (Pastorella Arcada) into the Accademia dell’Arcada in Rome by virtue of a cantata text that was set to music by Johann Adolph Hasse. (Other members of the academy included Pietro Metastasio, Johann Adolph Hasse, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Wilhelmine von Bayreuth, Alessandro Scarlatti, Arcangelo Corelli and, from 1738, her husband Friedrich Christian). From 1747 on, she signed her works with the abbreviated form of her academy name: ‘E.T.P.A.’ (Ermelinda Talea Pastorella Arcada).

Although her singing abilities must already have been quite considerable, she likely took singing lessons with Nicola Porpora in Dresden between 1747 and 1751. Her composition instructor in the royal capital was Johann Adolph Hasse. She also took lessons in playing the lute with Silvius Leopold Weiß, who appears to have been a famous chamber lutenist in Dresden at the time.

Maria Antonia’s contact with Pietro Metastasio began in 1749, when she (at first concealing her identity) sent him texts that she had written for the cantatas Lavinia and Didone Abbandonata. If one is to believe the comments in his letter to the court poet in Dresden, Abbé Claudio Pasquini, he was clearly enthusiastic about Maria Antonia’s work. Encouraged by Metastasio’s praise, the electress sent him her recently finished work, a pastoral entitled Il trionfo della fedeltà, asking him to add the finishing touches. He criticised the work so heavily that an offended Maria Antonia wrote: “Metastasio l’a cruellement mutilé, il n’en a pas laisser un seul de mes airs dont je voudrait pleurer...”[Metastasio mutilated it cruelly, sparing not a single air so that I want to cry...] (Letter to Countess Brühl, 22 July, 1750, cit. Weber, Vol. I, p.65 [transl. Trevor Pichanick]). Nevertheless, it was Metastasio’s version of Maria Antonia’s libretto that was set to music and published as a drama pastorale in 1756. Weber’s legitimate doubts as to Maria Antonia’s authorship (compare Weber, Vol. I, p. 65f and Drewes, p. 28) refer to the first version, for which Hasse appears to have been engaged as a composer. There is no evidence of Hasse’s collaboration on the second version of 1754 (compare Fischer, 2007, p. 192ff). Several years later, Maria Antonia worked on French translations of Metastasio’s works.

At the same time (beginning of 1750), the text for the oratorio La conversion di S. Agostino was completed and set to music by Johann Adolph Hasse. The work premiered in Dresden on Easter Saturday of 1750 and later revived several times, for example, in Trier. The libretto for Maria Antonia’s second opera Talestri, Regina delle Amazones was completed in 1753, several years before its musical realisation (Weber, Vol. I, p. 88).

With the invasion of the Prussian army in 1756, the Seven Years’ War began in Saxony. When the King of Poland and the reigning elector of Saxony, August III, and his minister, Brühl, went to Warsaw, state affairs fell to the prince-elector Friedrich Christian and his wife Maria Antonia for the first time. However, Dresden was lost in 1759 and they travelled via Prague to Munich, where Maria Antonia bore her seventh and last child, Theresa Marianna, in 1761.

According to a letter from Countess Brühl, Maria Antonia once again took composition lessons from Giovanni Ferrandini (who also set the Talestri text), and her pastoral, Il trionfo della fedeltà was performed during this period of exile in Munich. The libretto for the opera Talestri was also printed for the first time in Munich. In 1762 the family returned to Dresden, where, at the celebrations for the Prussian peace treaty on 15 February, 1763, Maria Antonia premiered her opera Talestri before an aristocratic audience, singing the main role herself. She was directly involved with her husband’s plans to establish an art academy in Dresden. (The plans were eventually carried out after the elector Friedrich Christian’s death by the regent prince Xaver, who ruled for the then
underage crown prince).

With the sudden death of elector August III, Friedrich Christian ascended the throne. One of his first acts as elector was to transfer the oversight of state finances into his wife’s care. The porcelain factory in Meißen soon came under her supervision as well. Unfortunately, Friedrich Christian died of smallpox in December 1763, just two months after his coronation.

Maria Antonia dedicated the remainder of her life to the arts with renewed and increased fervour. She spent time painting and there are several self-portraits, family pictures, etc. in existence. Unfortunately there are no current studies regarding Maria Antonia’s paintings. The most recent catalogue of her works can be found in Weber, 1857 (!) Vol. 2, pp. 252-253 (App. I 6), along with other young artists that she supported (e.g. Johann Gottlieb Naumann, 1741-1801, Gertrude Elisabeth Mara, 1749-1833, and many others). She also sponsored Munich performances of Christof Willibald Gluck’s Orfeo ed Euridice led by alto castrato Gaetano Guadagni in the 1770s (Fischer, 2007, p. 173f). She herself was also active as a singer up until this time.

Always a keen letter-writer, Maria Antonia began corresponding extensively with Friedrich II of Prussia (Frederick the Great) in 1763, whom she presumably made the close acquaintance of during the peace negotiations. She visited him twice: for the first time in 1769 on a diplomatic mission to secure her son the Polish throne, and again in 1770, this time on a social visit.

The industrial enterprises (a brewery and two textile mills) that she started to provide the Saxon people with jobs and income, and to revive the economy after the war, were unfortunately not a success (Weber, p. 207f).

Maria Antonia made a journey to Italy in 1772 with the intention of settling there permanently. This plan, however, never came to fruition. She was present in Munich for the premiere of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s opera La finta giardiniera in 1775, and according to Leopold Mozart’s letters, Maria Antonia had met W.A. Mozart and his sister Maria Anna in 1763 (Wilhelm A Bauer and Otto Erich Deutsch, Mozart: Briefe und Aufzeichnung, Kassel, inter alia: Bärenreiter, 1962, Vol. 1, p. 72). Her response to the child prodigy is unknown.

Not yet 56 years old, Maria Antonia died in Dresden on 23 April, 1780.

Appreciation

Maria Antonia Walpurgis, electress of Saxony, was active in many artistic fields. As a patroness, she supported the composers Johann Adolph Hasse, Nicola Porpora and Johann Gottlieb Naumann, the painter Raphael Mengs, and the singers Regina Mingotti and Gertrude Elisabeth Mara, along with many other artists. Her poems and libretti were set to music by the most distinguished composers of her time (e.g. her oratorio La conversion di Sant’Agostino by J.A. Hasse, her opera Talestri by G.B. Ferrandini and her cantata texts by Naumann, Hasse, G. Manna and others). As a good pianist and singer, she was able to accompany other singers as well as herself, and to sing the main roles in her operas, which she did in Il trionfo della fedeltà in Dresden in 1754 and again in 1760 in Nymphenburg (Munich), as well as in Talestri in Dresden in 1763. As an opera composer she clearly felt obliged to follow the example of her teacher, J.A. Hasse, however her two operas are in no way purely in the Hasse-style, but rather markedly independent. She was also active as a painter.

Maria Antonia Walpurgis was not just musically interested, but also politically and socially engaged. She actively took on responsibility for state matters during the Seven Years’ War and, with her husband’s rise to the throne, she was entrusted with the management of Saxony’s financial affairs. Following his death, she was an active diplomat, representing the interests of her son, elector Friedrich August, as well as her own.

She took trouble to develop the Saxon economy through the creation of industrial enterprises and advocated strongly for the people in her region during a time of famine.

Reception

To her contemporaries she was considered a “model of extraordinary scholarship” and known as “magnanimous Minerva” (Finauer (n.p.), [transl. Trevor Pichanick]).

She was also exceptionally well known as a composer and writer, but also, partly through her position as electress, as a patroness for the arts and sciences. Works dedicated to her by contemporaries include Peter Paul Finauer’s Allgemeines Historisches Verzeichnis gelehrter Frauenzimmer (Munich, Mayr, 1761), Antonia di Eximeno’s Dell’ origine e delle regole della musica (1774) and Christof Otto Freiherr von Schönäich’s translation of Horaz and Christoph Zapata’s first book of Cisneros’ edition of Petrarch’s Works (see Finauer’s dedication). Antonia de Eximeno even went so far as to declare an aria from Talestri a model of composition. (For a full catalogue of works dedicated to her, see Fischer, 2007, p. 443f).

Her cantata texts were set to music by major composers
such as J.G. Naumann, J.A. Hasse and G. Manna (an exact list can be found in Fischer, 2007, p. 443) while her operas were performed on several occasions and, according to Burney, also known in England. Il trionfo della fedeltà: 1754 in Dresden and Bayreuth, 1761 in Munich and 1772 in Padua; Talestri: 1760 and 1772 in Munich as well as in Dresden in 1763. The empress Maria Theresia read the libretto to Talestri and expressed her admiration for “la divine Talestri et ses incomparables talents.” Naturally, a portion of the tributes and accolades that appeared in the eighteenth century were addressed to Maria Antonia as a princess and patroness.

Repertoire

In a letter to Friedrich II of Prussia, Maria Antonia stated that the first aria she ever sang was Che legge spietata (from Catone in Utica, although Maria Antonia mistakenly wrote Cleofide in her letter) by Johann Adolph Hasse. She appeared in Dresden on 3 August, 1747, singing the cantata Grande Augusto, Ricevi, which Hasse had composed to Maria Antonia’s text. (It was on the merit of this text that she was adopted into the Accademia dell’Arcadia that same year.) On 8 December, 1747, her mother-in-law’s celebration day, she performed the cantata Che ti diro Regina (Text: Maria Antonia, Music: J. A. Hasse) and a year later, the cantata Didone Abbandonata (Fischer, 2007, p. 151). She sang Nice in the premiere of Il trionfo della Fedeltà in Dresden in 1754, and appeared as Talestri in 1763. It can be assumed that, apart from her own compositions, her repertoire was made up mostly of works by her teachers J.A. Hasse and G. Ferrandini, as well other composers with whom she was associated.

Research

Academic research into Maria Antonia’s body of work came about very slowly following her death, which also brought an end to performances of her compositions (La conversion di Sant’Agostino was performed in Padua in 1782, two years after her death. It was then only in the twentieth century, starting around 1980, that her operas could again be seen on stage (Fischer p. 9f)). The most important biographical source to date remains Carl von Weber’s monograph, published in 1857, which analysed and made available a large number of biographical sources as well as those relating to her work. Moritz Fürstenaus’ work on Maria Antonia tends to impose the domestic image of nineteenth century women on the electress’ biography.

In the 1930s, Carl Drewes looked at Maria Antonia as a composer and analysed her works in comparison with those of Hasse, Porpora, Porta and Ferrandini. His critique of Maria Antonia unfortunately comes from an entirely male-dominated concept of a genius that came about after Beethoven in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: “In contrast to the uniform development of Frederick the Great, stands the imbalance of a woman whose inner conflict and fateful versatility prevented her from achieving greatness [...] She showed signs of being greatly gifted, but failed to bring even one of her talents to the full. Thus in as much as her intellectual development points to a true aesthete, so does her artistic achievement to a hobbyist” (Eva Rieger, Introduction to Frau und Musik, Kassel: Furore, 1990, [transl. Trevor Pickanick]).


There have been new approaches to research in recent times, most notably Christine Fischer’s highly interesting publication, which casts Maria Antonia’s works in a whole new light, analysing them as part of a ‘self-styling’ concept created by a politically-minded electress. Particularly noteworthy in this context is her 2007 Dissertation Instrumentierte Visionen weiblicher Macht – Maria Antonia Walpurgis’ Werke als Bühne politischer Selbstinszenierung (Schweizer Beiträge zur Musikforschung Bd.7), Kassel, inter alia, Bärenreiter, 2007, in which she renders a wealth of accessible sources.

Christine Fischer lists the sources of the electress’ individual works and writings in detail, as well as all musical settings of her texts and those dedicated to her. According to Fischer, the majority of Maria Antonia’s manuscripts are housed in the Sächsischen Landesbibliothek, although copies and libretti of her operas are widely available (compare Fischer, 2007, p. 428ff).

Need for Research

Considering that references are often missing in Carl von Weber’s (commendable) monograph and that a number of inaccuracies have now been found, a new monograph on Maria Antonia would be highly desirable.

There is also an urgent need for research into her activity as a painter and her paintings. A new catalogue of her paintings and their locations needs to be compiled, as the most recent list dates from 1857 (Weber).

Authority control