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The Requiem's Inception: Footnote to a Footnote

I.

On the 7th of January 1792, thirty-three days after Wolfgang Mozart had died in Vienna, a short feature article concerning him appeared in the Saturday edition of a Salzburg newspaper, the *Salzburger Intelligenzblatt*. There, under "Miscellaneous Reports. Anecdotes," the local citizens could read the following about the recently deceased former Salzburg resident:

"1. Concerning Mozart. -- Some months before his death, he received an unsigned letter with the request that he compose a requiem and set whatever fee he wished. Because the project did not appeal to him at all, he said to himself, I will demand so much that the music-lover will surely turn me down. The next day, a servant came to get the reply – Mozart wrote the unknown person that he could not compose it for less than 60 ducats, and certainly not for another 2 or 3 months. The servant returned, bringing 30 ducats with him, and said he would inquire again in 3 months and if the mass was finished, he would immediately pay off the other half. Now Mozart had no choice but to compose it, something he often did with tears in his eyes, saying: I fear I am writing a requiem for myself; he completed it a few days before his death. When news of his death was announced, the servant came again, bringing the remaining 30 ducats; he did not ask for the requiem and since then there has been no further request. When it has been copied, it is going to be performed at a memorial service for him in St. Michael's church."

II.

Because of its connection with the fascinating and enigmatic history of Mozart's Requiem, this 1792 article from a Salzburg newspaper has been the subject of a variety of interpretations. Here are two examples out of many:

In his book, "1791: Mozart's Last Year" (London, 1988), H.C. Robbins Landon wrote:

"The explanation for this account is extremely simple: by about that time (early January) Constanze and her advisers had decided to finish the Requiem so that she could collect the rest of the money owed to her late husband; hence she was eager to give the impression that he had actually finished it. . . ."

The FOOTNOTES to the text begin at page 10; the INDEX begins on page 11.

(This article was initially distributed privately in February 1996. Subsequently it was accepted for publication by The (London) Musical Times and appeared in the December 1996 edition, pp.13-17, under the title of "From little seeds.")

In his article, "Mozart's Requiem: A Revaluation of the Evidence," published in the *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* (Vol.114, Pt.23, 1989), Paul Moseley wrote:

"...the evidence strongly suggests that [the article] was designed to mislead. For with little doubt this advertisement is the work of Constanze, given its very early date, depth of detail and similarity with material that she gave Niemetschek for his biography of Mozart. (Perhaps the use of a ladies' newspaper is also significant.) From a commercial point of view it achieves three objectives: creating an aura of mystery around the Requiem's commission, claiming that it was his completed swan-song, and announcing a forthcoming performance. If Wallsegg¹ had sent his messenger by this time, which seems certain if the Requiem were to be performed on the first anniversary of his wife's death (14 February 1792), then Constanze would have been forced to admit that it was incomplete. This may explain why her advertisement appeared in obscure journals a good distance from Vienna, where it would either escape Wallsegg's attention or at least not be directly associated with its source."

III.

In the time since these (and other) interpretations were first written, an important new piece of evidence has surfaced: while researching the account books of the Barnabite religious order in Vienna, the Austrian Mozart scholar, Walther Brauneis, has discovered that payment was made to hold a requiem mass for "*Herrn Wolfgangus Amadäus Mozart*" on Saturday, 10 December 1791, at the imperial parish church of St. Michael's next to the Hofburg.

The discovery is reported in his article "Exequies for Mozart," published in the Vienna periodical *Singende Kirche* (Vol.38/1, 1991; available here in the Translation section of the website). Furthermore, Brauneis notes: "According to a previously unpublished report in the 13 December 1791 issue of the Viennese journal *Auszug aus aller europäischen Zeitungen*, the two theater directors, Emanuel Schikaneder and Joseph von Bauernfeld, paid the expenses." Brauneis concludes that the nature of the costs itemized in the account book strongly suggests that "the musicians of St. Michael's, the former seat of the Caecilian association of court musicians founded in 1725, provided their service without charge and wanted in this way to do last honors to the departed Mozart."

As reflected in the Brauneis article, Mozart research has long been aware of various early newspaper articles that referred to a requiem and its performance at a mass for the dead composer held in Vienna:

--on 16 December 1791, the Viennese newspaper *Der heimliche Botschafter* had reported on Mozart's death and said "...in this connection the requiem he had composed during his final illness was performed as part of the service."

--an article in the Berlin *Musikalisches Wochenblatt* dated 31 December 1791 reported: "...One of his last compositions is said to have been a mass for the dead, which was performed at his last rites."

However, until Brauneis brought to light documentary evidence that a requiem mass for Mozart had in fact taken place in Vienna and on 10 December, these newspaper references had tended to be dismissed as “an unlikely story” (see Moseley, page 212 of article cited above) or “false” (see William Stafford, “Mozart’s Death,” Macmillan Press, London 1991, page 70). In his collection of documents relating to Mozart, Otto Erich Deutsch ridiculed them as “fantasies.”^{2/} As for the statement in the January 1792 *Salzburger Intelligenzblatt* article, it was generally interpreted as a local announcement of a forthcoming mass to be held at the St. Michael’s church located in Salzburg.

In short, the factual situation appears to be this: in Vienna, a requiem mass was held for Mozart in St. Michael’s church on 10 December 1791 and three separate newspaper articles refer to a requiem composed by Mozart as being performed at the service.^{3/}

But if that is so, how do we account for the fact that an article published in Salzburg on 7 January 1792, a month after Mozart had died, speaks of an event yet to come: “When [the requiem] has been copied, it is going to be performed at a memorial service for him in St. Michael’s church”? The answer lies in an awareness of contemporary journalistic practice. It was still an era of official censorship and newspaper articles were reviewed prior to publication. News originating in Vienna, for example, would be censored there; reports that had already been approved by the censors in Vienna could then be reprinted without further review in newspapers elsewhere in the domains of the Habsburgs. This gave rise to the practice of provincial newspapers filling out their space with articles (so-called *Korrespondentenberichte*) that had been previously censored and published.^{4/} The fact that the “news” might be several weeks old by this time was obviously a lesser consideration.

Although Salzburg at the time was still an independent principality ruled by a prince-archbishop and not therefore subject to the censorship edicts of the Habsburgs, it had similar censorship laws. Under Prince-Archbishop Colloredo, moreover, these laws were applied quite liberally and Lorenz Hübner, the publisher of the Salzburg newspaper and himself an apostle of the Enlightenment, was able to publish news from “abroad” promptly without having to ask many questions.

It has not yet been possible to establish the specific original source of the Mozart article in the *Salzburger Intelligenzblatt*. From the content of the article, however, it seems virtually certain that it originated with a newspaper reporter working in Vienna.

More importantly, the confirmation by Brauneis that a requiem mass for the newly deceased Mozart had been held in St. Michael’s church in Vienna on 10 December, together with the content of the *Salzburger Intelligenzblatt* article, means we are now in a position to know with some degree of precision when the original article was written: the reporter must have set these words down at some time between the morning of 5 December 1791 and the evening of 9 December – Mozart died during the night of 4/5 December, and the mass at which “a requiem composed by Mozart was performed” took place on 10 December. The “copying” of the score, reported in the article, would have had to be finished by the evening of 9 December at the latest to allow rehearsals to take place prior to the mass the next day.

IV.

Now that we know within a five-day span when the article was written, the next questions are, who wrote it, and who did the reporter talk to to get the story it reflects.

In light of previous interpretations, perhaps the first point to be made is that the article almost certainly was not written by the newly widowed Constanze Mozart, nor is it likely that she was a direct source for the reporter. Moseley's view of the article as an "advertisement" that is "the work of Constanze designed to mislead," one deliberately placed "in obscure journals a good distance from Vienna, where it would either escape Wallsegg's attention or at least not be directly associated with its source"— this seems overdrawn, to put it mildly.

The article is typical of 18th century feature journalism and hardly an "advertisement," even in the widest sense of the word. Moreover, the physical and emotional state of the new widow in the period from 5 to 9 December 1791, insofar as we know it from her own words and those of Sophie Haibel uttered many years after the fact, hardly suggests that she would have been capable at the time of formulating a strategic plan deliberately designed to mislead Count Wallsegg and cunningly conceived to maximize possible future financial benefit from one of her late husband's uncompleted scores.

If Constanze did not write the article, as she almost certainly did not, who did? Was it Süßmayr or van Swieten, Michael Puchberg or Joseph Eybler, working at the behest and under the influence of Constanze Mozart? In point of fact, it probably was not written by anyone who was an intimate of Mozart's. Instead, I suggest that the article was the work of a reporter associated with the Viennese press establishment, someone whose business it was to report on developments of local interest, such as a requiem service shortly to be held in St. Michael's church for the newly deceased composer of that popular, long-running opera currently on the boards at the Freihaus-Theater, *Die Zauberflöte*.

V.

Let us take a closer look at the text of the article itself as printed in the *Salzburger Intelligenzblatt*. It consists of seven sentences; the first five are essentially historical, that is, they could have been written at any time after Mozart had received the commission to compose the Requiem and prior to the night of 4/5 December; the last two sentences, however are time-specific – they report on what happened after Mozart died and before the requiem mass was to take place in St. Michael's church.

First, let us consider the placement of the article in the newspaper's format and what that might tell us. It appeared under the following heading:

- XI. *Miscellaneous reports. Anecdotes.*
 1. *Concerning Mozart.* --

Comment: The "anecdote" about Mozart was the first of two in Section XI of the 7 January (Saturday) 1792 edition of Lorenz Hübner's newspaper. (The second concerned a story about the Italian poet and author of the *Divine Comedy*, Dante Alighieri, supposedly told by Petrarch.) The headline

("Concerning Mozart") reflects the fact that Hübner's newspaper had previously reported the composer's death a month before; that which was printed on 7 January was in the nature of a follow-up.⁵

Now, let us examine each of the article's seven sentences in turn:

[1] *Some months before his death, he received an unsigned letter with the request that he compose a requiem and set whatever fee he wished.*

Comment: The interesting feature story begins: shortly before he died, Salzburg's former resident had received an anonymous letter asking him to compose a requiem and to name his price. To the reporter, it was the fact that someone commissioning the composition of a requiem would nevertheless want to keep his identity hidden ("an unsigned letter") that was of interest, not the nature of the messenger who brought the letter. The legend of the "Gray Messenger" was yet to come.

[2] *Because the project did not appeal to him at all, he said to himself, I will demand so much that the music-lover will surely turn me down.*

Comment: Now the reporter writing the article is telling us what went through Mozart's mind: that he really does not want to take on such a project, but rather than say no, he will set an exorbitant fee. But at this point, Mozart is dead; how would the reporter know that?

[3] *The next day, a servant came to get the reply – Mozart wrote the unknown person that he could not compose it for less than 60 ducats, and certainly not for another 2 or 3 months.*

Comment: Continuing with the story, we learn that "a servant" (not "the" servant who brought the original request) came to get Mozart's reply. More than that, just as though he were privy to Mozart's letter, the reporter tells us what is in it: the composer wants a lot of money and it will be at least another two or three months before he can get around to fulfilling the request.

[4] *The servant returned, bringing 30 ducats with him, and said he would inquire again in 3 months and if the mass was finished, he would immediately pay off the other half.*

Comment: The interesting feature story continues as Mozart's bluff is called.

[5] *Now Mozart had no choice but to compose it, something he often did with tears in his eyes, saying: I fear I am writing a requiem for myself; he completed it a few days before his death.*

Comment: It is this sentence that functions as the bridge between the reporting on the Requiem's inception, on the one hand, and the events taking place following Mozart's death. Before going on with the last two sentences of the article, let us consider where the information in the first four sentences and the first half of this, the fifth sentence, might have originated.

There appears to be a consensus in recent Mozart scholarship (Moseley's article cited above and Christoph Wolff's book "Mozart's Requiem," published by the Oxford University Press in Mary Whittall's English translation in 1994, to give two examples) that Mozart received the unsigned letter requesting a requiem in either July or August of 1791, prior to leaving for Prague and the production of *La clemenza di Tito* on 6 September. Furthermore, there is general agreement (based in part on Alan Tyson's paper studies) that active work on the Requiem did not begin until after the Mozarts were back from Prague and perhaps not even until the premiere of *Die Zauberflöte* was out of the way on 30 September 1791. The period when Mozart was actively engaged with composition of the Requiem, then, could have stretched from the end of September or the beginning of October to the time he became ill and took to his bed towards the end of November 1791.

This span of some seven or eight weeks was a busy time for Mozart, and not just because of the Requiem commission. He was working on at least two and perhaps three other compositions: the Clarinet Concerto (K622) for Anton Stadler, the "little Masonic Cantata" (K623), and possibly the Horn Concerto in D (K412) for Joseph Leutgeb as well. He was also keeping up a busy schedule of visits to the Freihaus-Theater to see how the new *Zauberflöte* production was coming along. And he must have had to meet with the officers of the lodge *Zur gekrönten Hoffnung* to agree on a text for the Masonic cantata and to plan and rehearse its presentation. When the consecration of the lodge in its new premises took place on 17 November, Mozart was there to conduct the cantata's performance.

To sum up: in the period between the first of October and the end of November, Mozart was in contact with a lot of people, persons who would want to hear, out of friendship or professional interest or both, what the composer was up to. If asked what he was doing, Mozart could have responded that, among other things, he was working on a requiem. That in itself would have been a matter of surprise and interest, for people would have known that Mozart had recently composed a variety of things, including two operas, but little or no music for the church. Who is the requiem for, would have been the logical next question. And the gregarious Mozart would have had a tale to tell.

His reply, I suggest, was essentially the story that came to be recounted in the first four sentences of the *Salzburger Intelligenzblatt* article. There is, of course, no direct documentary evidence for the proposition, but let us imagine conversations that went this way, as Mozart might have told it:

Emanuel Schikaneder (or Antonio Salieri or Franz Karl Flamm or Franz Hofer or Karl Ludwig Giesecke or Karl Friedrich Hensler, or any of the numerous persons Mozart saw and talked to in this period):

What are you up to these days, Mozart?

Mozart: *Well, among other things, I'm writing a requiem.*

Schikaneder (etc.): *Really! How did that happen and who's it for?*

Mozart: *Well, it's interesting. All I know is that it's for a music-lover. A couple months ago a servant brought me a letter but it was unsigned. Whoever it was wanted me to compose a requiem and asked me to name*

my fee. I was pretty busy with other things at the time and not much interested in taking it on. On the other hand, I didn't want to say no outright – you know how touchy people are. So I thought if I just make the fee high enough, the person will surely withdraw his request. When the servant returned the next day, he got a letter from me saying the fee was 60 ducats and I can't promise delivery for another two or three months. Well, what do you know, the servant showed up again with 30 ducats in hand. He said he would be back in three months and, if the work was finished, I would get the other 30 ducats. So now there's nothing to do but compose this requiem, and that's what I'm doing, along with everything else.

This is a story Mozart could have told more than once, and many persons could have heard it. Moreover, it is an unusual story, one likely to make the rounds among Mozart's friends in gossip-loving Vienna. A newspaper reporter prompted to contact Mozart's colleagues and acquaintances in the wake of his untimely death could have heard it in one form or another from several sources.

In its entirety, however, the fifth sentence probably would not have been part of the Mozart response to inquiring friends. To recall:

[5] Now Mozart had no choice but to compose it, something he often did with tears in his eyes, saying: I fear I am writing a requiem for myself; he completed it a few days before his death.

As I suggest, Mozart might have elected to wind up his story saying he had no choice but to write the requiem mass asked for. On the other hand, the remainder of the sentence, that is, the "tears in the eyes," the "requiem for myself," and its being "completed" "a few days before his death," strikes me as evidence of a source (or sources) close to the final "inner" circle (Constanze, Süßmayr, Eybler, maybe Schack and Gerl, perhaps Sophie) but not in it. This "outer" circle, so to speak, could have included such persons as Josepha and Franz Hofer or Aloisia and Joseph Lange – persons, in other words, close to Constanze who might on occasion have heard her tell about the visit to the Prater, who knew Mozart had been working on a requiem, and who, because they knew it was to be performed at St. Michael's church the coming Saturday, might naturally have assumed that that meant it had been "completed."

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To return to the article:

[6] When news of his death was announced, the servant came again, bringing the remaining 30 ducats; he did not ask for the requiem and since then there has been no further request.

Comment: Now we are at the present in terms of writing the newspaper article. The reporter, having heard the story up to this point, wants to know whatever became of the piece that was ordered (and half paid for) by the anonymous music-lover. From his written report, the answer he got seems to me further evidence for an "outer circle" source, perhaps the same one(s) who assumed the Requiem had been "completed." In any event, journalistically, it makes the whole story that much more piquant: the good requestor pays off his

debt of 30 ducats – which the new widow can surely use – for a completed piece of work he no longer wants. Happy end! 6/

[7] *When it has been copied, it is going to be performed at a memorial service for him in St. Michael's church.*

Comment: And, to judge from the various other newspaper reports and Walther Brauneis's discovery and analysis, it was. Z/

VI.

In his footnote to the reproduction of the *Salzburger Intelligenzblatt* article on page 123 of his book, "Mozart's Requiem," Christoph Wolff says,

"This anecdote was published in other newspapers (*Mozart-Dokumente*, 526), and it is conceivable that Constanze Mozart herself allowed it to spread, as a means of advertising the composition and completion of the Requiem and of avoiding awkward questions at the same time."

As a footnote to Wolff's footnote, some observations:

--Although we do not have the text of the original article, nor do we know who wrote it or in what newspaper it first appeared, we are able to date the writing of the article within a span of a few days and we can conjecture with some confidence that it was written originally in Vienna. 8/ With this in mind when we consider the relevance of the article to the history of the Requiem, I suggest it should be read primarily as evidence of:

- a) the actual inception of the Requiem (i.e., the first four-and-a-half sentences),
- b) the general validity (if not all the details) of the "drive-in-the-Prater" story that Constanze gave to Niemetschek several years later (the second half of sentence 5),
- c) a certain amount of confusion on the part of the reporter's source(s) as to exactly what had happened with the Requiem in the two, three or four days since Mozart had died (sentence 6), and
- d) straightforward event reporting (sentence 7).

--Further, it is possible to speculate as to the specific origins of the newspaper article:

- First, observe that, so far as the Viennese reporter was concerned, the actual "news" was the fact that a requiem mass for the deceased composer of *Die Zauberflöte* was to be held a few days hence at St. Michael's church; moreover, "when it has been copied," a requiem that Mozart had composed "is going to be performed" at the service. This is indeed the peg on which the "feature story" of how the Requiem came about was hung.

- Second, recall that the memorial mass had been arranged and was paid for by the two directors of the Freihaus-Theater, Schikaneder and Bauernfeld, where *Die Zauberflöte* had been playing with great success since 30 September.
- Putting these together, it seems reasonable to conjecture that the reporter got his story from circles in the Freihaus-Theater, perhaps beginning with Schikaneder himself, who had ordered the mass. Mozart had been a frequent visitor to the theater in the weeks when he was working on the Requiem and the theater's company included his sister-in-law, Josepha Hofer, the first "Queen of the Night," and a lot of friends as well.

--But what about the allusions to "the ride in the Prater"? Surely that suggests that Constanze was the most likely source for most of the information in the article. Not necessarily, for in the period when the article was written, the reporter probably did not have access to the distraught Constanze. There is no doubt that Constanze must be the original source for the "ride in the Prater," but she did not need to wait to have a reporter around to tell about this. She probably had related the incident over a cup of coffee to her mother and her sisters, and it – like the details in the first four-plus sentences – was abroad in the minds of the reporter's informants when he started working on his "feature story."

--The likelihood that the article constitutes a Constanze-inspired piece of disinformation seems remote to me. On the contrary, I would argue that the article shows no direct evidence whatsoever of Constanze having had a hand in its preparation. To suggest that "Constanze Mozart herself allowed it to spread, as a means of advertising the composition and completion of the Requiem and of avoiding awkward questions at the same time" is to invest the article with more portent than it deserves and to detract from its actual historical value.

In conclusion, I submit that the article, read in its temporal context, is as close to a factual account of the Requiem's inception as we are likely to get. In only a few years' time – thanks to Constanze, Rochlitz, and others – this account would slip slowly out of sight, submerged beneath a luxuriant growth of legend.

That said, one further comment seems required: given that Michael Puchberg had an apartment in Count Wallsegg's Vienna townhouse and may have instigated Wallsegg's commission in the first place, Mozart could well have come to know who the requestor really was soon after the anonymous letter had been received. Does that make any difference to the conclusion offered here respecting the nature of the article in the *Salzburger Intelligenzblatt*? Probably not, for even if Mozart soon was fully aware of the requestor's name, he was not about to mention it to anyone; the secret was not in the request, but in the requestor. Furthermore, it would not have been the first time that, in retailing a story, Mozart had been economical with the truth. (And if Mozart knew it, it is virtually certain that Constanze knew it too, and she, then, successfully carried on the charade of ignorance for several more years.)9/

Or think about it this way: if the seed of myth lies buried in the *Intelligenzblatt* report, it probably was planted there by Mozart himself.

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Footnotes

1. Count Franz Wallsegg (1773-1827). The spelling of the count's last name has several variations; for uniformity's sake, this article adopts the spelling used in the Walther Brauneis article, "‘Dies irae, dies illa -- Tag des Zornes, Tag der Klage’": Auftrag, Entstehung und Vollendung von Mozarts *Requiem*," *Jahrbuch des Vereins für Geschichte der Stadt Wien* 47-48 (1991-92), pp.33-39. (The article is available in the Translations section of this website.)

2. Otto Erich Deutsch, ed. *Mozart: Die Dokumente seines Lebens*, pp.374, 380, 526. *Neue Mozart-Ausgabe*, X:34, *Dokumente aus dem Leben Mozarts*.

3. See Walther Brauneis, „Unveröffentlichte Nachrichten zum Dezember 1791 aus einer Wiener Lokalzeitung,“ in *Mitteilungen der Internationalen Stiftung Mozarteum* 1-4/1991, p.165ff.

4. The *Salzburger Intelligenzblatt* article is a case in point: eleven days after its appearance in Salzburg, the very same article was picked up and reprinted in a Graz newspaper, the *Zeitung für Damen und andere Frauenzimmer*.

5. In a private communication, Walther Brauneis advises:

“As a matter of fact, this item was the last of four reports [concerning Mozart] that appeared in Salzburg. . . .At the time of the item concerning the Requiem, the newspaper was called the *Oberdeutsche Staats-Zeitung* and, as such it appeared on Mondays and Thursdays. An *Anhang* [annex] appeared on Tuesdays and Fridays. Every Wednesday, *Beylage* [inserts, additional items] would appear. In short, one is perfectly justified in speaking, in modern terms, of a daily newspaper. The *Salzburger Intelligenzblatt* was issued weekly on Saturdays as *Beiblätter*, that is, a newspaper supplement; once a month, a supplement appeared under the title of the *Räsonierende Magazin des Wichtigsten aus der Zeitgeschichte*.

“Mozart's death was reported in the *Oberdeutsche Staats-Zeitung* on [Monday] 12 December 1791; on [Tuesday] 27 December 1791, the readers of the *Anhang* learned about the requiem mass for Mozart held in Prague [on 14 December] and about van Swieten's alleged assumption of the guardianship of the two Mozart children. [Later editions of] the *Oberdeutsche Staats-Zeitung* also contained a report on the benefit concert given at the National-Hoftheater in Vienna [on 23 December 1791] and the text of a tombstone epitaph for Mozart.

“It would appear that Hübner chose the placement of the individual items in his newspapers very deliberately: reports from Vienna appeared in the *Oberdeutsche Staats-Zeitung*; items from farther afield and not readily verified, in the *Anhang*, and items of a literary character in the *Salzburger Intelligenzblatt*.” (BCC translation)

6. In a feature article in *The Washington (D.C.) Post*, 16 July 1995, Howard Kurtz observed that “Reporters are part of a co-dependent relationship with [those] whose lives they chronicle. They need a certain amount of drama, manufactured or otherwise, to make their stories come alive.” This was as true in December 1791 as it is today – or since the time of Herodotus, for that matter.

7. At the mass in St. Michael's on 10 December, only those parts of the Requiem that Mozart had completed -- specifically, the Requiem aeternam and the Kyrie -- could have been performed. The music needed to complete the liturgy could have been met by a requiem from another composer.

8. The judgment that the article was originally written by a reporter in Vienna does not necessarily mean it was first published in a Viennese newspaper. It could, for example, have first appeared in a Munich newspaper and have reached Lorenz Hübner in Salzburg from there.

9. Maynard Solomon comments (*Mozart: a Life* [New York, 1995], p.485): "If we also consider. . .that Puchberg lived in the same house as Count Wallsegg, it may be that Mozart was well aware of the patron's identity and intention and that he acceded to the arrangement in return for a substantial fee." Solomon does not address the question whether, in that case, Constanze would also have known who the patron was.

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