CHAPTER 1

Mozart in the theater

The word "miraculous" comes easily to those who think about Mozart's operas. In no genre did he more obviously surpass even the most talented of his compositional contemporaries. Since his training, the operas of other composers, and the musical life that surrounded him in Salzburg, Vienna, and other cities cannot fully account for the perfection of his later operas, we may be tempted to call them miraculous and leave it at that. Yet there is something about Mozart's relations with the theater that may help to explain some of what he achieved as a composer of opera. Throughout his life he was preoccupied with the theater, not only as a composer but as a member of the audience.

Spoken drama as well as opera fascinated Mozart. When he was in Munich writing *Idomeneo* during Fall 1780, he asked his sister Nannerl for a report on the plays performed in Salzburg since his departure. She responded with an annotated list of all the performances he had missed.[1] "My only entertainment is the theater," he wrote Nannerl from Vienna on 4 July 1781. "I wish you were here so you could see a tragedy! On the whole, I know of no theater where all kinds of plays are performed really well. But they are here. Every part, even the smallest and poorest part, is well cast and understudied."[2] (As his fame as a composer grew during the 1780s, he could have had the added pleasure of hearing his own name spoken on the stage of the Burgtheater. In one of the greatest hit plays of the age, August von Kotzebue's *Menschenhaß und Reue* [Misanthropy and Remorse, 1789], the heroine Eulalia speaks of the pleasures of solitude: "I play for myself a sonata by Mozart or sing for myself an aria of Paisiello."[3])

Opera represented for Mozart a kind of alternate reality: a place he could return to in his imagination even when he was physically somewhere else. In November 1771, when he was in Milan to compose, rehearse, and perform *Ascanio in Alba*, his father's illness kept him from attending a performance of

Johann Adolf Hasse's *Ruggiero* (performed in alternation with *Ascanio*). But that did not keep him from enjoying Hasse's music: "Fortunately I know nearly all the arias by heart so I can see and hear it at home in my imagination."[4] Twenty years later his own final illness kept him from attending a performance of *Die Zauberflöte*, according to Ignaz von Seyfried: "On the evening of 4 December [1791] M. lay delirious, imagining he was attending *Die Zauberflöte* in the Theater auf der Wieden; almost his last words, which he whispered to his wife, were, Quiet, quiet! Hofer is just taking her top F; – now my sister-in-law is singing her second aria, 'Der Hölle Rache': how strongly she strikes & holds the B flat: 'Hört! hört! hört! der Mutter Schwur!'"[5]

It was not only on his deathbed that opera pervaded Mozart's thoughts and actions. As an eight-year-old in London, in the midst of the great tour of European capitals that the Mozarts made in 1763–66, he turned his homesickness into thoughts of opera. Leopold reported: "Not a day passes without Wolfgang talking at least thirty times of Salzburg and of his and our friends and patrons. Now he always has an opera in his head that he wants to produce there with several young people."[6] Wenzel Swoboda, a double bass player at the premiere of *Don Giovanni* in Prague in 1787, remembered as an old man "Mozart's habit of laying aside mere speech in favour of musical recitative, which even in public he would use as a means of making remarks and conveying requests to his circle of friends."[7] When Mozart's father, left wifeless in Salzburg when Wolfgang and his mother were in Mannheim in 1777, gave a poor girl a room in his apartment, Wolfgang responded as if anticipating a scene from *Figaro*: "Mamma is burning with indignation, rage, and jealousy at the thought that all Papa has to do is move the chest and open the door to get to that pretty young chambermaid."[8]

Salzburg and Vienna

Mozart's birthplace and the character and interests of the most influential person in his life, his father Leopold, cannot by themselves explain his passion for the theater. Neither the seat of the prince-archbishop of Salzburg nor Leopold was particularly interested in opera. During the 1750s and 1760s, when Mozart was growing up, Salzburg saw the performance of a few Italian

operas; but it was no operatic center. Leopold composed prolifically during his early years in Salzburg, but as far as we know he wrote not a single opera. In letters written before his son began to write operas, he showed little interest in or fondness for the genre.

Yet one theatrical genre did flourish in Salzburg. Plays in Latin performed at the Benedictine university gave Mozart what seems to have been his first practical contact with the theater. In 1761 he had a role in *Sigismundus Hungariae Rex*; his name appeared in print for the first time in the libretto published for this production.[9] His appearance in the play had apparently nothing to do with his musical precociousness or training. Yet already as a five-year-old he experienced the thrill of being on stage, the pleasures of costumes, disguises, make-believe, and applause.

In considering the childhoods of other important operatic composers of the second half of the eighteenth century I can think of no similar theatrical debut. I suspect his appearance in a play at so young an age helped establish in his mind a desire that stayed with him throughout his life – a desire, simply put, to be on stage.

That desire surfaced clearly in 1783, when Mozart and a group of family and friends performed a *commedia dell'arte* sketch during a Carnival ball. The twenty-seven-year-old composer wrote to his father from Vienna:

> On Carnival Monday we performed our group's masquerade at the Redoute. It consisted of a pantomime that exactly filled the half hour set aside for it. My sister-in-law was Columbine, I was Harlequin, my brother-in-law Pierrot, an old dancing master (Merk) Pantalone, and a painter (Grassi) the doctor. The plot of the pantomine and the music for it were both by me; the dancing master Merk had the goodness to direct us, and I must say we played charmingly.[10]

Even in the last months of his life Mozart could not resist the urge to appear on stage – in sound if not in person. He wrote to his wife of a performance of *Die Zauberflöte* at which he circulated among the audience:

> But during Papageno's aria with the glockenspiel I went behind the scenes, for I felt an urge today to play it myself. Just for fun, at the point where Schikaneder has a pause, I played an arpeggio. He was startled, looked behind the wings, and saw me. When he had his next pause, I

> didn't play it. Now he stopped and refused to go on. I guessed what he was thinking and again played a chord. He then struck the glockenspiel and said "Shut up." Everyone laughed. I think many people learned through this joke that he does not play the instrument himself.[11]

Mozart had relatively few opportunities to act; he sublimated his desire to be on stage into a passion to write operas. That passion differentiated him from some contemporary composers. Haydn, for example, while certainly a willing, skillful, and sometimes inspired composer of operas, never expressed in his letters what Mozart expressed repeatedly – his desire to write operas and the excitement and pleasure he received from their success.

The theater offered Mozart an opportunity not only to be on stage in front of an admiring audience, but also to mingle with a part of society that throughout his life constituted the ideal audience for his talents and accomplishments – the court and the aristocracy. He probably learned to associate the theater with contact with the upper reaches of society before he left Salzburg. But his early travels reinforced this association.

It is not clear whether he actually attended the theater on the first trips, to Munich during Carnival 1762 and to Vienna from September 1762 to February 1763. But we know that Leopold took in an opera in Vienna. He wrote home on 16 October 1762: "We are already being talked of everywhere; and when on the 10th I was alone at the opera, I heard Archduke Leopold say a number of things from his box to another, namely that there was a boy in Vienna who played the Clavier most excellently and so on."[12] From Leopold's letter we could not know that the opera performed that night was Christoph Gluck's epochal *Orfeo ed Euridice*.[13]

Typical of Leopold is his lack of interest in what was happening on stage; typical too was his recognition of the theater as a place of potentially advantageous social interaction. A few weeks later he wrote: "The lady-in-waiting Countess Theresa von Lodron recently conferred a great honor on us. She gave us a box at the play (which is very difficult to get) and gave my Wolferl shoebuckles, which have little gold plates and look just like solid gold . . . Yesterday we lunched with Herr von Wahlau and in the evening Dr. Bernhard took us to a box at the opera."[14] If this "us" included Wolfgang, then he too witnessed a performance of Gluck's masterpiece.

Mozart, imitating his father, looked to the theater for contact with the court and nobility, contact that raised hopes of presents or even employment. Of the reception of *Ascanio in Alba* in 1771, Leopold wrote home to his wife from Milan:

> His Royal Highness the archduke and the archduchess not only caused two arias to be repeated by applauding them, but both during the serenata and afterwards leaned over from their box to Wolfgang down below and showed their gracious approval by calling out "Bravissimo, maestro" and clapping their hands. Their applause was taken up each time by the nobility and the whole audience."[15]

How similar is Mozart's report, written from Vienna twelve years later, of a concert he gave in the Burgtheater in March 1783 (which included arias from *Lucio Silla* and *Idomeneo*): "the theater could not have been more crowded and every box was full. But what pleased me most of all was that His Majesty the emperor was present and how delighted he was and how he applauded me."[16]

London and Paris

Mozart's travels constituted yet another aspect of his childhood in which he differed from most musicians of his era – they provided him with a vast array of theatrical experiences before the age of twelve, probably before most of his compositional contemporaries saw their first opera. These travels brought him to London, where he lived from April 1764 to July 1765, and where he celebrated his ninth birthday. His experiences in London, more than any other city, including Vienna, represented the single most important turning point in his relations with the theater.

In a letter of 8 February 1765 Leopold discussed Italian opera in London:

> This winter nobody is making as much money as Manzoli and a few others in the opera. Manzoli is getting 1500 pounds sterling for this winter . . . In addition he has a benefit, that is, a night's receipts for himself, so that this winter he will be making more than 20,000 German Gulden. He is the only person whom they have had to pay decently in order to set the opera on its feet again. On the other hand, five or six operas are being performed. The first was *Ezio*, the second *Berenice*, both so-called

> pasticci by different masters; the third, *Adriano in Siria*, was newly composed by Signor Bach. And I know that a newly composed *Demofoonte* by Vento is coming, and then a couple of more pasticci.[17]

Leopold's principal interest in the London opera was financial – the money that the musico (or castrato) Giovanni Manzoli made. As for the list of operas being performed in London, two things stand out: the Italian repertory in London during the Mozarts' visit consisted entirely of opera seria, and it was dominated by settings of librettos by Metastasio. Of the four operas mentioned by Leopold, three were based on librettos by the *poeta cesareo*. So was the opera organized for Manzoli's benefit performance, a setting by Felice Giardini of *Il re pastore*.

Compare Leopold's letter with Mozart's experience in London, which also involved Manzoli, opera seria, and Metastasio (and more specifically two of the dramas performed in London – *Ezio* and *Demofoonte*). Mozart heard Manzoli not only on the operatic stage but also in private concerts, such as one given by Margaret Clive, who wrote on 12 March 1765: "Tomorrow I shall have a great deal of Company . . . to hear Manzoli sing here, accompanied by Mr Burton on the harpsichord, on which the little Mozarts, the boy aged 8 and the girl 12 will also play most completely well."[18]

The famous account by Daines Barrington of Mozart's operatic improvisations has been frequently quoted; I do so again to emphasize the difference between Leopold's reaction to opera in London and that of his son:

> Happening to know that little Mozart was much taken notice of by Manzoli, the famous singer, who came over to England in 1764, I said to the boy, that I should be glad to hear an extemporary *Love Song*, such as his friend Manzoli might choose in an opera.
>
> The boy on this (who continued to sit at his harpsichord) looked back with much archness, and immediately began five or six lines of a jargon recitative proper to introduce a love song.
>
> He then played a symphony which might correspond with an air composed to the single word, *Affetto*.
>
> It had a first and second part, which, together with the symphonies, was of the length that opera songs generally last: if this extemporary composition was not amazingly capital, yet it was really above mediocrity, and shewed most extraordinary readiness of invention.

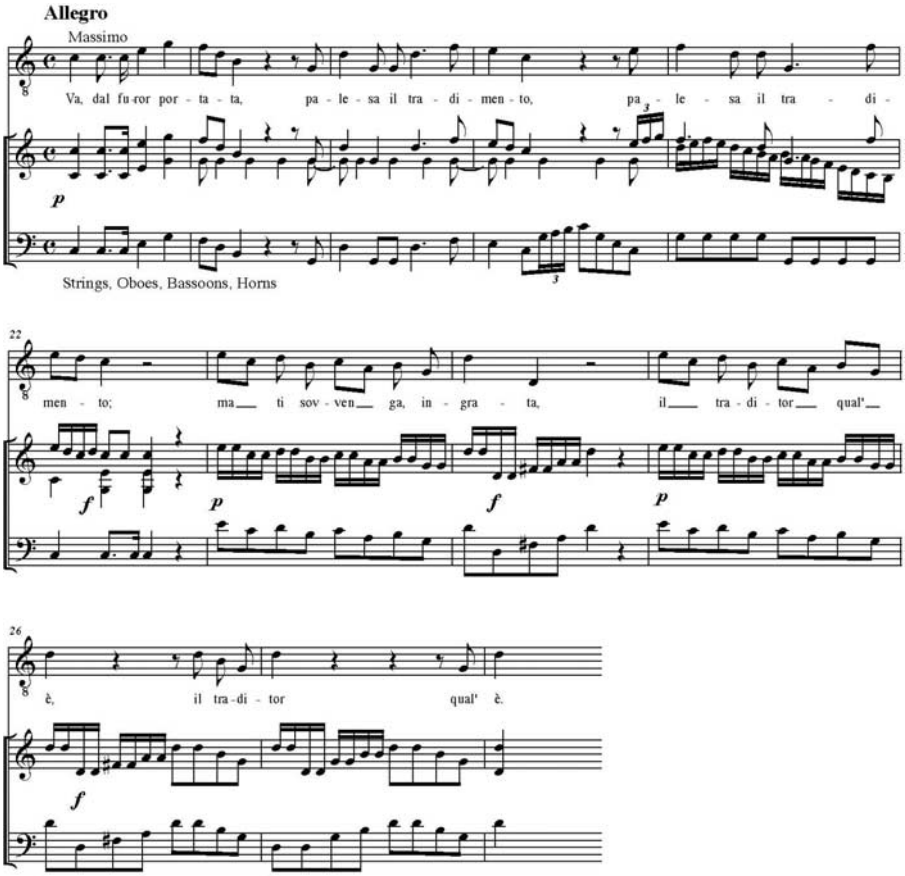
> Finding that he was in humour, and as it were inspired, I then desired him to compose a *Song of Rage*, such as might be proper for the opera stage.
>
> The boy again looked back with much archness, and began five or six lines of a jargon recitative proper to precede a *Song of Anger*.
>
> This lasted also about the same time with the *Song of Love*; and in the middle of it, he had worked himself up to such a pitch, that he beat his harpsichord like a person possessed, rising sometimes in his chair.
>
> The word he pitched upon for this second extemporary composition was, *Perfido*.[19]

On the same occasion Mozart and his father sang – at sight – a duet on a text from *Demofoonte*, the boy singing the higher part "in the truest taste, and with the greatest precision," Barrington reported: "His voice in the tone of it was thin and infantine, but nothing could exceed the masterly manner in which he sung." Mozart's singing is also attested to by Charles Burney, who wrote of the young boy's "fondness for Manzoli." Mozart imitated "the several Styles of Singing of each of the then Opera Singers, as well as of their Songs in an Extemporary opera to nonsense words – to which were [added] an overture of 3 Movem[ts] Recitative – Graziosa, Bravura & Pathetic Airs together with Several accomp[d] Recitatives, all full of Taste imagination, with good Harmony, Melody & Modulation, after wh[ch] he played at Marbles, in the true Childish Way of one who knows Nothing."[20]

A catalogue of Mozart's works that Leopold compiled in 1768 refers to fifteen Italian arias written in London and shortly thereafter in Holland, but does not name them. They must have included "Va, dal furor portata," Mozart's earliest surviving vocal work, a setting of an aria text from Metastasio's *Ezio* dated 1765. Some of these arias were presumably written-out versions of those he improvised in London; "Va, dal furor portata" (though notated for tenor, and without the word "perfido") could have been the aria of rage that Barrington asked him to improvise (ex. 1.1). (It is also possible, of course, that some of what Barrington took for improvisation was simply Mozart's performance of arias he had composed and memorized earlier.)

In London opera became for the first time a way for Mozart to perform, as he did for Barrington and Burney: a way to earn admiration and praise. And by earning money for Leopold – since Londoners paid to see Mozart

Ex. 1.1 Mozart, "Va, dal furor portata," K. 21, mm. 17–28.



improvise – opera became a way for Mozart to earn his father's approval as well. Earlier in his travels he had amazed and delighted audiences with his sight-reading and improvisation at the keyboard and with his fluent violin playing. But in London he found a new outlet for his talents that allowed him to experience something of the thrill of being on the operatic stage. He wrote no real opera in London, but the "Extemporary opera to nonsense words" that Burney admired was the seed from which his career as an operatic composer grew.

London offered Mozart his first sustained contact with opera seria, a genre that dominated the first half of his career as an operatic composer. From

London also dates his attachment to Metastasio's poetry, and his recognition of it as a potential vehicle for the demonstration of his own talent. Many of his early arias are settings of Metastasio's texts, including several from *Demofoonte* and *Ezio*. Leopold, eager to demonstrate his son's ability as an operatic composer in Vienna in 1768, had Wolfgang compose arias on texts chosen at random from the librettos of Metastasio.[21] Another link in the chain that, in Mozart's mind, connected operatic success with Italian serious opera in general and Metastasio's poetry in particular was a lavish gift that he received in Milan in 1770 from his patron Count Carl Joseph Firmian – an edition of Metastasio's complete works. When Mozart, through Firmian's intercession, received his first commission for an opera in Italy, he recommended that the libretto be one of Metastasio's. Those responsible for choosing the libretto did not follow his advice (the opera was *Mitridate*); but five years later he composed *Il re pastore*, returning to a libretto that he almost certainly saw performed, with Manzoli in the title role, in London. At the end of his life he returned to opera seria and Metastasio for his last Italian opera, *La clemenza di Tito*.

What did Mozart learn from Manzoli in England, and of what did their relations consist? Parallels between his experiences and those of another musician suggest some possible answers. The Irish singer and composer Michael Kelly, born six years after Mozart, enjoyed a series of relations with musici that he recorded in his memoirs and that may help us understand what Mozart gained from Manzoli.

As a boy in Dublin in the early 1770s Kelly, when he was not practicing keyboard, studied singing with Nicolò Peretti, "a *vero musico*" who had sung in Italy, Germany, and London.[22] Later he met another musico:

> I was so fortunate as to be taken great notice of by Rauzzini, during his stay in Dublin. He gave me lessons, and taught me several songs, particularly that beautiful air of his own, which he sang divinely, "Fuggiam da questo loco, in piena libertà" . . .
>
> Rauzzini was so kind to me, and so pleased with the ardent feeling I evinced for music, that, previously to his leaving Ireland, he called upon my father, and said, "My dear Sir, depend upon it: your son will never follow any profession but that of a musician; and as there is no person in this country who can give him the instruction he requires, you ought to

> send him to Italy. He is now at the time of life to imbibe true taste, and in Italy only is it to be found."[23]

Kelly's phrase "taken great notice of" duplicates almost exactly the phrase Barrington used to describe Manzoli's attitude to Mozart. Venanzio Rauzzini (like Peretti and Manzoli) was a specialist in opera seria, a musical genre that Kelly's contemporaries evidently believed to embody the techniques and ideals that serious young musicians were most in need of learning. Rauzzini, like many musici and some tenors too, was a composer as well as a singer – a reminder that the early stages in the musical training of singers and composers involved mastering many of the same skills.

That Manzoli gave Mozart any formal lessons is doubtful: if he had done so, Leopold would surely have mentioned it. But his singing constituted a valuable lesson in itself – in the shaping and spinning out of beautiful melody, in the ornamentation of vocal lines, in the dramatic potential of opera seria. Manzoli's lesson was probably heard and absorbed by Leopold as well as Wolfgang. Rauzzini's recommendation to Kelly's father that he send his son to Italy suggests the possibility that Manzoli made a similar recommendation to Leopold.[24]

Mozart's grand tour of 1763–66 brought him twice to Paris, where he lived for a total of seven months. His experiences with French opera, in so far as they can be extrapolated from Leopold's letters and notes, were very limited. There is no evidence of his presence at a single opera, either an opéra-comique or a tragédie lyrique.[25] Leopold shared with many eighteenth-century German and Italian musicians a distaste for French singing and for what he called *der französische Geschmack* (French musical style), and he passed it on to his son. In cultivating relations with musicians in Paris, Leopold took a particular interest in instrumentalists; he emphasized Wolfgang's talents as a keyboard player and (in the boy's first published works) a composer of keyboard music. Leopold and Wolfgang probably met Marie Fel and Pierre Jélyotte, two of the greatest French opera singers of the time; but in describing Jélyotte as a "singer renowned in France – that is to say, for their taste"[26] Leopold disqualified the tenor from becoming the kind of friend and mentor for Wolfgang that Manzoli was. London put Mozart on the path to success as a composer of Italian opera; Paris (as he experienced it through Leopold)