

"I Cannot Bury My Talent"

A Look at Mozart on His Bicentennial

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Shortly after midnight on the fifth of December, 1791, weakened by a long attack of rheumatic fever and excessive bloodletting, the young composer's exhausted heart failed him. That winter night, Europe lost one of the greatest musical geniuses it had ever known. The works of the young man, christened Joannes Chrysostomus Wolfgangus Theophilus, "unsurpassed in lyric beauty, rhythmic gaiety and effortless melodic invention,"¹ constitute an artistic legacy with few parallels in the history of music.

Today, two centuries after his death, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's music has lost none of its power to express the complete range of human emotions from terror and rage to blissful joy. In recognition of his achievement, numerous commemorative performances have been held during this anniversary year, and a complete set of his works, including those left unfinished (a total of 179 compact discs), is being issued—the first set of this kind in the history of recorded music.

An Unusual Talent

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart entered the world on January 27, 1756, in the midst of a highly musical family. His father, Leopold, who played a central role in his life, was a well-known violinist, composer, Salzburg court conductor, and author of a celebrated theoretical treatise; his older sister Maria Anna, or "Nannerl," was to become an accomplished pianist. Little Wolfgang revealed his talent at a very early age. Before his fifth birthday he had learned pieces from his sister's keyboard music book and soon after composed his first music, much to his father's

amazement.

Realizing that his son possessed an incredible gift, Leopold resolved to foster the boy's talent. Although often criticized for exploitation and commercialization of his son's gifts, Leopold believed it was his God-given duty to train his gifted children and to share their abilities with the world. From the time Mozart was six until the age of 19, his father took him, at first together with his sister and then alone, on a series of performance tours to the most important musical centers of Europe. These journeys kept Mozart away from home for months and years at a time.

When Mozart was seven, the entire family embarked on a three-and-a-half year concert tour visiting Germany, Belgium, Holland, France, England, and Switzerland. Mozart and his sister played in royal palaces and noble residences, giving public concerts



whenever the opportunity presented itself. A few years later father and son began another major tour, which took them to Italy, at that time the most progressive land in Europe musically speaking. They stayed there more than a year visiting musical centers where Mozart studied counterpoint and absorbed the country's specialty, opera. In Rome, the Mozarts had an audience with the pope, who made the 14-year-old boy a Knight of the Order of the Golden Spur, a signal honor bestowed on only two other contemporary composers.

Numerous anecdotes refer to Mozart's feats as a child prodigy. Contemporary reports tell us that he amazed his audiences by playing in an adult manner, improvising in various styles, accompanying on sight, playing with a cloth covering the keyboard, and adding accompaniment to a melody unknown to him. On one occasion he wrote the music for a double choir after having heard the music performed only once.

Mozart did not receive formal schooling, most likely because he spent much of his childhood and youth traveling. Likewise, there is no evidence that he had formal musical instruction, except for occasional comments from his father. His musical training was mostly indirect, aided by a prodigious capacity to absorb different styles and influences and to synthesize from these a wholly personal musical language. Writing to his son years later, Leopold provides this description of the boy's childhood:

As a child and a boy you were serious rather than childish and when you sat at the clavier or were otherwise intent on music, no one dared to

posers at that time, Mozart wrote his works to fulfill commissions or to provide new material for his own concerts and those of his pupils. In Salzburg he had been generally expected to provide sacred music for the court chapel. In Vienna, however, his main interests were instrumental music and especially opera. He had the good fortune of associating with the court poet Lorenzo da Ponte, who provided him with excellent librettos; from this artistic collaboration were born his three finest Italian comedies, *Le Nozze di Figaro* (The Marriage of Figaro), *Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan Tutte*. No less important are his two German operas, especially *Die Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute).

A significant influence on Mozart's creative work during these years stemmed from his association with freemasonry, in which he was an active member from 1784 until his death. He composed a number of pieces for specific Masonic events. Even works not directly associated with lodge ceremonies show the influence of Masonic thought, the most notable example being *Die Zauberflöte*, which presents Masonic-based trials that a prince and a princess must undergo to achieve wisdom and virtue.

New doors seemed to open during the last year of Mozart's life; he received several important commissions and his financial situation was less pressing. He composed two operas and began the composition of a requiem Mass commissioned in rather unusual circumstances. A stranger asked him to compose a requiem for a patron who wished to remain anonymous and who would pay him a handsome fee; the only condition was that Mozart must not reveal that he was the author of the work. (After Mozart's death, it was discovered that the requiem had been commissioned by a count who had the habit of requesting original works, which he would then pass off as his own.

The requiem was to be in memory of the count's young wife, who had recently died.)

Mozart worked on the requiem intermittently for several months. However, it remained unfinished because in November, he became seriously ill, rapidly growing worse despite the attentions of two leading Viennese doctors. On the evening of December 4, Mozart seemed to regain his strength and a few friends gathered to sing parts of the still-incomplete requiem at his bedside. He soon took a turn for the worse, however, and a few hours later was dead. The cause of death, according to the available evidence, was an acute attack of rheumatic fever.⁴ According to Viennese custom, two days later he was buried in a mass grave, the gravedigger the only witness to his interment.

An Assessment

Mozart's ideas about music, art, and life in general are not evident to the casual observer. Although fascinating, his letters reveal little except for certain technical aspects about his music. Nothing is mentioned of his thoughts on the upheaval caused by the French Revolution, its political repercussions on the Austrian Empire, or other socio-political events of his day. His music appears to be largely unaffected by external forces.

Despite periods of financial and physical distress, he produced works imbued with unbounded exuberance and optimism. Unlike many other composers, Mozart the composer appears detached from Mozart the individual. His music is not a reflection of his own state of mind but a transcending distillation of every human emotion.

This is not to say that Mozart was inattentive to his audiences. He shared the contemporary view that music must be a reflection of nature and that its main purpose is to elicit the listener's pleasure. On the other hand, he was not willing to bow indiscriminately to the public's changing tastes in order to secure an audience, although that decision resulted in a decrease in the acceptance of his music. As a modern writer puts it:

perhaps the most remarkable facet of Mozart's character was his confidence in his own creativity. One searches in vain through his correspondence or the recollections of contemporaries for any hint of doubt about the value and quality of his compositions. Even during periods of acute poverty, loneliness or illness, Mozart's exultation in the creative process and delight in his work seem to have endured.⁵

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Mozart's friends singing the unfinished requiem at his deathbed.

I Can Not . . .

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Although Mozart grew up in a religious environment and retained his Christian beliefs throughout his life, he did not seek commissions to write sacred pieces as he did to compose operas. It is in the latter area that we see the clearest manifestation of his character. At a time when literary productions were subjected to the scrutiny of official censorship, Mozart's mature operas offered an in-depth commentary on contemporary social conflicts. By producing such works he was willing to put his artistic success at risk. His association with freemasonry should be viewed in the same light, since he maintained an allegiance to the lodge despite its increasing reputation for allegedly revolutionary activities. Mozart was not an extremist, but he was attracted by the ideals of social equality, religious tolerance, and charity espoused by freemasons.

One can detect a sense of duty in Mozart's approach to his art. Writing to his father he declared that "I neither can nor ought to bury the talent for composition with which God in his goodness has so richly endowed me."⁶ He left his mark in every musical genre. He was a master of the symphony, the piano concerto, and string quartet. His operas are unsurpassed documents of dramatic characterization and unequalled portrayals of the most varied human emotions. His requiem, even uncompleted, is a testimony to his religious beliefs.

Mozart and Freemasonry

Mozart's connections with freemasonry have intrigued students of the composer's life and music. Originally derived from the guilds of stonemasons and cathedral builders of the Middle Ages, freemasonry refers to the teachings and practices of the Free and Accepted Masons, the largest fraternal secret society in the world. Its members now number several million, with most of them residing in the United States and Great Britain.

In the 17th and 18th centuries freemasonry began to adopt the rituals of the ancient religious orders. Because of this, it has encountered strong opposition from the organized Christian churches. Among its quasi-religious elements are its teachings promoting morality, charity, and obedience to the laws of the land. An applicant for membership in a lodge must be an adult male who believes in the existence of a Supreme Being and in the immortality of the soul. Its members go through an elaborate process to reach ever higher degrees of knowledge and authority within the order.

The greatness of his music is found in its intrinsic qualities. The amateur listener is impressed by its naturalness and directness, while the expert is fascinated by the wealth of melodic and harmonic ideas it possesses and by the inexhaustible imagination revealed in its elaboration.

Joseph Haydn, another great classical composer, acknowledged Mozart's supreme mastery when he declared to Leopold Mozart: "Before God and as an honest man I tell you that your son is the greatest composer known to me either in person or by name. He has taste and, what is more, the most profound knowledge of composition."⁷ When Mozart died at 35 he had produced an enduring corpus of masterpieces; one can only speculate what marvels of musical beauty he would have created had he been granted another 35 years of life.

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NOTES

1. *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, 6th ed., s. v. "Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus."

2. Letter dated February 16, 1778, in *The Letters of Mozart and His Family*, ed. by Emily Anderson, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985), pp. 483-484.

3. Mozart's letter to his father dated June 9, 1781, in *The Letters of Mozart and His Family*, pp. 740-742.

4. The idea that Mozart was poisoned by Antonio Salieri, a notion exploited by Peter Shaffer in his play *Amadeus*, is completely unfounded. Incidentally, this play and the movie derived from it present an image of Mozart totally distorted and devoid of historical accuracy.

5. Andrew Steptoe, "Mozart as an Individual," *The Mozart Compendium: A Guide to Mozart's Life and Music*, ed. by H. C. Robbins Landon (New York: Schirmer Books, 1990), p. 108.

6. Letter of February 7, 1778, in *The Letters of Mozart*, pp. 467-470.

7. Letter of Leopold Mozart to his daughter dated February 16, 1785, in *The Letters of Mozart*, pp. 885-887.