

A fresh look at Mozart—Part 1

Helmut Perl's *The Case of Mozart: Testimony about a Misunderstood Genius*

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This is the first of a two-part series.

Der Fall Mozart. Aussagen über ein missverstandenes Genie (*The Case of Mozart: Testimony about a Misunderstood Genius*), by Helmut Perl, Zürich Mainz 2005

This year's 250th anniversary of Mozart's birth has breathed new life into studies of the great composer and renewed interest in his works in concert halls, opera houses and broadcasting stations. The period in which Mozart's music was underestimated as "easy listening" classical music, his operas treated as fairy tales, attractive but not very serious musical comedies, appears to be over, even if some new productions place greater emphasis on spectacular special effects rather than a deeper understanding of the music.

Mozart is being discussed everywhere and efforts are being made to understand why his compositions continue to fascinate. Meetings and exhibitions held to celebrate Mozart's anniversary have aroused lively interest.

For many years biographers held the view that in comparison to Beethoven, for instance, Mozart was a genius of a non-political nature who took little interest in the revolutionary events of his time. According to this version of his biography, his well-known affiliation with the Freemasons in Vienna arose entirely from vocational considerations, had no political foundation and exercised no real influence over his work or upon his life.

This year has seen the publication of numerous articles and books dealing with psychological issues concerning the father-son relationship, new speculations over Mozart's death and other areas of his life. But there are several publications which (for the first time) concern themselves with Mozart as a political figure and attempt to understand how his music was bound up with the revolutionary currents of his time.

For example, a very popular book published in Italy by the Italian musicologist Lidia Bramani, *Mozart massone e rivoluzionario* (Mozart: Freemason and Revolutionary), sold out within weeks.

In mid-December 2005, a number of articles and interviews in the weekly German newspaper *Die Zeit* highlighted the revolutionary Mozart. Among them were Helmut Reinalter's "The Jacobins of Vienna," Volker Braunbehren's, "An Empire for the Genius," an interview with the theater director Peter Sellars, who coordinated the Mozart Festival in Vienna last autumn and an interview with the pianist Maurizio Pollini.

The main exhibition for Mozart's anniversary year at the Albertina Museum in Vienna is "Mozart—The experiment Enlightenment." It contains a large number of documents and exhibits which trace Mozart's close relationship with the Freemasons and Illuminati in Vienna and their reflection in his works, particularly in *The Magic Flute*.

In Germany, *The Case of Mozart—Testimony about a Misunderstood Genius*, by Helmut Perl, the organ expert and musicologist who died in 2004, was published posthumously for Mozart's 250th birthday in 2005.

The book, which has yet to receive the attention it deserves, documents Mozart's years in Vienna and puts an end to certain myths about the composer. Perl pays special attention to *The Magic Flute*, in the context of the French Revolution, as a sociopolitical enlightenment allegory.

Perl writes in his preface: "Mozart experienced intensely the later period of the radical Enlightenment—the disputes of modern philosophers with the clergy who acted as stewards of traditional values and social structures.... This publication is an attempt to shed some light on Mozart's intellectual environment during this period and to understand in this regard his life and his works" (Helmut Perl, *The Case of Mozart*, p. 7).

Mozart's last years ranked "among the most exciting in European history. Vienna was, more than any other European metropolis, a focal point, in which the most extreme positions of rival powers and their protagonists met face to face. Following the events in Paris, in which for the first time in history, the disenfranchised citizen, the broad masses, the 'mob,' began to play a crucial role, the Viennese populace openly discussed the conflicts and began to form a public opinion. The inhabitants of Vienna began to understand what freedom of opinion represented and what impact it could have. The representatives of the *ancien regime* recognized the danger. The citizenry began to see themselves and to act as a political force" (ibid., p. 12).

Mozart's short 35-year life encompassed the Seven Years War, the American War of Independence and the French Revolution. Sections of Mozart's correspondence are missing or were later partly deleted by his widow, Constanze, in order to evade censorship. Even if no direct references to the French Revolution have been passed down, nonetheless his conduct as a member of the Freemasonry movement; the choice and treatment of his operas; his library, which contained a wide variety of aesthetic, historical, philosophical, educational, mathematical and scientific works; and not least his music, reveal a many-sided and engaged artist with keen observation, one who sided with the Enlightenment in opposition to the aristocracy and the church, and one on whom the revolutionary currents of Europe had an immense impact.

Mozart's personal life already shows us a rebellious side. In June 1781 he quit his position as organist at the court of the Salzburg Prince Bishop Hieronymus Colloredo and went to Vienna. Colloredo, a reformed Catholic and Enlightenment sympathiser, behaved, nevertheless, like a despot. Mozart was treated like a servant and made to eat with the cooks below stairs. When Mozart quit, Count Arco, to demonstrate his loyalty to his master, gave him a kick in the rear. This experience later found an echo in the wonderful aria in *The Marriage of Figaro* sung to a cavatina dance tune, "If you want to dance, my pretty Count, I'll play the tune on my little guitar." After leaving Salzburg, Mozart became one of the first freelance musicians.

From the first days of his life in Vienna in 1781, Mozart developed a close contact with the most significant figures of the Viennese

Enlightenment. Princess Thun-Hohenstein, Baron Gottfried van Swieten, Sales von Greiner, Prince Kaunitz-Rietberg and others were in his private circle. In 1784 Mozart was initiated into the Freemason Lodge “Zur Wohltätigkeit” (For Beneficence), which was itself affiliated with the Lodge “Zur wahren Eintracht” (For True Harmony). He quickly became a member and, within a year, a Master Mason. The Freemason Lodges in Vienna were the crucibles of scientific, philosophical and political disputes. In them the Enlightenment tracts of Immanuel Kant, Christoph Martin Wieland and others were passed around and political events in Europe discussed.

Within Mozart’s circle were the scientist Ignaz von Born, Otto von Gemmingen, Joseph Franz Ratschky, Aloys Blumauer, Josef von Sonnenfels, Johann Baptist von Alxinger, Martin Joseph Prandstetter, Johann Pezzl, Georg Forster, and many others. Important scientists belonged to it, such as the famous botanist Nikolaus Joseph Baron von Jacquin, professor of Chemistry at Vienna University. The latter’s three children were close friends of Constanze and Wolfgang Mozart, regularly attending the Wednesday concerts held at his home. Besides Mozart, other artists and musicians met at the Lodges, including Joseph Haydn, Paul Wranitzki and the well-known clarinetist Anton Stadler.

Perl stresses that Mozart was very active in the Lodges, and did not become a member simply in order to receive commissions. He composed numerous Freemason musical works, often playing them himself on the piano or personally conducting them. The two Lodges he was associated with were regarded as the elite lodges of Vienna, lodges which stood closest to the Illuminati.

The Freemasonry movement formed in England at the end of the seventeenth century and beginning of the eighteenth century; it is thought the movement originated from the stone mason craft guilds. The movement spread to the European continent in close connection with the nascent Enlightenment. The Illuminati were a particular variety of Freemasons. Organized as a secret student organization in 1775 by the philosopher and theologian Adam Weishaupt, in Ingolstadt, the movement broadened under the leadership of Adolph von Knigge.

In contrast to the general Freemasonry movement which sought to avoid political and religious discussions, the Illuminati stood also for political and social changes. These ranged from the creation of a constitutional monarchy and the weakening of clerical power over the state by deliberate recruitment of civil servants or by the assumption of public offices to openly democratic positions in sympathy with the French revolutionary movement.

While the Illuminati movement was banned and persecuted in Bavaria from 1784 and Weishaupt forced to flee to Weimar, the Enlightenment movement in Vienna enjoyed relatively favorable conditions until the end of the 1780s. Emperor Joseph II had at first promoted the movement for reform, as had Friedrich II in Prussia. Joseph II abolished serfdom in 1781, banned the death penalty and censorship, enacted educational and legal reforms, allowed the writings of the Enlightenment broader circulation and limited the influence of the clergy on political issues.

Many members of Mozart’s lodge held posts in the state apparatus. Gottfried Freiherr van Swieten, a friend and supporter of the Mozart family, was in charge of the Censorship Commission. Joseph von Sonnenfels, professor of Political Science and founder of the Illuminati in Vienna, reformed the Justice Department during the reign of Maria Theresa and promoted the abolition of the death penalty and torture. Ignaz von Born, Master at the lodge “For True Unity,” one of the first mineralogists and mining engineers, was appointed by Maria Theresa to arrange the imperial museum in Vienna. Baron Andreas Riedel, one of the group around Aloys Blumauer, Mozart’s favourite author, later translated the constitution from the French Revolution together with Martin Joseph Prandstetter. Riedel was tutor to the sons of Joseph II’s brother, the future Emperor Leopold II.

In 1786 the liberal phase of Joseph’s reforms came to an end, and the activities of the lodges were sharply curtailed and placed under state control. Mozart’s lodge “Zur Wohltätigkeit” and others ceased their independent existence and amalgamated into one newly founded lodge, “Zur neugekrönten Hoffnung” (New-Crowned Hope), and from 1788 “Zur gekrönten Hoffnung” (The Crowned Hope). Mozart remained a member of the lodge. But Ignaz von Born and many others withdrew from active participation.

Reaction set in after the death of Emperor Joseph in 1790, under the regency of his brother Leopold II, and strengthened after Mozart’s death, under the regime of Franz II. The democratic strivings of the Enlightenment were brutally suppressed. Many of Mozart’s friends and lodge brothers were sentenced to death or imprisonment in the Jacobin trials in Vienna during 1794-95.

This was the response of the absolutist monarchy in Vienna to the French Revolution of 1789 and the social unrest in its own domain, especially in Hungary and Belgium after 1788 in the aftermath of the Turkish war. It had become clear that the reform of the absolute monarchy was impossible and that the overthrow of feudal social relations was on the order of the day.

Even the camp of the Illuminati and the Freemasons was polarised by the French Revolution, between those who rejected any forceful overthrow and those sympathetic to the French revolutionaries.

Some of the Illuminati and Freemasons retreated at this time, frightened by the violent events in Paris, but also fearing the loss of their social standing. Several became informers or open renegades, like Leopold Aloys Hoffmann, the erstwhile publisher of *Wöchentlichen Wahrheiten für und über Prediger in Wien* (Weekly Truths for and about Clergymen in Vienna), a publication of biting satire directed against the superstitions promoted by the clergy, and from 1783, secretary of the lodge “Zur Wohltätigkeit.” In 1789 he became one of the most energetic persecutors of the Illuminati and his denunciations became a blueprint for the Viennese Jacobin trials. In contrast, other lodge brothers of Mozart became open supporters of the revolution, such as Georg Forster, Prandstetter and Franz von Hebenstreit.

Mozart remained loyal to his lodge at this time, and openly used his compositions to support the ideas of the Enlightenment and his lodge brothers. On November 18, 1791, shortly before his death, Mozart personally supervised the premier performance of the Freemasons cantata “A Little Masonic Cantata” (KV 623), that he himself had composed for the inauguration of the lodge temple “Zur neugekrönten Hoffnung.”

Perl writes: “The polarisation of ideas developed more and more into an internal political struggle. For the second time, Mozart had made a decision that was completely unwise. It would now have been high time to behave somewhat more diplomatically and to accommodate himself to the increasingly anti-liberal trend, which was also followed by the emperor. The only possible interpretation of his behaviour is that he consciously remained loyal to the supporters of liberal and early democratic ideas” (ibid. p. 59).

Perl also considers Mozart’s death and his burial in an unmarked mass grave to be bound up with his revolutionary sympathies, which he held until the end. In the final chapter of his book he debunks the premise that Mozart died in poverty and abandoned by his family and Freemason friends when he was secretly buried in a pauper’s grave. He dismisses other theories alleging that Mozart was poisoned or died from mercury poisoning, trying to treat himself for syphilis or the like. The fact is that Mozart’s burial had been organized by two priests from St. Stephan’s Dome, who were among the most determined opponents of the Enlightenment among the clergy and who most probably excommunicated him first. Mozart’s sister-in-law Sophie Weber reported 30 years later that at his death the priests had refused Mozart the last rites for a considerable time.

Perl's thesis—that Mozart was prevented from being given a dignified and Christian burial as an act of revenge by reactionary forces under Leopold II against the composer and his family due to his determined support for the Illuminati—is supported by the fact that Baron van Swieten, who apparently had raised objections to these actions, was dismissed from the civil service only a few hours after Mozart's death.

One question which is only dealt with superficially in Perl's book, but would have been an important factor in Mozart's steadfast support for the Illuminati, was the fact of his many travels throughout Europe. He was not only influenced by the supporters of the Enlightenment in Vienna, but he had also become acquainted with the progressive spirits in Weimar, Paris, London and Prague. His death was reported in many European newspapers and mourned throughout the continent.

Such influences lie at the very heart of Mozart's music—the spirit of a vigorous freedom-loving citizen of the world. In some respects, Mozart resembled his contemporary Illuminati Georg Forster, who travelled the world with James Cook and Alexander von Humboldt, and who became an enthusiastic supporter of the French Revolution. He visited the lodge “Zur gekrönten Hoffnung” in Vienna and was a regular visitor at the home of Ignaz von Born, as Mozart was just completing *The Magic Flute*. Certainly the two met at that time.

To be continued



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