

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00700-9 - The Life of Mozart: Including his Correspondence

Edward Holmes

Excerpt

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THE LIFE OF MOZART.

PART THE FIRST.

HIS INFANCY.

LEOPOLD MOZART, the father of the great musician, was the son of a bookbinder at Augsburg. He was born December 14, 1719, and was in due time removed to the University of Salzburg, where he studied jurisprudence; whether with undecided views of a profession, is doubtful—for he had already made himself skilful in music, and was an admirable performer on the violin. On leaving the university he was received into the family of Count von Thurn, a canon of the cathedral, and by him afterwards recommended to the notice of the Archbishop of Salzburg, who entertained him in the capacity of valet-musician.

This appointment, however degrading it may appear to modern ideas of the dignity of art, offered at that time the best prospect of preferment in the establishments of the great; and Leopold Mozart found it so, for he was by degrees removed from the meaner servitude, made one of the court musicians, and subsequently vice kapellmeister.* Among names distinguished in music and enrolled in the service of the court of Salzburg, are those of

* Composer, and conductor of the orchestra.

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Eberlin, Michael Haydn, &c. The emoluments of a post in the orchestra of the archbishop, from the highest member of it to the lowest, were incredibly small; but the country was cheap, there was sufficient for a simple, contented life, and the musician's widow was provided for at his death.

In his 21st year, Leopold Mozart made himself advantageously known by the production of six violin trios, which, being too poor to publish them in the ordinary way, he *engraved* himself. These trios and a collection of twelve pieces for the clavier,* under the quaint title—"The Morning and Evening melodiously and harmoniously introduced to the Inhabitants of Salzburg"—pieces which it seems were daily performed at the times alluded to, by a band on the fortifications, are the only compositions that he ever published. But until convinced of the great superiority of the genius of his son, he was a most industrious composer, as his MSS. evince. Before he surrendered the pen to abler hands, he had accumulated twelve oratorios, besides a great variety of pieces for the church and theatre, several pantomimes, more than thirty grand serenades, many symphonies, concertos for wind instruments, trios, &c.

He did much to raise the character of the archbishop's musical establishment. His style of composition is described as having been contrapuntal and solid; consequently better adapted for ecclesiastical than secular purposes. But as a composer, he remained within the trammels of the fashion of his day—subject to all its stiffness and formality; and it was only as his son's genius opened,

* The clavier, a keyed instrument (as its name implies), was the precursor of the pianoforte. Though weak in tone, it possessed the same power of sustaining sounds, and was capable of delicate expression. Mozart often used the term "clavier," indifferently for itself and the pianoforte.

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and his different manner of writing became apparent, that the father discovered his own talent to lie rather in the didactic than the inventive part of music.

No sooner was Leopold Mozart fairly established with the archbishop, than he married a young person to whom he had long been attached, named Anna Bertlina, a ward of the institution of St. Gilgen. The newly-married pair were so conspicuous for beauty of form, that it was said at the time so handsome a couple had never before been seen at Salzburg. Of seven children, the issue of this union, a girl and a boy alone survived the period of infancy. The girl, named Maria Anna, was born on the 29th of August, 1751; and her brother, John Chrysostom Wolfgang Amadeus, the subject of this biography, on the 27th of January, 1756.

As his family increased, Leopold Mozart was obliged to devote every hour that he could spare from his laborious official duties, to tuition on the violin and clavier; and being soon in high esteem for the pupils he had formed, his circumstances so far improved as to enable him in the year of Wolfgang's birth, to publish at his own expense a work of considerable importance in the theory and practice of music, entitled "An Attempt towards a Fundamental System for the Violin."* This performance gradually extended his reputation as an artist and as a methodical, sound, and intelligent instructor, throughout the whole continent; and it may be undoubtedly considered, next to the education of his own son, as the greatest benefit he ever conferred upon the art. The selection of examples and the system of fingering laid down in this violin school, were thought excellent; and though an approximation to that of Tartini was discovered in the general principles,

* *Versuch einer gründlichen Violinschule, mit vier Kupfertafeln &c. versehen.* AUGSBURG.

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it permitted much greater freedom in the management of the bow. The best violin players of Germany during the latter half of the eighteenth century, formed themselves upon the principles inculcated in this work.

Even at this day the name of Mozart had emerged from obscurity and was mentioned by musicians with respect. In proof, it may be told, that one of the earliest publications in musical literature, the critical letters on the art printed at Berlin, in 1759–60, which were successively addressed to the most distinguished men, such as Emanuel and Friedemann Bach, Kirnberger, Marpurg, Benda, &c., made its *coup d'essai* with Leopold Mozart. “Could we,” said the writer, “in addressing our weekly musical dissertations to some man of eminent desert, make a fitter commencement than with yourself?”

Leopold Mozart possessed, in addition to his musical talent, a strong feeling for the sister arts, and no inconsiderable share of literary ability. One instance will suffice to portray his romantic and enthusiastic character. Having read some of the devotional verses of the Protestant poet Gellert with much pleasure, he addressed to him, though a stranger, a letter so full of feeling and elegance, that Gellert, delighted at the compliment, replied in the warmest terms of friendship and regard. They never met, however, for the poet was at this time an hypochondriacal invalid, and soon afterwards died.

Within the circle of his immediate acquaintance at Salzburg, the character ascribed to this musician was that of a satirical humorist. He exhibited a singular compound of qualities—a mixture of sense and superstition, of enthusiasm and caution, of benevolence and prejudice; but the impression left by his intercourse was on the whole highly agreeable, and he lived not less admired for his talents, than esteemed for his character.

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The wonderful musical genius of his family came to light almost accidentally. When the girl had reached seven years of age she became her father's pupil on the clavier, at which her progress was great and uniform, and finally made her mistress of the highest reputation that any female performer had ever acquired on a keyed instrument. Her brother, at this time three years old, was a constant attendant on her lessons, and already showed, by his fondness for striking thirds, and pleasing his ear by the discovery of other harmonious intervals, a lively interest in music. At four, he could always retain in memory the brilliant solos in the concertos which he heard; and now his father began, half in sport, to give him lessons. The musical faculty appears to have been intuitive in him, for in learning to play he learned to compose at the same time:—his own nature discovering to him some important secrets in melody, rhythm, symmetry, and the art of setting a bass. To learn a minuet, he required half-an-hour; for a longer piece, an hour; and having once mastered them, he played them with perfect neatness and in exact time. His progress was so great, that at four years of age, or earlier, he composed little pieces which his father wrote down for him.

In teaching his children, Leopold Mozart at first employed manuscript lessons written by himself in a book appropriated to that purpose; composition or the transcribing of music was perpetually going forward in his house; and thus the little boy, with the love of imitation natural at his age, was led to make his first essays in holding the pen—those of a composer. The book in which the father wrote the infantine productions of his boy was preserved by the sister as a precious relic to the end of her life; and though it would be gratifying to see his *first* composition as the source of a mighty stream of genius, some uncertainty

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exists as to its precise identity. However, the specimen here given was undoubtedly composed in his fourth year.

The first system of musical notation consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef, and the lower staff is in bass clef. The key signature has one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 3/4. The music features a simple melody in the right hand and a supporting bass line in the left hand.

The second system of musical notation consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef, and the lower staff is in bass clef. The key signature has one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 3/4. The melody continues with some eighth-note patterns.

The third system of musical notation consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef, and the lower staff is in bass clef. The key signature has one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 3/4. The music includes some sixteenth-note figures.

The fourth system of musical notation consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef, and the lower staff is in bass clef. The key signature has one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 3/4. The piece concludes with a final cadence.

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During 1760 and the two following years, he was continually exercising himself in this manner,* and acquired great experience in design and modulation; and now the father, no longer in doubt respecting the precocious genius of his son, resolved to bring both him and his sister to the Bavarian court at Munich, whither he carried them in January, 1762.

The boy was always extremely animated and intelligent. Before he applied himself to music he entered into the usual pastimes of childhood with such interest, that over a pleasant game he would forget every thing, even his meals; but afterwards he lost much of his relish for these recreations, or liked them only in proportion as they were mixed with music. One of the great favorites of Wolfgang, and his especial playmate, was Andreas Schachtner, the principal trumpeter in the Archbishop's band; a man of cultivated mind and considerable talent in poetry, the intimate friend of the family. Whenever the playthings were removed from one chamber to another, if this companion were with him, it must be done to music; and he who carried nothing must play or sing a march. Such was the ascendancy that the art had gained.

His disposition was characterised by an extreme sensibility and tenderness, insomuch that he would ask those about him ten times a day whether they loved him, and if they jestingly answered in the negative, his eyes would fill with tears.

The first studies in arithmetic were pursued by little Wolfgang with such ardour, as for a time to supplant even music in his affections. The walls, the chairs, the tables, and even the floor were now covered with figures;

* A characteristic selection from these compositions will be introduced at the end of the work.

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and his predilection for this branch of science, with the reputation of expertness in it which he now acquired, were preserved by him throughout life.

His desire of knowledge was great on all subjects; but in music he astonished his teacher, not so much by an avidity of information, as by the impossibility of telling him any thing which he did not know before. This was a mystery which Leopold Mozart contemplated in silent amazement. Had he merely shown the same excellent disposition for music as his sister, merely made the same rapid progress on the clavier, there would have been little to astonish even in an age when infant musical education, now so well understood and appreciated, was in a great degree experimental; but to see this child so early display the ambition, and even the science of the composer, was truly wonderful. The genius thus revealed in various incidents, partly comic and partly pathetic, raised in the paternal heart feelings of devout gratitude, and in every friend of the family the warmest interest and sympathy.

One day as Leopold Mozart, accompanied by a friend, had just returned home from church, he found little Wolfgang very busy with pen and ink. "What are you doing there?" said his father. "Writing a concerto for the clavier," replied the boy. "The first part is just finished." "It must be something very fine, I dare say—let us look at it." "No, no," said Wolfgang, "it is not ready yet." The father however took up the paper, and he and his friend began at first to laugh heartily over this gallimatias of notes, which was so blotted as to be scarcely legible; for the little composer had continually thrust his pen to the bottom of the ink-stand, and as often wiped away with the palm of his hand the blot thus brought up, intent solely upon committing his thoughts to writ-

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ing. But as the father examined the composition more attentively, his gaze became rivetted to the page, and tears of joy and wonder began to roll down his cheeks, for there were ideas in this music far beyond the years of his son. "See," said he, smiling to his friend, "how regularly and correctly written it is; though no use can be made of it, for it is so immensely difficult, nobody could play it." "It is a concerto," returned little Wolfgang, "and must be practised before it can be performed. It ought to go in this way." He then began to play it, but was unable to accomplish more than give a notion of his design. This concerto was written with a full score of accompaniments, and even *trumpets and drums*.*

What the ideas of a child of six years old could have been respecting the combination and employment of instruments, may be dismissed from the imagination for another wonder, which is, however, rather a matter of fact than of conjecture; namely, that at this age, Mozart knew the effect of sounds as represented by notes, and had overcome the difficulty of composing unaided by an instrument. But having commenced composition without recourse to the clavier, his power in mental music constantly increased, and he soon imagined effects, of which the original type existed only in his own brain.

Leopold Mozart had now for some time declined all engagements as a teacher of music at Salzburg, the better to superintend the education of his children. Of the journey which the father, son, and daughter made to

* So says Nissen; but the trumpets and drums are probably a biographical flourish, designed to embellish a story, that needed no addition of the marvellous. The scores of Mozart, which have been preserved from his tenth year, show that he wrote for use, and not for ostentation; his wind instruments being seldom more than oboes, bassoons, and horns; such, in fact, as the orchestras of the day readily supplied.

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Munich, in January, 1762, no further intelligence has transpired than that they remained three weeks; that Wolfgang performed a concerto in the presence of the elector, and together with his sister excited lively admiration.

From this successful opening tour the children returned to Salzburg, to pursue their music with renewed spirit; and the boy began at this time to make acquaintance with the violin,* somebody having presented him with a little instrument adapted to his size and age. New faculties and fresh sources of wonder were now disclosed.

Before he had received any regular lessons, his father was one day visited by a violinist named Wenzl, an excellent performer, for the purpose of trying over some new trios of his composition. Schachtner the trumpeter, who tenderly loved the little musician, has related the anecdote connected with this performance. "The father," he says, "took the bass part on the viola, Wenzl played the first violin, I the second. Little Wolfgang entreated that he might play the second violin; his father, however, would not hear of it, for as he had had no instruction, it was impossible that he could do any thing to the purpose. The child replied, that to play a second violin part it was not necessary to have been taught; but the father, somewhat impatiently, bid him go away and not disturb us. At this he began to cry bitterly, and carried his little fiddle away, but I begged that he might come back and play with me. The father at last consented. 'Well, then, you may play with Herr Schachtner, but remember, so softly

* Nissen and other biographers of Mozart state, that he brought this violin from Vienna, at the close of 1762, and first began to practise it by stealth. There is improbability on the face of this story; but it is distinctly disproved by a letter of Leopold Mozart's, written on the road to Vienna, where he describes the boy softening the custom-house officer by a minuet on the violin.