

Chapter 1

Outline of a remarkable life

On 27 January 1756 Anna Maria Mozart gave birth to the seventh offspring of her marriage with Leopold Mozart, a violinist and chamber musician in the service of the Prince-Archbishop of Salzburg. The child, a boy, was baptized one day later under the name of Joannes Chrysostomos Wolfgangus Theophilus. Five of their previous children had died in childhood. Only ‘Wolfgangerl’, as he was soon called, and his sister Maria Anna or ‘Nannerl’, four-and-a-half years older than he, were to survive.

When Mozart’s father began to give music lessons to his highly gifted daughter at about the age of eight it soon transpired that Wolfgangerl had even more extraordinary musical abilities than she, and before long he had overtaken her. He was not quite six years old when his father decided to display the talents of his two prodigies at the court of the Prince Elector in Munich. From 1762 to 1779 the Mozarts undertook many lengthy journeys, including one lasting more than three years. Some of these involved the entire family – father, mother, daughter and son. Others were taken without the mother, and still others involved father and son alone. They travelled to the mighty courts of Vienna, Paris and London, to the principal centres of music in Italy, and to a multitude of minor courts, aristocratic palaces and bourgeois houses. They also held concerts in public. The children often performed for hours on end, sometimes two and even three times on a single day.

In the meantime Mozart’s father had become deputy Kapellmeister in Salzburg. But much to his dismay and disappointment he was never to advance beyond this position. Wolfgang, with his remarkable talents, was meant to obtain a higher income and a more liberal and secure appointment, one less troubled by humiliations and setbacks, not only for his own benefit but also for the good of the family. To be sure, by 1769, at the age of thirteen, he had become concert master at the Salzburg court of the Prince-Archbishop, though without stipend; and in 1772 he was appointed *maestro di capella* of Salzburg cathedral

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with a modest salary that was later even tripled. But, understandably, this was hardly deemed sufficient, the less so as Leopold, a competent and intelligent musician, also hoped to escape from Salzburg. Nor were these hopes far-fetched: in 1756, the year of Mozart's birth, he published *Versuch einer gründlichen Violinschule*, a highly regarded treatise on the violin that underwent several reissues and was translated into French and Dutch.

By the time he was about fifteen Mozart was too old to be a child prodigy, yet too young to be a serious applicant for a position. By then Nannerl had grown to become a thoroughly competent pianist and piano teacher in Salzburg, earning the lifelong respect of her brother. Hence, the main object of the third Italian tour undertaken by Mozart *père* and *fils* in 1772–3, as well as the journeys to Vienna in 1773 and Munich in 1774–5, was primarily to obtain a *scrittura* – an opera commission – and only secondarily to give concerts. Their stays in Salzburg began increasingly to seem like interruptions in their journeys and preparations for future ones. Mozart's first lengthy tenure in Salzburg, from March 1775 to September 1777, may have been a result of the more stringent regulations following the installation of the new Prince-Archbishop Colloredo.

When Mozart reached the age of twenty-two, however, it seemed that the time had come for a fundamental change. Notice was given on the position in Salzburg, and Mozart, this time accompanied only by his mother, left on 23 September 1777 to try his luck elsewhere, first at the courts of Munich and Mannheim. When a position failed to materialize at either court he extended the journey, after some hesitation, to include Paris. Here, however, he met with one failure after another, despite the sound advice and letters of recommendation of his father. Of course Mozart performed with success both privately and in public; and of course a number of his compositions were successfully premièred. But his primary goal, an opera commission, never came about. He turned down a by no means unfavourable appointment as organist in Versailles despite the admonitions of his father to give it serious consideration. And he suffered a grievous blow. In summer 1778 his mother fell ill and died within two weeks.

Various circumstances now forced Mozart to leave Paris although several opportunities had seemingly arisen in the meantime. A renewed attempt to settle in Mannheim failed, and he suffered a bitter disappointment when the first great love of his life, Aloysia Weber, a highly gifted soprano, rejected him. Thereafter he had no choice but to admit defeat and return to the employ of the Prince-Archbishop in Salzburg, from whom his father had obtained a promise to reinstate him as court and cathedral organist with a modest salary. It was now mid-January of 1779.

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By this time Mozart had become a masterly composer. He had written thirteen operas and other works for the stage, sixteen Mass settings, a large number of church compositions and many symphonies, divertimenti, string quartets, piano pieces and songs.

It was clear not only to Mozart himself but also to his father and sister that he would not remain in Salzburg. Curiously, the immediate occasion for this overdue change came from his employer Colloredo, who had journeyed to Vienna together with his court in order to attend the coronation of Joseph II. He now summoned Mozart to Vienna to complete his musical retinue. To Mozart, Vienna had long seemed an advantageous place to be. It was particularly so now that Joseph had become sole occupant of the throne following the death of his mother Maria Theresia in November 1780, for Mozart was in sympathy with Joseph's plans of reform. Determined to remain in Vienna, Mozart provoked a breach with the Archbishop. From this point on, from March 1781 until his death almost eleven years later, Vienna remained Mozart's permanent place of residence.

The first few years boded well. Mozart married Konstanze Weber, the sister of Aloysia, though much to the apprehension of his father and sister, who thought the Weber family beneath their station. From this union issued six children, of whom, however, only two survived to adulthood. The series of triumphs in Vienna began in March 1782 with the first performance of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, which had been commissioned by the Emperor. In the years that followed Mozart was brilliantly successful as a composer, a virtuoso pianist and improviser, and as a piano teacher. But a permanent position with a regular income continued to elude him. Not until 1787 was he given the title of composer to the royal-imperial chamber. This obligated him to write dance music for court balls and brought him an annual income of 800 gulden. Gluck, Mozart's predecessor in this honorific title, had received 2,000 gulden.

In 1784 Mozart joined a Viennese masonic lodge. At that time the goals of the Freemasons were to overcome the privileges of absolutist society and to display mutual respect and assistance for all men. That Mozart took these goals seriously is evidenced by the men he associated with in his lodge and, above all, by the compositions of his final years.

By the time he was fifteen, most of Mozart's works revealed a mastery of musical craftsmanship, a balanced application of the various elements of musical language, and originality of invention. They made it abundantly clear that this young lad was moving on from the astonishing achievements of a child prodigy to become a composer of genius. But it was not until the 1780s, when Mozart learnt to adopt topical and highly provocative subjects for his stage

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works and to bring his vocal and instrumental music into fruitful interplay, that he reached the pinnacle of his century and became its outstanding composer.

For this Mozart had to pay dearly. There can be little doubt that a number of his aristocratic patrons dropped him after he had taken up the cause of the third estate in *Le nozze di Figaro*, premièred in Vienna on 1 May 1786. And in 1788 – a year in which Emperor Joseph set out on a new campaign against the Turks, many noble families fled the capital, the theatre and concert life declined and Konstanze fell ill – Mozart found himself in disastrous straits.

During this same period his fame began to increase outside Vienna. Mozart's music, particularly his late works, assumed a special role in Prague, Mannheim and Mainz, where it accompanied the emergence of a bourgeois-democratic intellectual culture and a revolt against the privileges of the nobility. Wherever the theatre and the concert hall became forums of bourgeois public life (in the sense demanded by Friedrich Schiller), Mozart was played, esteemed and loved. Thus, his brief journeys to Prague in 1786, 1787 and 1791, and to the Rhineland in 1790 with a short stay in Mainz, were moments of light in a world that seemed to be darkening about him. Vienna, too, offered him one of these moments. On 30 September 1791 Mozart, for the first time, appeared with a major stage work before an audience not made up primarily of the aristocracy and the grand bourgeoisie when *Die Zauberflöte* was given in a suburban Viennese theatre. Its success was instantaneous and lasting, but it came a mere nine weeks before his death. There is something comforting in the thought that he took pleasure not only in the raucous applause and cries for encores, but also in what he called 'the silent applause' that greeted this work and cheered the final days of his life.

Nothing reliable is known about the cause of Mozart's death. According to Landon (1988, pp. 178f.), he probably died of a streptococcal infection acquired on 18 November 1791 during his attendance at a meeting at the masonic lodge, compounded by kidney failure, bloodlettings, cerebral haemorrhaging, and finally bronchial and pulmonary pneumonia. Nor can we completely discount Mozart's own suspicion that he had been poisoned, though if so, we have no way of knowing who the murderer might have been. Mozart died shortly after midnight on 5 December 1791.

Chapter 2

From child prodigy to genius

Mozart's musicality as a child was obviously unique. True, the fact that at the age of three he explored the keyboard for thirds and took delight in their euphony can hardly be called extraordinary. But the same cannot be said of the dozen little piano pieces he learnt to play within a year when his father started giving him lessons at the age of four. He was not yet five when he mastered two longer pieces, each within the space of half an hour. And it was at the age of five that he composed small pieces, meaning in this case that he invented them at the keyboard. (He was still unable to write them down; that was his father's task.) Not long thereafter he played the second part of a trio on a small violin without having received any instruction, and he was seven-and-a-half when it was discovered that he could play the organ, including the pedals, once again without any previous instruction. From his sixth year he also learnt to write down his own compositions – his first attempts are said to have been made when he was five – and at the age of eight he was given a notebook of his own which he proceeded to fill with astonishingly varied and imaginative pieces, some of them quite long. It was obvious that extraordinary things were going on in the boy's mind.

Looking a little more closely, we can see that Mozart's abilities were made up of several components. He had an astonishingly good ear; he could apparently detect eighth-tone discrepancies in pitch. His musical memory was phenomenal; thousands of pieces must have been stored in his brain, all of them complete. Still more astonishing was his ability to improvise; even as a boy he could elaborate given themes into fugues at the keyboard without preparation. The technical prowess he displayed on the piano, organ and violin was apparently limitless.

Now, if need be, we can quantify the components of musical talent. They can be measured with greater or lesser accuracy and compared with the accomplishments of other people. In fact, this has already been done in countless publications in music psychology (a general discussion of musical talent can be found in Helga de la Motte 1985, pp. 257–401). But there is little that we can conclude from these

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studies. For one thing, not all components of musical talent are measurable: there is no way, for example, of holding a yardstick to the imagination with which the eight-year-old Mozart wrote down his ideas. For another, even the rarest aptitude for music will lead nowhere unless it goes hand in hand with other aptitudes and meets favourable conditions; it is certainly not sufficient in itself to turn every talent into a genius. Superior musical abilities have even been observed here and there in people with mental disorders (one such case is recounted by de la Motte 1985, pp. 334f.).

We must, then, beware of the tacit assumption that Mozart was predestined to genius from his childhood. In this case genius would be equatable with the possession of an abnormally bounteous gift of musical abilities. Physiologists claim that what we receive from nature are predispositions; whether and how these predispositions develop is a question of circumstance. Ordinary observations confirm this view. Not all child prodigies with astonishing talents have grown up to become major composers, and, conversely, not all major composers started their careers as stupendous prodigies. Indeed, musical prodigies are more likely to become highly esteemed virtuoso instrumentalists when they come of age. Moreover, prodigies in other fields such as mathematics, chess or, recently, cybernetics, can accomplish remarkable things without necessarily having remarkable careers later. They have one thing in common: their brains are organized in such a way that they can produce extraordinary achievements within a special, circumscribed area through an interplay of mental faculties – gifts of observation, wealth of invention, shrewdness of deduction and powers of memory. This interplay, at our present stage of knowledge, is largely obscure and opaque. For the psychology of human creativity it is a crucial question – and one which, so far as I know, has yet to be researched – to discover whether, and if so in what way, experiences from the world outside this special field impinge on the mind of the prodigy. This question, while perhaps extraneous in the case of chess, is critical for achievements in the arts.

Fortunately, in the case of Mozart, we have a rich body of observations at our disposal. There exists, for example, an astute and telling account of his early childhood by his sister Nannerl, who observed her giant of a little brother lovingly and apparently without envy from early childhood. Following his death she had this to say of him (Deutsch 1965, p. 493):

Mozart's over-rich imagination was so lively and so vivid, even in childhood, at a time when it still lies dormant in ordinary men, and perfected that which it had once taken hold of, to such an

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extent, that one cannot imagine anything more extraordinary and in some respects more moving than its enthusiastic creations; which, because the little man still knew so little of the real world, were as far removed from it as the heavens themselves. Just one illustration: As the journeys which we used to make (he and I, his sister) took him to different lands, he would think out a kingdom for himself as we travelled from one place to another, and this he called the Kingdom of Back [*Rücken*] – why by this name, I can no longer recall. This kingdom and its inhabitants were endowed with everything that could make of them good and happy children. He was the King of this land – and this notion became so rooted within him, and he carried it so far, that our servant, who could draw a little, had to make a chart of it, and he would dictate the names of the cities, market-towns and villages to him.

Similar juvenile fantasies by the English writers Charlotte and Emily Brontë (1816–55 and 1818–48) deserve to be mentioned in this connection as their father's accounts help us to understand how childhood fantasies gradually begin to merge with impressions from the real world. When the two girls were, respectively, seven and nine years old they began to write stories together with their eight-year-old brother Branwell, and later with the youngest sister Anne. The children were given twelve tin soldiers, which they promptly supplied with names and put through fantastic adventures. These adventures gradually began to take in reports and events recounted to them by their father from books and newspapers, thereby turning the children into avid readers. The final upshot was a series of interlocking novels covering thousands of pages, a sort of trial run for the works of genius that Charlotte and Emily were to produce in their adulthood.

Mozart, of course, did not become a novelist – the distinction is worth noting because music and the novel bear completely different relations to reality. And as we are dealing with a region which is virtually uncharted, but all the more hotly contested, we would be well advised to pay close attention not only to those experiences and impressions under which Mozart's talent evolved, but also to the additional predispositions that took part in this evolution. A bent toward universality is, after all, often one ingredient of genius – witness Michelangelo, da Vinci and Goethe.

Nannerl's account of the 'Kingdom of Back' explicitly states that this was just one instance of the boy's teeming fantasy. The same account informs us that Mozart had learnt fencing before the age of twelve, that he was specially adept at imitating card tricks at sight, and that the work of draughtsmen, painters and engravers captured his fancy to such an extent that he asked for samples of their work, which he then carefully preserved. The variety of his talents and his openness

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in all directions is also stressed in an account by Schachtner, a writer and musician who was a close friend of the Mozart family (Deutsch 1965, pp. 452ff.): Mozart in his childhood had

a fiery disposition, [and] any object was enough to arouse his interest... Whatever he was given to learn occupied him so completely that he put all else, even music, to one side... When he was doing sums, the table, chairs, walls, even the floor were covered with chalked figures.

Mozart never lost his interest in numbers. There exists a ‘page of musical sketches on which he had begun to figure out the sum which the chess player would have received from the King, in the famous Oriental story’, writes Einstein (1946, p. 36), referring to the legendary Persian sage who asked for a grain of corn on the first square of the chess board and double the amount on each successive square. Nannerl likewise remarked (April 1792) that as a youngster her brother had ‘the desire to master whatever he saw, and he had great dexterity in drawing and calculations’. Even later in life, she continues in the same source, ‘his brain was always occupied with music and *with other branches of knowledge* as well’ (italics mine). This same view is endorsed by his father (23 February 1778): ‘In all branches of knowledge you have always grasped everything with the greatest of ease.’ Nor should we overlook a later account which has fallen victim to the widespread low opinion of Konstanze Mozart. On 28 August 1799, for a projected biography of Mozart, she sent ‘missives’ to Breitkopf & Härtel in Leipzig, adding the remarkable comment that there was much to be learnt from them ‘about the traits of his character: his educational attainments, his exceeding tenderness toward myself, the goodness of his nature, his forms of recreation, his love of arithmetic and algebra (as demonstrated by several books [n.b.!]), his whimsy, which at times could be almost Shakespearean, as Herr Rochlitz once remarked of his musical whimsy, and of which I will send examples’.

There is, of course, no shortage of evidence for Mozart’s gifts and aptitude for the theatre. We need not attach undue importance to his appearance at the age of five in a student production at Salzburg University, in a comedy with music, as one of the *salii* or ‘leapers’ (probably meaning dancers). But it is surely remarkable that during his Vienna years he should have written a (fragmentary) sketch for a farce and another for a comedy in the style of the Viennese ‘Hans-Wurst’ theatre (*Briefe* IV, pp. 167–73). Neither of them is devoid of interest, and the latter is theatrically very effective. Doubtless equally effective on stage, though not in a sense that we usually associate with Mozart, was his appearance as Harlequin. In the carnival season of

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1783, when Mozart was twenty-seven, he performed a half-hour pantomime during the interval of a ball, a pantomime which he himself had invented and set to music (*Briefe* III, p. 259, and *NMA* II/6/2, pp. 120ff.). Its five characters embodied traditional figures from the *commedia dell'arte*: Aloysia Weber, formerly Mozart's beloved and now his sister-in-law, played Colombine; her husband, the actor and painter Joseph Lange, took the part of Pierrot; two others played Pantalon and the Doctor. Mozart reserved the part of Harlequin for himself. At his first entrance, cleverly postponed until No. 7 of an estimated two dozen musical numbers, he 'peeps out of the wardrobe'. Later, disguised as a Turk, he fights his brother-in-law Pierrot for the hand of Colombine-Aloysia, losing both the battle and his life, only to be resurrected later. The first half of No. 14 is surely a parody of a funeral march for the death of Harlequin; the second half, containing a *maggiore* variant of his entrance music, doubtless accompanied the resurrection of Harlequin-Mozart. In sum, this is a stage work which, we can see, abounded in irony and deeper meaning. The same might also be said of Mozart's appearance at a masked ball disguised as an Indian philosopher (in the eighteenth century the word 'philosopher' had a special meaning, with Enlightenment overtones) distributing handbills with scathing comments on the aristocracy.

We had best view Mozart's theatrical gifts, too, in their various components and in their evolution. Their basic component is probably to be found in Mozart's physical agility – his fondness for bodily motion and dance steps, for gesture and mime. At the age of seventeen, in a letter from Leopold to his wife (Vienna, 8 September 1773), Mozart added the following brief postscript: 'Wolfganglerl has no time to write, for he has nothing to do. He is walking up and down the room like a dog with fleas.' Konstanze's youngest sister Sophie Haibl, herself an astute and sensitive observer – she left a moving account of Mozart's last days (Deutsch 1965, pp. 524–7) and Mozart apparently had a high opinion of her – describes this side of Mozart's personality as follows (Deutsch 1965, p. 537):

Even when he was washing his hands in the morning, he walked up and down in the room, never standing still, tapped one heel against the other the while and was always deep in thought... Also, his feet and hands were always in motion, he was always playing with something, be it his hat, pockets, watch-fob, tables, chairs, as if they were a clavier.

This picture agrees with a note which Mozart sent his sister from Milan at the age of fifteen (31 August 1771): 'My only amusement is to communicate [by sign language] with the deaf and dumb, for I can do that to perfection.'

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A gift for the theatre, of course, does not reside solely in special talents. It also takes recourse to a large extent in ordinary human capabilities. Those who have no knowledge of human nature, who cannot observe and project themselves into other people, who have no understanding of human psychology, will never amount to anything in the theatre. The acuity of Mozart's observations even as a child, and the sometimes uncanny sensitivity with which he reacted to other people (in both a positive and negative sense), are part of his genius.

Yet we must not overlook another, darker side of Mozart's personality, one which has been pointed out and emphasized by Jean Massin (*Komponisten*, pp. 211–14). Massin, who in 1954, with Brigitte Massin, published one of the central books on Mozart (hitherto sadly neglected in German and Anglo-American scholarship), directs our attention to Mozart's manner of 'constantly questioning the real identity of people, and perhaps of himself'. Writing from Paris on 29 May 1778, Mozart relates that he is doing 'tolerably well' and continues, 'but I often can't make any sense of things – I am neither hot nor cold – and don't find much pleasure in anything.' Even one of his last letters, written to Konstanze in Baden on 7 July 1791, betrays a similar mood. Admittedly he connects this mood with the forced separation from his wife and contrasts it with his memory of 'how merry and childish we were together at Baden'. But one is forced to agree with Massin that outbursts of this sort give us a glimpse into the depths of Mozart's psyche. The passage reads as follows: 'I can't describe what I have been feeling – a kind of emptiness that just hurts, a kind of longing that is never satisfied and thus never ceases but persists and even increases from day to day.'

Mozart's gifts, perhaps even mania, for the theatre would never have come to full fruition had he concentrated on musical craftsmanship alone, no matter how intense that concentration. This inherently plausible claim can even be documented in several instances. In 1765, when Mozart was nine years old, his family was paid a visit in their London lodgings by the English savant Daines Barrington, who later set down his impressions in writing (Deutsch 1965, pp. 95–100). At Barrington's request Mozart improvised an aria of love and an aria of rage or anger at the keyboard. The latter was based on the Italian word *perfido*, part of the stock-in-trade of Italian opera seria that would even play a role in *Don Giovanni*. During his aria of rage Wolfgang 'worked himself up to such a pitch, that he beat his harpsichord like a person possessed, rising sometimes in his chair' (p. 98). We can well imagine what this sounded like. First of all, Barrington's circumspect report does not hide the fact that the music remained well within the bounds of convention, that though above average it was by no means 'amazingly capital'. We also possess an