

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-58744-0 - The Life of Mozart
John Rosselli
Excerpt
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Introduction: on the cusp

On 26 January 1790 a new opera had its first performance at the chief Vienna theatre. Its title, hit upon at the last moment, might be rendered as *Girls Will Play*; more literally, as *Women All Behave Like That*. Its subtitle, *The School for Lovers*, showed that it belonged to a long-standing popular genre, Italian comic opera. This dealt, in sung exchanges as a rule light, graceful, speedy, with the more obvious foibles of humankind: just now, with the absurdity of expecting faithfulness in women – shown in a tale of two men each of whom, farcically disguised, wins over the other's 'inconsolable' lover within twenty-four hours of having – it seems – left for the front. Musicians and librettists had churned out such works for the previous half-century; *Così fan tutte* drew for its situations on many of them, though with flourishes from more august literary sources – as, in the cinema, a Western draws on familiar skies and conflicts though from a new, would-be serious angle.

The new work did well enough – not as well as some by proper Italian composers (one of whom had turned down the libretto after sketching out a scene or two), but respectably. The monarch, the Emperor Joseph II, was too ill to attend; his death on 20 February would interrupt the run after ten performances. Another operagoer, a nobleman who kept a diary, noted that the subject was 'rather amusing'; 'the music by Mozart is charming . . .'

Emperor and nobleman – and Mozart – had reason to think of events far beyond the opera, the theatre, or Vienna itself. In France,

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where Joseph II's sister Marie-Antoinette was queen, the Bastille had fallen on 14 July 1789, six and a half months before the first performance of *Così fan tutte*. Then had come the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, the renunciation of feudal privileges; in October the mob had forced the king and queen from Versailles back into Paris. The dissolution of monastic orders was to come within the next few months, as was that of nobility itself. But although the most drastic changes still lay a short way ahead, in Vienna as in other European cities educated people knew that the French Revolution was transforming the order of things.

An 'enlightened', reforming sovereign like Joseph might have welcomed some of the changes; he could not welcome the popular agitation – running into violence – that had brought them about. His deliberately plain clothes and manner did not mean that he would wish to see aristocracy done away with and the 'middling' people (or Third Estate) set up as master. To the jobbing composer Wolfgang Amadé Mozart, on the other hand (himself apt to feel he must have a 'beautiful red coat' to set off some mother-of-pearl and topaz buttons), the rise of the Third Estate answered a long-frustrated wish. He had suffered through the hauteur and thoughtlessness of those he sometimes caricatured as 'Duchess Smackbottom' or 'Princess Dunchill'; a count in the service of a prince-archbishop had once literally kicked him out, foot landed square on his behind. 'It is the heart', Mozart once wrote, 'that ennobles man' – a commonplace at the time among the forward-looking, but he meant it. The French Revolution from the start raised the cry 'the career open to talent', wonderful to the ears of the unprivileged young. Mozart – just thirty-four at the time of *Così fan tutte* – knew he could compose better than any of his rivals, Haydn alone excepted; yet he had again and again seen others land an established post while he was left unbeneficed. For him the 'opening to talent' could not come too soon.

Così fan tutte might look like just another Italian comic opera. It was in fact a token of a world on the cusp of change. Mozart's most perfect dramatic work enshrines a society where men and women need

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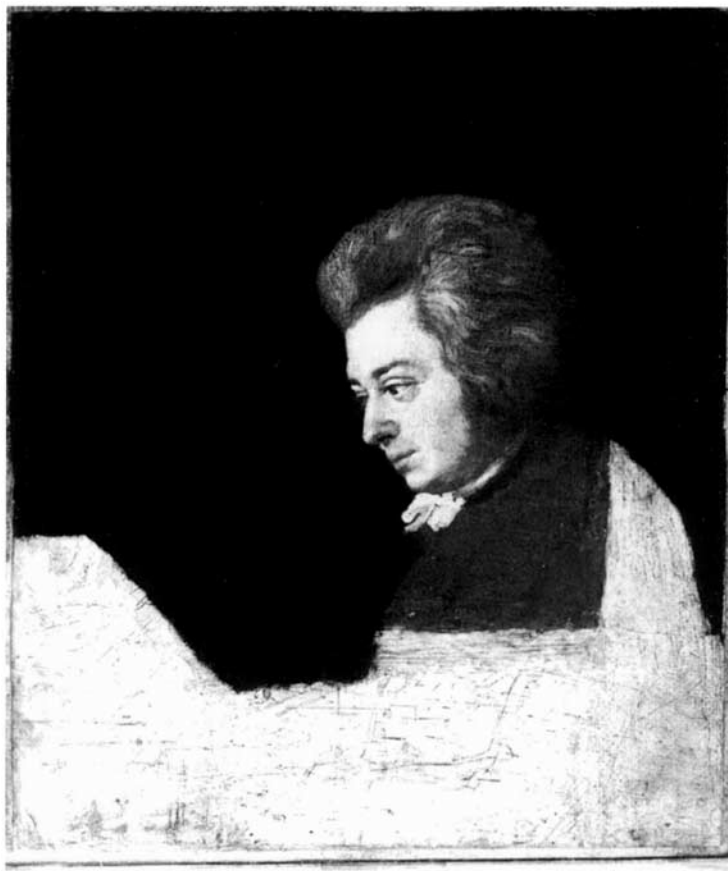
concern themselves only with delectable follies, and where reconciliation mends all in the name of sense. Music of ideal beauty lifts the ironies of the tale onto a plane of grace – but that grace, as Scott Burnham has written, is ‘fugitive, transitory . . . a glimpse of a paradise now discerned as an illusory realm forever beyond the pale of mundane reality yet somehow still true’. The ambience of *Così fan tutte* is what the ex-revolutionary Talleyrand meant when, in old age, he remarked that only those who had grown up before 1789 could know the sweetness of life. Afterwards came struggle and earnestness. *Così fan tutte* is the fine flower of the old regime at its point of dissolution.

Mozart’s life as much as his art shows him on the cusp of change from the old world to the new. His early career as child prodigy depended on the favour of monarchs, petty princes, and nobles; in adolescence and early youth he had to work for a ruler who seated him just above the cooks; even as an independent concert artist and composer in Vienna he had to play to a limited audience, still heavily aristocratic, apt to get bored and look elsewhere. Though he sought the dignity of a free artist he just missed, through early death, the conditions that would give a free artist the chance of a wider public and a less troubled career.

Again, he lived at a time when composers expected to turn out music for everyday use, one piece after another as the need arose – whether a special commission or a regular duty, like J. S. Bach’s 199 church cantatas or Haydn’s more than one hundred trios for his noble patron to play on the obsolescent baryton, a kind of viola da gamba. Mozart too wrote his share of serenades, masses, or German dances to order; he did not pursue a musical idea beyond a sketched beginning if he saw no likelihood of its being performed. Yet impatience of patronage led him more than once to leave a bespoke series unfinished, and he again and again burst the accustomed bounds of a genre – of comic opera with *Don Giovanni*, of the symphony with his last four, of serenade and chamber music with several works that did not readily fit into the musical life of the time; in his piano concertos he virtually invented a new genre.

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- 1 Mozart in his thirties: unfinished oil painting by his brother-in-law the actor–painter Joseph Lange. Though perhaps slightly idealised, this is one of the few portraits to give a sense of the eager creative artist.

Though often called a traditionalist who took the musical language of his day as he found it, he – together with Haydn – changed it so pervasively as to make for a new emotional relationship between music and its audience; as master of delicately calibrated shifts in harmony he made music speak to and for inner feeling with a varied eloquence no one before him had attained. Music had been for use, for community, for religious contemplation, for pleasure, for a connoisseur's

interest in minor new departures; after Mozart it was for life, for love, for the shadow of death, for the individual's profoundest experiences.

Most crucially, Mozart lived in a time of transition from a Europe where the community believed unhesitatingly in a spiritual world not theirs to one where the individual would live on his or her own resources; he bridged – we might say – the Christian and post-Christian eras. He himself always wrote straightforwardly that he relied on God and looked forward to meeting the people he loved in a better world; yet some of his last works open out on a secular humanism. In *The Magic Flute*, in the tiny motet 'Ave, verum corpus', truth speaks in human voices without a hint of an overarching power.

In a remarkable passage written between the two world wars of our own century, the theologian Karl Barth claimed Mozart's music as the true Christian's 'food and drink' because Mozart was not a 'self' frantic to express itself but a unique 'ear' open to the music of creation:

he heard the harmony of creation in which the shadow also belongs but in which the shadow is not darkness, deficiency is not defeat, sadness cannot become despair, trouble cannot degenerate into tragedy and infinite melancholy is not ultimately forced to claim undisputed sway. Thus the cheerfulness in this harmony is not without its limits. But the light shines all the more brightly because it breaks forth from the shadow . . . Mozart saw this light no more than we do, but he heard the whole world of creation enveloped by this light.

Mozart's music, according to Barth, showed that although creation included a Yes and a No it was not disordered, not cleft between God and nothingness; even in its No, hence as a totality, 'creation praises its Master and is therefore perfect.'

Barth used to listen to some Mozart every day, in effect as to an angel – a messenger of God. Many people, it seems likely, hear as Barth did. Unbelievers though most of them probably are, in this music they glimpse the spirit – 'airs from heaven and blasts from hell', as Bernard Shaw wrote of *Don Giovanni*, reconciled in a work of art that brings peace.

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Barth's, however, is not the only Mozart. Writers on the Marxist Left have been at pains to bring out the Mozart who played an active part in the 'enlightened' movements of his time, Freemasonry in particular, and who in his resentment of the aristocracy and upper clergy anticipated the supposedly bourgeois revolution of 1789. Those of more conservative outlook tend to play down Mozart's political engagement and interpret his works accordingly. Vast audiences exposed to Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* – play and film – harbour the image of Mozart as a lout who is also an inspired artist. Biographers involve themselves in Mozart's two chief personal relationships – with his father and his wife; some take sides, at times relying heavily on speculation or on what they think modern psychoanalysis can tell us about eighteenth-century motives.

The present work rests as far as possible on Mozart's own documentation – his letters, together with those of his father – and on the more reliable other documents of the time, set within the context of their society. Though it is bound to look into Mozart's relationships it seeks to avoid guesswork. In trying to understand Mozart we none the less face difficulties. His surviving letters are many and tell us a great deal, yet they are most of them addressed to members of his family; in writing to his father in particular – perhaps at times to his wife – Mozart, it has become clear, was not always truthful. If we had more letters to friends and fellow artists we might get a different impression. For much of 1773–77 and 1779–80 – when all the family were in Salzburg and need not write – again after Wolfgang's break with Salzburg in 1781, still more after his father's death in 1787, the correspondence slackens or disappears; in some years we have little evidence.

More fundamentally, what matters to us in this fellow human being is his music. The present study takes the work as no less central to its inquiry than the life; indeed it assumes that the chief events in that life, one or two apart, were musical. Mozart's compositions, however, run into hundreds: a short book cannot begin to deal with them all. The following chapters dwell on certain works as particularly significant;

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others they ignore or deal with as categories and groups. The significant works do not always appear in chronological order. Once Mozart had achieved his mature style – when he was about eighteen – he did not in any obvious sense ‘progress’ from work to work; at most we may ask whether the last year or two of his life show the coming of a ‘late style’ that might reflect changes in his personal and artistic outlook. A work of his mature period may therefore legitimately be taken out of order to illustrate a theme in what he still says to us.

For all these reasons Chapters 1 and 2 deal with Mozart’s childhood and youth and his emancipation from authority, Chapter 3 with his marriage and with the music of the early Vienna period, the piano concertos especially. Chapters 4 and 5 follow two themes across Mozart’s major phase, his involvement with opera and his inmost beliefs as they are reflected in his works. Chapter 6 deals with his ‘late’ phase, Chapter 7 with his illness and death.

At the core of what Mozart says to us lies something that cannot be taken to bits and explained. After repeated hearings, its mystery endures. That is why we go on listening to it. Having listened, we must in the end leave some questions open.

I Escape from the father

'All the ladies are in love with my boy', Leopold Mozart reported from Vienna in October 1762. The boy was six, some of the ladies very great ladies indeed: the Empress Maria Theresia spent three hours at her Schönbrunn palace with the Mozart family, during which little Wofel not only played the harpsichord but 'jumped up on the empress's lap, put his arms round her neck and kissed her heartily'. At Versailles over a year later the royal princesses kissed the boy as he went by; Queen Marie Leszczyńska fed him from dishes on her table, but this time he stood and merely kissed her hands over and over. Later still at Buckingham House the family met Queen Charlotte and George III, so friendly and attentive that a week later in St James's Park, 'although we all had on different clothes', the king leaned out of his carriage and greeted them, 'especially our Master Wolfgang, nodding to us and waving his hand'. Between the ages of six and fourteen, while other boys kept to the daily round of home and, perhaps, school, Mozart toured Europe as a star performer everywhere made much of by the greatest in the land.

The child prodigy as exhibit was something of a novelty. It already made some people shake their heads: such early fruit would yield little later on, and the children would face the disappointment of being, after all, no better than their contemporaries. Many none the less revelled in what Mozart's father Leopold always described as a 'miracle of God', a 'wonder of nature' he was bound to make known to the world,

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just as many twentieth-century people were to revel in films starring Shirley Temple or the latest four-years-old cinemoppet.

Such a childhood went a long way to shape the grown man's sensibility and outlook, all the more because the way Leopold ran his son's life made – as their letters show – for complex, difficult relations between the two later on. Much of Wolfgang's life up to the age of twenty-five, when he set up as an independent musician, was a prolonged, necessary, in part bungled escape from the father he loved.

The boy was born in his parents' Salzburg flat on 27 January 1756; next day he was baptised in Salzburg Cathedral with the names Joannes Chrysostomus Wolfgangus Theophilus. The birthplace, the town, the names are all significant.

The flat consisted of three rooms, all of them wide but so low-ceilinged as to image the filling in a sandwich. They opened one into the other: the corridor, an eighteenth-century invention, came too late for the builders of the house. No corridor meant no space shut off as a bedroom, no privacy in the modern sense, no setting off of the individual apart from the family. Biographers who misunderstand Wolfgang's relations with his father and sister unconsciously assume that each acted, modern British or American fashion, as one distinct individual facing others. They do not allow for the family, an overarching body all the Mozarts were inescapably part of even when they were angry with one another or were no longer communicating.

Salzburg was a handsome, prosperous town in a part of the German-speaking lands where Roman Catholicism, imposed once again by force after the Reformation, now held sway as the unquestioned, often deeply felt religion. It was the seat of a principality ruled by an archbishop, one of the hundreds of states large and small that made up the Holy Roman Empire – a ramshackle, weak leftover from the Middle Ages, spread over much of central Europe. Contemporaries tended to think of Salzburg as geographically part of Bavaria to the north; Munich, the Bavarian capital, was the nearest

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large city. To the south, Italy was within easy reach: the town had for over a century employed Italian architects and musicians, and Italian musical influence was strong.

Was not Mozart an Austrian, then? No one thought of Austria as a nation to which Salzburg obviously belonged. The Habsburg dynasty in Vienna ruled over the Austrian hereditary lands, which did not include Salzburg; most of these lands were, like Salzburg, within the Holy Roman Empire, of which the Habsburg ruler was almost automatically the head, and in many the upper classes at least spoke German. The Habsburgs were also kings of Hungary, a large area outside the Empire. In Vienna the Empress Maria Theresa and her husband and children wrote each other little notes in French, German, or Italian as the fancy took them: French was the medium of polite exchange throughout Europe; all three languages were among those spoken by their subjects. They could muster some Hungarian if need be, and in everyday conversation they and their nobles fell into Viennese dialect. Mozart was born into a part of Europe where nationality in the modern sense did not exist.

As he grew up, some educated people – himself among them – talked at times warmly of promoting the German language and German music, but they did not look for a united German state. If Germanness had a capital (which was doubtful) that capital was Vienna, but in Vienna as in Salzburg the educated looked almost as much to France and Italy as to central Europe. Mozart was to dedicate his string quartets to Haydn in Italian (the language of music), and now and then to write to his family in Italian or French.

His baptismal names symbolised these openings to different cultures. The first two names, those of the saint on whose day he was born, marked the family's steadfast Catholic piety. Wolfgang, the name his family chose to call him by, was straightforwardly German. Theophilus ('lover of God') was the Greek form of a name often rendered in Latin as Amadeus, or at times in German as Gottlieb. Mozart himself in later life more often than not signed himself