



Mozart: The Man and the Myth

Some of you may remember the play *Amadeus* (1979, Peter Shaffer), or the eponymous movie based on it (1984, Milos Forman). *Amadeus* is a fictionalized account of Mozart's life in Vienna (1781 to 1791). But the fictions on which the play and movie are based were myths about Mozart of long standing, which began soon after his death. They depict Mozart as a giggling trickster, marooned in adolescence, who was murdered by a jealous fellow musician after being subjected to ghostly visitations by a mysterious stranger. And his genius was sometimes viewed as so exceptional as to be supernatural. His father, sister, and wife tended, for their own reasons, to perpetuate these ideas, and their voices dominated Mozart biographical scholarship even into the twentieth century. Modern scholarship has given us a different picture.

Although extraordinary, there was nothing supernatural about Mozart's talent. He studied and worked diligently at his music, and continually strove to innovate. His "childishness" was described by his sister Nannerl, who wrote in 1792: "Apart from his music, he was almost always a child, and thus he remained: ...he always needed a father's, a mother's, or some other guardian's care." Mozart did love all kinds of games, earthy humor, improvisations, wordplay, and pranks, and was often physically exuberant. But he managed to create a career and family for himself, after breaking away from Salzburg and his father, which were the result of a strong desire for independence, good business sense and hard work – not the achievements of a perpetual child.

Neither are the circumstances of Mozart's death as nefarious as they have been portrayed. The commission for the Requiem Mass on which he was working during his final illness was from a certain not-very-mysterious Count Walsegg. This amateur musician and patron of the arts, according to the testimony of his court musicians, habitually commissioned works anonymously and with a demand for exclusive ownership. His purpose, of course, was to pass off these compositions as his own.

Antonio Salieri, a prominent court musician during Mozart's entire career in Vienna, and admittedly his rival, allegedly confessed to poisoning Mozart near the end of his life, when he was institutionalized for senility. But his mental state at that time, the further testimony of contemporaries, and subsequent medical investigation into the cause of Mozart's death all have led to the rejection of this conjecture. There was ample evidence to conclude that he died of natural causes, including perhaps overwork. His financial difficulties near the time of his death did cause him concern: "I will work – work so hard – that no

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unforeseen accidents shall ever reduce us to such desperate straits again..." Letter to his wife, 7-8 October, 1791

So why were both sister and father devoted to the cause of denigrating Mozart? Achieving independence from the iron grip of Leopold Mozart was the crucial task of Mozart's young adulthood. Both Mozart and his sister were child prodigies. Leopold was their teacher, and in addition to the normal lessons he exposed them to the contemporary musical scene and, through their travels, to other cultures and languages. Mozart was entirely eager to learn and to win his father's approval and the applause of the world.

But the more-or-less benevolent, if strict, dictatorship Leopold exercised over the child prodigy changed to a no-holds-barred struggle for control when Wolfgang sought to assert himself later. He wanted to leave Salzburg, which had no theater or opera, for Vienna, and he wanted to marry and establish his own family. These goals threatened his father's access to the financial rewards of his son's labors and his role as chief confidante, advisor and arranger. There followed guilt-mongering and disaster prediction of the highest order: "Hurt me now, if you can be so cruel!" and "If you continue to pursue your empty hopes, you will make me and your sister into beggars." Letters to his son, 11 February and 3 September, 1778.

He withheld consent to Mozart's marriage and disinherited him after he succeeded in breaking away. Although his sister eventually married, she adopted her father's attitudes and even gave him a child of hers to raise. They rejected Mozart's wife, Costanze, and persisted in the estrangement from the son and brother until his death, after which they perpetuated their grievances in the way they described him to the outside world. Mozart had a sincere affection for his family, a long habit of filial obedience, and a deep desire for approval. The achievement of his independence must have been a bittersweet victory.

Reference: Solomon, Maynard, *Mozart*, Harper Collins, NY, 1995
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