

Mozart turns two hundred and fifty

Part 1: The German Enlightenment and Amadeus

Laura Villon

4 May 2006

[PART 1](#) | [PART 2](#) | [PART 3](#) | [PART 4](#) | [PART 5](#)

The following is the first of a five-part series of articles. It contains references to numerous works of music by Mozart. We encourage readers to listen to these pieces, long samples of which are available free of charge on www.classical.com.

January 27, 2006 marked the 250th anniversary of the birth of one of the greatest of all musicians, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

To the extent that genius has a popular name, it is Mozart. The monumental scale of his opus lends itself easily to myth and legend. How can one explain and comprehend creativity on such a seemingly superhuman scale? The well-documented stories of his childhood precocity, his apparently inexhaustible supply of melodic imagination, the technical perfection of his compositions, the speed with which he turned out timeless masterpieces in virtually every musical genre—sonatas, string quartets, concertos for string, percussion and wind instruments, massive choral works, operas, cantatas and songs—and all in the space of less than 36 years, has given rise to a conception of Mozart as a sort of miracle whose life defies comprehension.

The very popular film *Amadeus*, based on the play by Peter Schaffer, played upon this conception with striking effect. The drama revolves around the confrontation of mere human talent, represented by the composer Salieri, with the superhuman, divinely inspired genius of Mozart. In the film, Salieri is a plodding bureaucratic court composer who struggles to construct pleasing philistine melodies out of his limited musical inspiration. He watches and listens with stupefaction as Mozart—a lascivious and foul-mouthed boor—“takes dictation from God” and sets masterworks to paper without so much as an erasure. In envious rage against God for endowing Mozart with such unearthly gifts, Salieri resolves to murder his rival. By killing God’s creation, Salieri intends to take revenge on behalf of human mediocrity against the divinity of genius.

Listen: Piano Sonata No. 15, 1784, K450, heard in Amadeus.

Of course, the play has virtually no historical basis. Salieri was, as a matter of fact, neither a bad composer nor a murderer. He was an influential teacher whose pupils included Mozart’s son and Franz Schubert, whose genius he recognized early on. Mozart’s death at a very young age by today’s standards was the product of disease, not poison.[1]

The issue here, however, is not the merits of *Amadeus*, but the way in which the life and work of Mozart can and should be understood. Yes, Mozart was a “genius” but that is an attribute whose source is to be found in the historical, socio-cultural and political conditions of his day.

Nourished in an extraordinarily artistic environment, Mozart absorbed the most advanced intellectual, political and cultural trends of late eighteenth century Europe and incorporated them into his life work—the dramatic representation of the world through music. As the historian Hajo Holborn observed, “Both in Mozart’s work and person we can feel the stirrings of a coming modern world, but he was at the same time the last towering genius of Baroque art in Europe” (229).

He mastered the techniques and forms developed in the music of the

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—the Italian gift for lyricism and melody, German expressiveness and emotionalism, and especially the Baroque passion for counterpoint and structure—and combined them in a new, organic whole with such imagination that his music arguably attained a level of conceptual perfection and beauty unequaled by any other composer.

From a formal standpoint, Mozart was not a revolutionary innovator. He worked within the established structures of counterpoint, harmonics and tonality developed by Haydn and others. Nor did Mozart invent the classical genres of symphony, concerto, string quartet, piano (or other instrumental) sonata or opera. These had already been developed even before Mozart appeared on the scene. But he mastered all these elements of music and enriched them with a profoundly human and humane content. It was not, as *Amadeus* would have it, God who revealed himself in the music of Mozart. It was humankind—in all its contradictions and complexities.

In his day he was recognized as the greatest musician alive. Franz Joseph Haydn, the most respected and famous musician in Europe, confessed to Wolfgang’s father in 1785, “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.”

The young Mozart and the older Haydn profoundly influenced each other, and are together credited with bringing the string quartet and the classical symphony to a height of perfection.

What is the Enlightenment?

The Enlightenment was that intellectual movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which sought to apply science and reason to solve the problems of society. It represents the profound broadening of man’s intellectual horizons, the rejection of irrationality, superstition and the tyranny of the feudal system. It was the subversive idea that ordinary people have as equal a right to life and liberty as the nobleman ruling over them.

The words of Marquis de Condorcet, a contemporary of Mozart, give one a sense of the atmosphere in which Mozart worked.

“The time will therefore come when the sun will shine only on free men who know no other master but their reason; when tyrants and slaves, priests and their stupid or hypocritical instruments will only appear in works of history and on the stage; and when we shall think of them only ... to learn how to recognize and so to destroy, by force of reason, the first seeds of tyranny and superstition, should they ever dare to reappear amongst us...”

Just as Leonardo da Vinci in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth

centuries was a towering genius among the brilliant men of his time, so Mozart was surrounded by brilliant musicians, foremost among them Haydn (1732-1809), Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714-1787) and their forerunners J.S. Bach (1685-1750) and George Frideric Handel (1685-1759). Mozart was a cosmopolitan European who spoke many languages and maintained an intellectual relation with the most advanced men of his time all over Europe; he was at the same time a South German, most at home in the musical centers of Mannheim or Vienna.

The German Enlightenment

Why did the Classical age of Music mature and develop in Germany, the political and economic backwater of Europe? Why not in France, the center of political thought, or England, the most advanced commercial nation?

Germany was divided into almost 400 small principalities, each ruled by a different prince, and loosely united in the Holy Roman Empire. In the sixteenth century, what is now Germany was a relatively prosperous region. However it was devastated by the Thirty Years War of 1618-1648, a European war fought largely on German soil, which caused the population to fall by at least one third. One hundred years later, many cities had not regained their former population or wealth.

The impact of the destruction on the economy and trade meant that both city and court life stagnated. The type of thriving bourgeoisie that emerged in England could not develop in Germany. In each principality, absolute rulers—aided by underpaid and submissive functionaries—regimented every aspect of their citizens' lives from birth to death, controlled their religion and censored their correspondence and books. The impoverished peasants were overtaxed and the middle class in the towns were subordinate to the princes.

During the eighteenth century at least seven wars were fought on German territory, which further burdened the population. The growing conflict between the empire of the Austrian Hapsburgs and Prussia under Frederick the Great led to the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1745) and the Seven Years War (1755-1763)—known in the United States as the French and Indian War. Towns such as Dresden were bombarded and the countryside laid to waste, especially in Saxony.

These disasters of war, historian Robert Gutman notes, “generally struck the prince’s subjects, not the prince himself” (89). These disasters would hasten the demise of the *ancien régime* in neighboring France only 30 years later.

And yet, amidst the economic and social backwardness, the Germans of the eighteenth century began to exhibit a remarkable talent in the domain of conceptual thought—the abstract representation of the world and the universe. If, during the eighteenth century, you wanted to learn about economics and practical matters of business, the English and the Scots were the people to talk to. If it was politics that you wished to discuss, the French were the people you needed to meet. But if you were concerned with translating the sum total of natural, social, ontological and epistemological processes in the language of pure thought, you couldn’t do better than discuss the problem with a German intellectual—preferably a philosopher. In all spheres of culture requiring this peculiar talent for the abstract representation of reality, the Germans of the eighteenth century registered extraordinary achievements. How is this to be explained? Later, in the nineteenth century, Marx and Engels suggested that backward objective conditions imposed upon German intellectuals the task of interpreting in conceptual terms the practical achievements of more advanced countries. They explained *theoretically* what others *did*. Whatever the reasons, backward Germany became the locus of abstract

thought, of which Music is an expression.

During the late eighteenth century, German culture reached a level of philosophical thought and dramatic and musical expression which matched the greatest achievements of Antiquity and the Renaissance. The political philosopher and writer Lessing (1729-1781) created German theater and brought Shakespeare to German drama. The poet Johann Wolfgang Goethe, author of *Faust*, was born in 1749; his friend Schiller in 1759.

In 1781, Kant wrote the *Critique of Pure Reason*. “‘Sapere Audi! [Dare to know!] Have the courage to use your own intelligence!’ is therefore the motto of the Enlightenment,” Kant proclaimed in his famous essay of 1784, “What is Enlightenment?” Kant explored the relationship between experience and Being; he was as well a scientist who proposed that the solar system had an origin. The brilliant dialectical philosopher Hegel was born in 1770, the same year as Beethoven (1770-1827).

A musical family

Into this tumultuous time, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was born on January 27, 1756 to a musical family in the small principality of Salzburg, between southern Austria and Bavaria. His father Leopold (1719-1787) was a musician in the service of the Prince Archbishop of Salzburg.

Leopold Mozart was educated in the Jesuit College of his native Augsburg (in Swabia, in present-day southwestern Germany), and at the University of Salzburg. His hopes for a substantial position in musical life never materialized. Both he and his famous son hated the petty humiliations of the provincial Salzburg court life, and sought unsuccessfully to obtain official appointments to the more liberal courts of Europe.

Salzburg’s tiny principality had a population of some 200,000 people. The 16,000 inhabitants of the city were mostly dependent for their salaries or livelihood upon the court treasury, which teetered on bankruptcy. The archbishop exercised quasi-monarchical powers as the principal life-long representative, or *primus legatus*, of the Pope in all Germany.

The Archbishop’s court was conservative, corrupt, and his musicians understandably sought refuge from their daily miseries in alcohol. Wearing the court’s livery or domestic uniforms, they were poorly paid personal servants. They were little more than valets, were treated as lackeys, and lived barely above the poverty level. Amidst the stifling social backwardness, Leopold stood out as a musician of substantial talent and intellectual substance. He published in 1756, the year of Wolfgang’s birth, an “Essay on a Fundamental Violin Method” (German: *Versuch einer gründlichen Violinschule*), an influential guide to teaching violin in Germany for over half a century.

Listen: Leopold’s Symphony of the Toys, 1756

In Salzburg it was the wealthy bourgeois traders who supported the Mozart family, formed its circle of friends and co-thinkers, and advanced the funds for their extensive tours of Europe. The family lived in the house of the wealthy merchant and music lover Lorenz Hagenauer. Much of what we know today of Mozart comes from letters home to family and friends in Salzburg.

Wolfgang was the last of seven children born to Leopold and his wife, Anna Maria. The only other child to survive was his older sister Nannerl (1751-1829). As a young boy, Mozart displayed an astonishing gift and passion for music. There exist countless legends of Mozart’s precociousness, but in Mozart’s case legends seem to be based on facts. By four he began to use his sister’s piano book, and was soon mastering both piano and organ. Mozart, according to his sister, played new piano pieces “faultlessly, with utmost neatness, and in exact time” (Gutman 55).

He developed a passion for improvising, especially fantasias, and he soon began to compose music. Music was as natural a language to Mozart as verbal speech.

After Wolfgang's death, family friend, musician and poet Andreas Schachtner wrote to Nannerl in 1792 with a recollection of the young Mozart's extraordinary musical talent.

"We played a trio, Papa [Leopold] playing the bass with his viola, Wenzel the first violin, and I the second violin. Wolfgang [young Mozart] asked to be allowed to play the second violin, but his foolish request was refused, because he had not yet had the least instruction in the violin, and Papa thought that he could not possibly play anything... Wolfgang began to weep bitterly and stamped off with his little violin. I asked them to let him play with me; Papa eventually said, 'Play with Herr Schachtner, but so softly that we can't hear you or you will have to go,' and so it was. Wolfgang played with me; I soon noticed with astonishment that I was quite superfluous, I quietly put my violin down, and looked at your Papa; tears of wonder and comfort ran down his cheeks at this scene" (Conrad and Besch 21-22).

Leopold Mozart, recognizing the potential in his son, devoted his considerable energies to the younger Mozart's education. Apart from musical lessons from two prominent people on his many travels, Wolfgang had no other teacher than his father.

Listen: Piano Concerto No. 1, K37 (Mozart at 11)

Leopold provided his son with rigorous schooling in music, languages and the arts, and most importantly, brought him into contact with the many intellectually powerful tendencies at work in Enlightenment Europe. He took his son to every major cultural center, from Paris to London and Italy, and introduced him to modern ideas and literature, which he himself eagerly absorbed. In an age of ideological ferment, both father and son were very *au courant*.

Many writers have critiqued Leopold for seeking to profit from his children. However, all available evidence indicates that Leopold was deeply preoccupied with the long-term intellectual development of his son. While he clearly recognized that his young son was a genius, Leopold was concerned with more than securing short-term performance contracts for Wolfgang. He sought to provide his son with a thorough musical education. Moreover, the surviving correspondence between father and son demonstrates that their relationship was, intellectually and emotionally, exceptionally close.

Leopold treated his son with tenderness and sensitivity, while helping Wolfgang to master musical technique, including baroque counterpoint composition as well as religious and secular vocal music. If he was concerned about money, it is because the German professional trying to make his way outside the court system occupied an extremely precarious position.

The Hapsburg Empire

In 1762, when Wolfgang was six and Nannerl eleven, Leopold took the family on tour, first to Munich and then by boat down the Danube River to Vienna. From this great city, the Empress Maria Theresa ruled over much of Europe, from southern Italy to northern Germany and eastwards to Hungary and Bohemia.

The Hapsburg Empress Maria Theresa had inherited the throne on her father's death in 1740. For five years, she fought against Prussia, Saxony, Bavaria and France to hold onto her extensive lands. She and her husband Francis of Lorraine had 16 children who were eventually placed on various European thrones. Cultivating an alliance with Bourbon France during her reign, she arranged the fateful marriage of her youngest

daughter Maria Antonia to the future King Louis XVI.

All Vienna was abuzz with news of the sensational children as they played at noble houses on the way down the river. Within a week they were summoned to Maria Theresa's summer palace at Schönbrunn where Wolfgang, accompanied by Nannerl, played and entertained the royal family.

"Wolferl," wrote Leopold home to Salzburg, "jumped into the Empress's lap, caught her around the neck, and vigorously kissed her." The Empress gave them a large monetary gift and requested that they stay in Vienna for several months.

When the family returned home in January 1763, Leopold's extended absence had increased his fame, but did little for his career at the Salzburg court. He once again petitioned the archbishop for an extended leave of absence, to take his famous children to the artistic and cultural center of Europe—Paris.

The entire family set out in a carriage purchased with the Empress's generous gift, accompanied by a manservant who doubled as their hairdresser and musician.

The ascendancy of German music

The Mozart family's grand tour of Western Europe from June 1763 to November 1766 led them as far north as Brussels. They also enjoyed extended stays in Paris and London. At every court or city the children would perform. Sometimes there was a famous organ or pianoforte for Wolfgang to try out, or an important musician to meet. In the free city of Frankfurt, the 14-year-old Johann Wolfgang Goethe—later Germany's greatest poet—attended the first of five concerts given by the Mozart children.

Every German Prince, from Frederick the Great of Prussia to his petty Swabish imitator Duke Karl Eugene, wanted to make his court into a miniature Versailles. Dynastic wars as well as music and the arts consumed a large portion of the taxes exacted from the peasantry. The Duke supported his lavish spending on castles, mistresses, opera houses and expensive Italian artists by hiring out his mercenary army, composed of peasant youth conscripted into military service. ("The Jew Süss," by Lion Feuchtwanger, describes the predations of this despotic duke's ancestor in his increasingly bankrupt Duchy of Württemberg.)

The Duke hired the Neapolitan opera composer Niccolò Jommelli and well-known violinists and singers, including the Italian castrato Giuseppe Aprile, who took in 6000 florins per season. (By comparison, Wolfgang as a violinist in the Salzburg court orchestra earned 150 florins a year.) The Duke also engaged dancers, among them the choreographer Jean Georges Noverre, who would revolutionize dance with his treatise of 1760.

But the German court with most enviable musical scene in Europe, and the town most to the liking of Leopold and Wolfgang, was Mannheim.

It was not Versailles or Berlin which boasted the best orchestra of the time, but tiny Mannheim—located in today's Baden-Württemberg in southwest Germany. In 1742, at the age of 18, Elector Karl Theodore acceded to the Rhenish Palatinate throne. He was an enthusiastic amateur flutist and cellist. Together with Johann Stamitz (1717-1757), he built a virtuoso orchestra by recruiting not Italian, but German and Bohemian artists, many of them fleeing the Wars of the Austrian Succession.

The "Mannheim sigh" for which the orchestra became famous signified a fervent soulful ornamental tone, with quick changes of dynamics (alterations from very soft *piano* to very loud *fortissimo* sound) and subtle tone. The "sigh" appeared in Wolfgang's early compositions. The vigorous emotional playing presaged a new era in music.

Parallel to this innovative expressiveness, a new instrument, the

pianoforte, was being developed in Germany. Its dynamic range permitted the performer sudden changes of mood and intensity not available to the harpsichordist. In the piano concerto, the mature Mozart would achieve some of his greatest musical expression. Over the course of his career, Johann Andreas Stein and other famous instrument makers would make innovative pianos for him to try out.

The influence of German musicians was beginning to be heard over Italian ones. Gutman, a biographer of Mozart, observed, “Blending the expressive effects of their German and Italian contemporaries into a disciplined, unified, finely shaded, carefully notated style characterized by changing and emotional dynamics, the Mannheimers anticipated the eclecticism of Haydn and Mozart and pointed the way toward a German hegemony in instrumental music that would last almost two centuries” (101).

To the newcomers from insular Salzburg, Mannheim was a cosmopolitan place where Catholics, Protestants and Jews mingled in society and commerce. Wolfgang and Nannerl “set all Schwetzingen astir” with their performances, and the family made important friends who would introduce them to society in Paris and elsewhere.

To be continued

Notes:

1. Two very engaging replies to the film *Amadeus* are to be found in H.C. Robbins Landon book *1791-Mozart's Last Year* and in A. Peter Brown's article “Amadeus and Mozart: Setting the Record Straight,” published in *The American Scholar*, vol. 61, no. 1, 1992 and available at here [<http://www.mozartproject.org/essays/brown.html>]. Both are well worth reading as an assessment of Mozart and his music.

Works cited and consulted:

Fischer Hans Conrad and Lutz Besch. *The Life of Mozart*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1969.

Gutman, Robert W. *Mozart: A Cultural Biography*, Harcourt Brace, 1999.

Holborn, Hajo. *A History of Modern Germany, 1648-1840*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968

Marquis de Condorcet. *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, written while he was in hiding. A Girondin supporter, Condorcet killed himself during the Revolution.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact