

A Note of Introduction: This survey of the abiding question of Mozart and genius is by Guest Author William Stafford, Professor of History at the University of Huddersfield and author of Mozart's Death: A corrective Survey of the Legends (Macmillan 1991; also published in the USA as Mozart Myths and Legends). The conclusions of this paper are presented more briefly in The Cambridge Mozart Encyclopedia (Cambridge, 2006).

William Stafford

Mozart and Genius

Here are some early accounts of Mozart as a genius: first, something written in 1792 by Albert von Mölk, a priest and member of a Salzburg family that socialized with the Mozarts. This sounds the theme that the genius is one-sided; brilliant at his art, hopeless at everything else:

Apart from his music he was almost always a child, and thus he remained... he always needed a father's, a mother's or some other guardian's care; he could not manage his financial affairs. He married a girl quite unsuited to him, and against the will of his father, and thus the great domestic chaos at and after his death.¹

Second, from the first biography of any length, by Niemetschek, prepared with help of a sort from the Widow Mozart and published in 1798. Here we have genius as effortless inspiration and also as a solitary business in which the genius, in ecstasy, is a conduit for ideas from a higher realm:

Mozart wrote everything with a facility and rapidity, which perhaps at first sight could appear as carelessness or haste; and while writing he never came to the *klavier*. His imagination presented the whole work, when it came to him, clearly and vividly. In the quiet repose of the night, when no obstacle hindered his soul, the power of his imagination became incandescent with the most animated activity, and unfolded all the wealth of tone which nature had placed in his spirit Only the person who heard Mozart at such times knows the depth and the whole range of his musical genius: free and independent of all concern his spirit could soar in daring flight to the highest regions of art.²

Thirdly, from a little later in 1798, we have a story by Friedrich Rochlitz which exemplifies the unworldliness of the genius, or rather, his contempt for the status-systems of the world. Mozart had been invited to play before an elite audience, but they were a bad audience, restless & chattering. So he abused and mocked them, and at the end

Mozart himself left the house at once, meanwhile inviting his host and several of the old town musicians to come together; they had an evening meal and, in

¹ O.E. Deutsch, *Mozart: a Documentary Biography*, London, 1966, p. 462

² Franz Niemetschek, *Leben des K.K. Kapellmeisters Wolfgang Gottlieb Mozart, nach Originalquellen beschrieben*, Prag, 1798, pp. 54-5 (where German titles are cited in the references, the translations are mine)

response to their shy request, he improvised for the old ones with pleasure until after midnight.³

Fourthly, in a little book of 1803 by Arnold we meet the genius as bohemian, even dissipated artist:

It is known how often he endangered his health, how many mornings he drank champagne with Schikaneder, how many nights he spent drinking punch. ... outside the marriage bed [he] indulged in many gallantries with pretty actresses and such fine maidens and married women.⁴

Fifthly, Mozart's sister-in-law Sophie Haibl in 1828 remembered the absent-minded, eccentric genius:

Even when he washed his hands in the early morning, he walked up and down the room at the same time, never standing still, at the same time tapped one heel against the other and was always thoughtful. At table he often took a corner of his napkin, crumpled it up tightly, rubbed it round below his nose, and appeared in his thoughtfulness to be unaware of what he was doing, and often he would grimace with his mouth at the same time.⁵

It is interesting to compare this passage with what Schindler wrote about Beethoven in 1840:

Beethoven, in a fit of abstraction, would pour several jugs of water on his hands, humming and roaring. After wetting his clothes through, he would pace up and down the room with a vacant expression of countenance, and eyes frightfully distended.⁶

One is reminded of those late and posthumous portraits of Beethoven, his cravat badly tied, his hair all over the place - a man obviously too scruffy to get a job as a booking-clerk. Here is an interesting reminiscence of Mozart by Karoline Pichler in 1844 testifying to the eccentricity and irresponsibility of the genius, outstanding in just one area, worse than mediocre at everything else. Mozart had been playing beautifully

but then he suddenly tired of it, jumped up, and, in the mad mood which so often came over him, he began to leap over tables & chairs, miaow like a cat, and turn somersaults like an unruly boy. Mozart & Haydn, whom I knew well, were men in whose personal intercourse there was absolutely no other sign of unusual power of intellect and almost no trace of intellectual culture, nor of any scholarly or other higher interests. A rather ordinary turn of mind, silly jokes and, in the case of Mozart, an irresponsible way of life, were all that

³ Maynard Solomon, „The Rochlitz Anecdotes: Issues of Authenticity in early Mozart Biography“, *Mozart Studies*, ed. Cliff Eisen, Oxford, 1991, pp. 12-13

⁴ I.T.F.C. Arnold, *Mozarts Geist*, Erfurt, 1803, pp. 65-7

⁵ Deutsch, *Documentary Biography*, p. 537

⁶ The parallel is noticed by E. Holmes, *Life of Mozart* (1845), London, 1912, p. 240

distinguished them in society; and yet what depths, what worlds of fantasy, harmony, melody & feeling lay concealed behind this unpromising exterior!⁷

Finally, in 1815 Rochlitz published a newly-discovered letter from Mozart to the Baron von P_____

You say, you should like to know my way of composing, and what method I follow in writing works of some extent. I can really say no more on this subject than the following; for I myself know no more about it, and cannot account for it. When I am, as it were, completely myself, entirely alone, and of good cheer - say, travelling in a carriage, or walking after a good meal, or during the night when I cannot sleep; it is on such occasions that my ideas flow best and most abundantly. *Whence* and *how* they come, I know not; nor can I force them. Those ideas that please me I retain in memory, and am accustomed, as I have been told, to hum them to myself..... All this fires my soul, and, provided I am not disturbed, my subject enlarges itself, becomes methodised and defined, and the whole, though it be long, stands almost complete and finished in my mind, so that I can survey it, like a fine picture or a beautiful statue, at a glance. Nor do I hear in my imagination the parts *successively*, but I hear them, as it were, all at once. What a delight this is I cannot tell! All this inventing, this producing, takes place in a pleasing lively dream.....The committing to paper is done quickly enough, for everything is ... already finished; and it rarely differs on paper from what it was in my imagination.⁸

That is a fascinating account of the genius. Inspiration comes to him from he knows not where, almost against his will; but when it doesn't come, there is nothing he can do about it, no technique for finding it; he is a kind of somnambulist, composing in a dream; composition is a solitary business; composition is effortless. Genius is unintelligible, inexplicable, quite out of the common run of things; the genius just is not like us. The only problem with Mozart's letter about genius is, he did not write it. It is a forgery, almost certainly from the pen of Rochlitz himself, Rochlitz who was the source of a number of highly dubious stories about the composer. And once our suspicions have been roused in this way, we begin to have other doubts. All of these accounts of Mozart as genius are posthumous, by as much as a quarter or even half a century. Is it not a bit odd that those accounts of Mozart and Beethoven getting up in the morning, by Sophie Haibl and Schindler should be so similar? Could it be that they are describing the genius as they think he ought to be, rather than Mozart and Beethoven as they actually were? At the very least we suspect a selective account of these men, in accordance with preconceptions about how geniuses behave. As for the unworldly Mozart, too absorbed in his art to manage his affairs, the solid evidence of the correspondence can be read in a quite contrary sense.⁹

⁷ Deutsch, *Documentary Biography*, pp. 556-7

⁸ Holmes, *Life of Mozart*, pp. 255-6

⁹ W. Stafford, *Mozart's Death*, London, 1991, pp. 243-8

Likewise with the story of the childlike, irresponsible, sensual, dissipated, bohemian genius, the man who was constantly drunk, always chasing after actresses and gambling away his money – there is actually no reliable evidence for this at all. The first obituarist, Schlichtegroll, who launched this story, never met Mozart, nor did the first biographer, Niemetschek, despite his claims to the contrary.¹⁰ Rochlitz, the forger, may have met Mozart when the composer visited Leipzig in 1789. We cannot say that any of them really knew him. The real Mozart seems to be hidden behind a fictional Mozart, a Mozart born in 1792 in the first obituary, and who came to full maturity in the film 'Amadeus'.

Which brings me to the big general point of this paper, the conceptual and theoretical point, a point about genius in general rather than about Mozart in particular. In these postmodern times, we have a sense of the gap between words and things and between narratives and events. We do not think that language accurately corresponds to reality, simply mirroring or reflecting it. We are alive to the possibility that what we commonsensically think of as reality, the knowledge we carry around in our heads, may rather be a representation or construction, fashioned by the language we use. So we never see reality as it is; we are always imprisoned in the language, the discourses, the narratives, the representations we have fashioned. An extreme postmodernism like this is highly debatable: perhaps when our words refer to simple material objects, they may be a pretty accurate reflection of reality. Especially is this so with precise scientific terms, for example those used in the classification of plants and animals by botanists, entomologists, ornithologists and others. But when we come to words like 'genius', then it seems to me that the postmodernists are largely right. It is not the case that there is a single discrete identifiable thing, a reality, existing out there in the world, found in certain individuals like Mozart, which can be labelled 'genius' as unproblematically as we label a certain bird 'Turdidus turdidus', or 'blackbird'. The word 'genius' refers to sets of ideas, invented and elaborated by thinkers and artists over two and a half thousand years, which have then been attributed to and imposed upon certain individuals. A given concept of the genius, at any given time, produces certain expectations as to what outstanding individuals will be like, and how they will behave. So evidence which corresponds with these expectations will be selected and emphasized - hence the similarities in accounts of the behaviour of Mozart and Beethoven. If the evidence to correspond with these expectations is lacking, it may be invented - as in the case of the forged letter to the Baron von P. I shall now go on to back up my point - that the word 'genius' does not refer to something real - by showing that the

¹⁰ Walther Brauneis, „Franz Xaver Niemetschek: is his Association with Mozart only Legend?“ *Report of the Internationaler Musikwissenschaftlicher Kongress zum Mozart-Jahr 1991, Baden-Wien*, ed. Ingrid Fuchs, Tutzing, 1993, translation by Bruce Cooper Clarke available elsewhere in this website. For a discussion of the unreliability of the Rochlitz anecdotes, see Solomon, „The Rochlitz Anecdotes“, pp. 1-59

word does not have a single meaning, and that its meanings have evolved. To use postmodern terminology, what I am doing here is engaging in a deconstruction of 'genius' - and, since Mozart has persistently been viewed through the lens of that word, also a deconstruction of 'Mozart'.

The *word* 'genius' (and this is true of its German equivalent 'Genie') has had several meanings.¹¹ If we look at the way it was used at the end of the eighteenth century, for example, in its broadest sense it may signify the peculiar character of a person, or a nation, or a place - as in the expression the *genius loci*, the genius or character of the place: in this sense of the word everyone has a genius insofar as they have a marked character. Secondly it may refer to an aptitude or talent for a particular activity - poetry, or gardening, or organizing: in this sense many people have a genius. In late eighteenth century British discourse, 'genius' in this sense of aptitude or talent was indeed most commonly applied to aesthetic talent - the ability to write a poem or paint a picture. But it did not necessarily imply outstanding or remarkable aesthetic talent; anyone who could write a decent poem with qualities of imagination and sensibility might be described as having genius, and so in this sense there were dozens of poetic geniuses in England in the 1790s - not just Cowper, Coleridge and Wordsworth but also for example Charlotte Smith, Ann Radcliffe, Helen Williams, Anne Yearsley, Jane West, Anna Seward, Hannah More and Mary Robinson.¹² Thirdly it may refer to an outstanding and rare ability for creative work, and to those who have such ability; in this sense very few are geniuses. This last concept is of course the one which has traditionally been applied to Mozart; and so I will continue my deconstructive endeavour by surveying its history and varieties.

Its roots lie in Greek thought, for example in Plato (c. 428-347 BC) and 'Longinus'(1st c. AD).¹³ The Greeks launched such ideas as that poetic invention is mysterious and inexplicable. It cannot be reduced to rules and taught and learnt; either you have it or you do not, and if you do not there is nothing that can be done about it. This was to be an enduring theme, and it is not difficult to understand why; there *is* something mysterious about the imagination or invention needed for creative work in any of the arts. But if it cannot be learnt, where does it come from? The Greeks also proposed that it is a gift of the Gods, a matter of inspiration, the breathing-in of something divinely given. From the Greeks too come the notions that genius is

¹¹ For discussions of „genius“ see J. Schmidt, *Die Geschichte des Genie-Gedankens, 1750-1945*, 2 vols., Darmstadt, 1985; P. Murray (ed.). *Genius: the History of an Idea*, Oxford, 1989; A. Steptoe, *Genius and the Mind: Studies of Creativity and Temperament*, Oxford, 1998

¹² William Stafford, *English Feminists and their Opponents: Unsex'd and Proper Females*, Manchester, 2002, pp. 190-1

¹³ P. Murray, „Poetic Genius and its Classical Origins“, Murray (ed.), *Genius*, pp. 9-31

associated with a kind of frenzy akin to madness, and that poets are typically given to dark melancholy. As these last ideas intimate, Greek philosophy was ambivalent about artists and their powers of imagination. For example Aristotle (384-322 BC) thought that the imagination was below the highest intellectual faculties.¹⁴ Plato too took a low view of artists, and would have banished them from his republic.¹⁵

All of these ideas were recuperated by modern thought, after the close of the middle ages. During the middle ages, interest in individuality and originality in art - therefore in the idea of the genius - had been at a low ebb. The first stage of recuperation was the Renaissance, when artists and theorists of art sought to win high status (and therefore higher payments) by insisting that artists were special and extraordinary. They promoted the notion of the artist as a *creator*, whose activity was akin to that of the divine Creator himself. Here again we meet the Greek notion of genius as something Godgiven. Some of them also cultivated eccentric behaviour so as to mark themselves out as special.¹⁶

But the critical period for the emergence of the fully-fledged concept of 'the genius' was the eighteenth century. It emerged as a reaction against the dominant aesthetic theory and practice. The context was the high prestige, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, of French classicism, with its emphasis upon imitation rather than imagination and invention, and upon the rules of art promulgated by the French academies. This presented a problem for aesthetic theory in England, because of the adoration of Shakespeare whose dramas manifestly failed to conform to French and classical rules. Hence the steady rise of the notion of natural genius, untutored genius, the naive, spontaneous but inspired creator - not just Shakespeare, but also for example Homer, or the authors of the psalms and other 'sublime' books of the bible.¹⁷ Genius therefore was seen as something more important than teachable rules or techniques, genius as a gift of God or Nature as distinguished from mere *talent* which can be acquired. The exaltation of natural genius finds expression in Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* of 1759.

The theme of the genius was not without influence in France, the heart of academic classicism, itself. Greek ideas, such as Aristotle's divorce of poetic imagination from reason, lived on. For example Diderot (1713-84) in *Le Neveu de Rameau* influentially proposed that the artist, remarkable in the field of his natural gift, might be mediocre or even below par in all other respects. From all of this it may follow that learning and general culture are

¹⁴ Aristotle, *De Anima*, 427a-430a

¹⁵ Plato, *Republic*, 607a-608b

¹⁶ Peter Burke, *Tradition and Innovation in Renaissance Italy*, London, 1974, pp. 92-6

¹⁷ Jonathan Bate, „Shakespeare and original genius“, Murray (ed.), *Genius*, p. 77

not necessary to the genius, who outside of his art may be passionate, sensual, irrational, disorderly, quite the reverse of an admirable specimen of humanity.

But Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* had an even greater impact in Germany, for political and nationalistic reasons.¹⁸ In a world of petty princes determined to emulate France and to build their palaces in imitation of Versailles, young German artists yearned to throw off the yoke of French cultural dominance. The rebels of the 'Sturm und Drang' movement of the 1770s such as Hamann, Herder and Goethe promoted the concept of genius in extreme form. As they saw it, the art of France, academic art according to the rules, was superficial and dead; only that which was created through the inspiration of genius was truly profound and living. Again we find the recuperation and development of ideas started by the Greeks. Genius, and the artistic creativity which stems from it, was thought of as inexplicable, incapable of being reduced to a set of rules or techniques which could be learnt. Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft* of 1790 gives classic philosophical expression to this. Some of the artists and theorists of the Sturm und Drang movement, for example Goethe, later returned to an enriched classicism, drawing back from the excesses of the 'Geniezeit', the 'time of genius'. But German romanticism of the nineteenth century essentially continued the themes started by the Sturm und Drang, giving the idea of genius a central place. To such an extent was this the case that the other meanings of 'Genie' - genius as character, genius as any level of aesthetic ability - dropped out of most dictionaries. This left the field clear for the definition of genius as 'überragende schöpferische Begabung, Geisteskraft'¹⁹ - outstanding creative ability, mental power.

The Greek idea of the artist as divinely inspired, developed in the Sturm und Drang 'Geniezeit' by Hamann (1730-88), continued to be very influential in German romanticism. So inspiration could be thought of in religious terms as coming from without. But alternatively it might be contended that it came from within, stemming from the sub-rational and even the subconscious - from passion, emotion, and instinct. In this way artistic creativity could be conceived as a welling up of an underlying, sub-rational, perhaps dark and destructive life force.²⁰

The genius, according to romantic conceptions, is utterly unlike ordinary men and women. Because of this exceptionality, those of mere talent may react with envy and dislike. The genius is characterized by originality; never

¹⁸ Michael Beddow, „Goethe on genius“, Murray (ed.), *Genius*, p. 98

¹⁹ *Duden. Das grosse Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, 8 vols., Mannheim, Leipzig, Wien, Zurich, 1993; see also *Wörterbuch der Deutschen Gegenwartssprache*, Berlin, 1964 „höchste schöpferische Geisteskraft“

²⁰ R. Taylor, *The Romantic Tradition in Germany*, London, 1970, pp. 53-7. For a full account of these developments in Germany, see Schmidt, *Die Geschichte des Genie-Gedankens*.

a mere imitator or follower of norms. Obsessed with his art, driven by his mission to create, he is unwilling to conform and adapt himself to social requirements, largely indifferent to his audience. Hence he tends to be an outsider, a misfit, perhaps a social rebel. The young rebels of the Sturm und Drang set themselves the goal of shocking the conventionally minded - because this, they thought, was how geniuses behaved. They were rebels against aristocratic and stuffy bourgeois society, against the German political system of princely rule, against prudish and restrictive conventional morality. The outlaw became their hero, as in Schiller's enormously influential play *Die Räuber*, the robbers. Some of them, sometimes, went even further, and played with the idea of rebellion against God himself; we see this for example in their fascination with such myths as that of Prometheus, who stole fire from heaven to give to humankind, or of the wandering Jew, who spat in the face of Christ on his way to Calvary and whose punishment was to live for ever.²¹ This fed into conceptions of genius. Some of them suggested that the source of inspiration was not divine, but rather demonic, and this connects with the idea of genius as something dark and dangerous, passionate and uncontrolled, akin to madness. Once again, this theme of demonic possession had been started long ago, by the Greeks. Socrates, as described by Plato, was inspired by his demon.

The theme of a connection between genius and mental abnormality or lack of mental health continued through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: for example Lombroso in his *Genio e Follia* wrote of genius as a degenerative psychosis, and Freud thought that artistic creation was rooted in escapism and a reluctance to come to terms with reality. Recently there has been interest in those suffering from autism who in a limited area are capable of genius-like performance, e.g. incredibly rapid calculations or amazing feats of memory.²²

To sum up this section, we have seen that the concept of genius is a tradition. The discourse of genius is a tradition of great antiquity, but a tradition which does not remain unchanging. Rather it evolves and develops to meet the needs of different contexts. Therefore it yields a number of different, but related concepts of genius, rather than a single, unified concept. Finally we might remark that the discourse of genius was a way of dealing with, of coming to terms with, something that was not fully understood, namely artistic creativity. Here I would suggest to you that the discourse was always guilty of a fundamental mistake. For from the truism 'we don't fully understand artistic creativity' it falsely inferred that artistic creativity is something unintelligible. But to say that we do not understand

²¹ R. Trousson, *Le Thème de Prométhée dans la Littérature Européenne*, Geneva, 1964

²² Neil Kessel, „Genius and Mental Disorder: a History of Ideas concerning their Conjunction“, Murray (ed.), *Genius*. See also Steptoe, *Genius and the Mind*

artistic creativity does not necessarily imply that artistic creativity is unintelligible; it may simply mean that we have not understood it yet.

In this next section I shall briefly survey the ways in which these constructions of 'genius' were applied to Mozart - or, to put it another way, how, after his death in 1791, Mozart was constructed according to these conceptions. The concept of genius, in my view, had a great and largely malign influence on the way Mozart was understood, from his death to the end of the twentieth century.

First, Mozart the angel. This is most explicit in French Catholic biographers such as Wyzewa and St. Foix (1912-46), Curzon (1920), Gheon (1932), and Adolphe Boschot (1935).²³ In their view Mozart's genius was a divine inspiration coming from outside, speaking through him. Such a conception led to an emphasis upon the spontaneous effortlessness of his compositional activity. When the idea of inspiration is combined with the notion of genius as a natural, God-given gift, not learnt or acquired by effort, this leads to a construction of Mozart's genius taking fire and enabling him to compose rapidly and effortlessly - Niemetschek (1798)²⁴ and Rochlitz (1798-1801)²⁵ had inspired this account of his composing, and through Nissen's biography (1828) which incorporated so much from earlier biographical writings, it became a standard one. It also produced a Mozart who was angelic, a loveable human being. This was how Niemetschek, the first biographer, had described him. Such an emphasis upon Mozart's essential goodness, sanity, health and balance squared with the view of him as an essentially classical composer. We might surmise that because of the association of classicism with the golden age of French culture, the French Catholic biographers were happy to see Mozart in this way, as a classicist.

Friedrich Schiller's highly influential distinction between naive and sentimental artists in his *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung* (1795) to some extent fitted with this, enabling subsequent biographers to construct a naive, childlike, perhaps childish composer who composed without reflection. This view of him is charmingly realized in Morike's little novel *Mozart auf der Reise nach Prag* (1856). It too proposed a classical composer, for it was natural to assimilate Schiller's naive and sentimental to classicism and romanticism respectively.

²³ Théodor de Wyzewa & Georges de Saint-Foix, *W.A. Mozart: sa vie musicale et son oeuvre*, Paris, 1912-46; Henri de Curzon, *Mozart*, Paris, 1920; Henri Ghéon, *Promenades avec Mozart*, Paris, 1923; Adolphe Boschot, *Mozart*, Paris, 1935

²⁴ Niemetschek, *Leben des K.K. Kapellmeisters Wolfgang Gottlieb Mozart*, pp. 54-5

²⁵ See the „Letter to the Baron von P---,“ above

Secondly, Mozart as a divided being, part angel and part beast. Schlichtegroll in his obituary of the composer (1792) drew upon the tradition, going back to Aristotle in classical antiquity, according to which the imagination is a lower, sub-rational faculty of the soul.²⁶ This suited his story of Mozart as a man with deep character flaws. This construction contributed to the biographical tradition, in Schlichtegroll, Suard, Arnold, Stendhal, Schurig, Einstein and others which depicted Mozart as a strange mixture of the elevated and the contemptible: sublime where his music was concerned, but pathetically inadequate in worldly matters.²⁷

Thirdly, Mozart as demon. For the romantics, the paradigmatic musical genius was Beethoven. The danger was that Mozart would be contrasted with Beethoven and depicted as a merely classical composer, skilled in the techniques of his art, and composing according to rules. And since German critics associated classicism with France and Italy, and thought that romantic genius expressed the German soul, such a contrast would put in question Mozart's place in the national pantheon. Mozart lovers taking this view wished to reconstruct him as a romantic. This led to a conception of Mozart as a composer whose music at its greatest expresses dark, demonic inner impulses and forces; a dionysiac rather than an apollonian Mozart, passionate and driven rather than rational and balanced, tragic rather than shallowly optimistic, troubled rather than serene, his music mysterious rather than transparent. Such a view of him was proposed by Kierkegaard (*Entweder/Oder*, 1843), and by E.T.A. Hoffmann (1776-1822) in short stories (he wrote a little 'demonic' story about Mozart's *Don Giovanni*).²⁸ The alienness, the semi-autism of the genius, lost in his ideal world and cut off from everyday reality, was also a theme of Hoffmann's influential writings. Nevertheless for much of the nineteenth century the image of the classical composer prevailed, and therefore so did the tendency to think of Mozart as inferior to say Beethoven and Wagner. Mozart was reclaimed for romanticism in Alfred Heuss's article, 'Das dämonische Element in Mozarts Werken', (1906) 'The demonic element in Mozart's work' which exerted a crucial influence on the biographical tradition through the writings of Schurig (1913) and Abert (1919).²⁹

²⁶ Georges Favier, *Vie de W.A. Mozart par Franz Xaver Niemetschek précédée du nécrologe de Schlichtegroll*, St. Étienne, 1976, p. 103

²⁷ Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Suard, *Anecdotes sur Mozart*, Paris, 1804; Stendhal [Beyle, M.-H.] *Vie de Mozart*, Paris, 1814; Arthur Schurig, *Wolfgang Amadé Mozart*, Leipzig, 1913; Alfred Einstein, *Mozart: his Character, his Work*, London, 1946

²⁸ E.T.A. Hoffmann, „Don Giovanni“, in *Six German Romantic Tales*, trans. R. Taylor, London, 1985

²⁹ Alfred Heuss, „Das dämonische Element in Mozarts Werken“, *Zeitschrift der Internationalen Musikgesellschaft*, 5 (1906-7), pp. 175-86; Hermann Abert, *W.A. Mozart*, Leipzig, 1919-21

The demonic construction of Mozart placed emphasis on the works in minor keys, and also on *Don Giovanni* which was understood as an expression of the dark, destructive, death-seeking dionysiac forces in Mozart's soul. It also went with a high evaluation of *Die Zauberflöte* as a work which, it was contended, half-lifted the veil to reveal the underlying world of spirit. *Die Zauberflöte* was in German, and this construction of Mozart presented him quite falsely as a true German who longed to create German opera and who at bottom was out of sympathy with the cosmopolitan classical style, above all represented by Italian *opera seria*. This contributed to the neglect, through most of the 19th and 20th centuries, of Mozart's serious operas even including *Idomeneo* and *La Clemenza di Tito*. Furthermore it gave impetus to the conception of Mozart the man as an irrational, passionate being whose irresistible inner impulses drove him to self-destruction.

All of these conceptions of genius point to a Mozart utterly out of the common run, whose creativity stems not from his social milieu and his relations with others, but from some divine or demonic inspiration which comes only to the genius. They suit an account of a man who was unworldly and lacking in common social skills. Some biographies of Mozart have accordingly constructed him as an alienated outsider or as abnormal because of his genius, for example the Massins' account of him as a social rebel, or Hildesheimer's depiction of him as tragically cut off from human understanding and contact.³⁰ The idea that he composed to satisfy an inner need and was indifferent or cavalier towards his audience was propagated by Niemetschek, Rochlitz and Nissen.³¹

Such a construction downplays the element of skill or craft in his compositions, craft which he would have learned from other composers and musical traditions. Schurig gives us a man utterly lacking in general culture, a Tamino when composing under inspiration, a Papageno in all the common affairs of life.³² These themes feed into Einstein's celebrated biography, and reach their ultimate expression in Wolfgang Hildesheimer's account according to which Mozart the genius was so out of the ordinary, so cut off from normal humanity as to be semi-autistic.³³

A modern, 'scientific' version of the demonic genius narrative can to a certain extent be found in neo-Freudian accounts which relate Mozart's creativity, and the alleged tragedy of his life, to subconscious drives intensified and given a certain direction by his psychological development. Such accounts propose an unbearable conflict between his devotion to the father who gave him so much, and an oedipal revolt against that father in quest of

³⁰ Jean & Brigitte Massin, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*, Paris, 1959; Wolfgang Hildesheimer, *Mozart*, Frankfurt, 1977

³¹ Niemetschek, *Leben*, pp. 6, 30, 57, 71: *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, Leipzig, i (1798-9), pp. 49-51

³² Schurig, *Wolfgang Amadé Mozart*, ii, pp. 89, 345

³³ Hildesheimer, *Mozart*, p. 57

independence and erotic fulfilment. This conflict, it is proposed, gave depth to his creativity but was ultimately destructive. Brigid Brophy developed this thesis and it has been worked out more fully by Solomon.³⁴ But the application of highly debateable Freudian theories by amateur psychologists to a long dead patient unable to answer for himself on the psychologist's couch, should not command the respect of a sober historian.

I have two tasks remaining for this paper. First, I will float a few thoughts about what Mozart's gifts, or talents, were really like, and the extent to which they corresponded to the discourse of genius. Can we understand Mozart's greatness without recourse to that dubious term, genius? As a historian of ideas my competence here is limited, and the musicians may well have more useful things to say about Mozart's endowments as a composer. Second I will look at what Mozart said about himself and his abilities.

A key issue in this discussion is whether abilities are natural, or learnt. It is plausible to say that Mozart did have some natural gifts though these were then enhanced by environment and education. Firstly it is clear that he had exceptionally good hearing and perfect pitch; there are well-attested accounts of notes being played on the keyboard and the child correctly calling out what notes they were. There is other evidence of the acuteness of his hearing as a child.³⁵ Secondly it seems likely that, to use an old-fashioned expression, he had a very good brain. The child took to mathematics with enthusiasm, the youth and mature man was proficient at languages. Every schoolboy knows that he had a marvellous musical memory, as the famous story of him writing out the Allegri Miserere after one hearing in the Vatican chapel attests.³⁶ There are passages in his letters which may be read as affirming that he sometimes composed pieces entire in his head, and then quickly wrote them out from memory. (This is not absolutely beyond dispute: the quick writing-out may have been the production of a performance-ready score from less tidy drafts).³⁷ But it has to be insisted that he did not always do this; more elaborate or difficult pieces were worked out at the keyboard and on paper, with sketches and alterations before the final product. Sometimes he got stuck, and laid a work aside to be finished later. Work on the autograph scores of the quartets

³⁴ Brigid Brophy, *Mozart the Dramatist*, London, 1964; Maynard Solomon, *Mozart: a Life*, London, 1995

³⁵ See for example the reminiscences of Johann Andreas Schachtner, sent to Mozart's sister, Deutsch, *Documentary Biography*, pp. 451-3

³⁶ *Mozart Briefe und Aufzeichnungen*, ed. Wilhelm A. Bauer, Joseph Heinz Eibl und Otto Erich Deutsch, Basel, 7 vols., 1962-75, 176/46-55 (here and hereafter the number before the slash is the number of the letter in the Bauer, Eibl & Deutsch edition, and the numbers after the slash are the numbers of the lines).

³⁷ *Mozart Briefe und Aufzeichnungen*, 573/49-51; 631/38-40; 668/9-15

dedicated to Haydn has demonstrated that Mozart found their composition a slow and difficult business - as his own dedication declares.³⁸ Thirdly, he was endowed with abounding energy and zest; when we read his letters we get a sense of *joie de vivre*, of the life forces bubbling up and welling over; no doubt this contributed to his ability to produce so much in his relatively short life. All of these capacities may have had a natural, organic component.

As well as the joyful, exuberant letters, there are also miserable, gloomy ones, especially that series in the late 1780s to his friend and fellow freemason Puchberg begging for loans. Does this support the view that Mozart was a manic-depressive, and that this psychological condition contributed to his creativity? But Mozart had good reasons to be depressed in the late 1780s. He was sometimes ill, his wife was chronically ill, several of his children died at birth or soon after, for various reasons Austrian musicians were going through hard times with reduced opportunities to earn money.³⁹ In any case, if a man wanted to touch his friend and banker for a loan, he might well write a letter whose subtext was 'send me some money or I'll cut my throat'.

Obviously environmental factors underlay Mozart's greatness. He was born into a household where there was constant music-making. His father Leopold was a professional musician, a keyboard and string player and composer. Leopold was a gifted teacher, who had published a well-regarded book on teaching the violin before his son was born. Then he took the boy and adolescent on a musical grand tour of Europe in order to showcase his talent; the young Mozart was exposed to the varying musical traditions of Europe and he associated with composers and top performers. By his mid-teens he had an unrivalled knowledge of contemporary European music. The father was ambitious, an ambition fuelled by his sense that he was not properly recognized and remunerated in Salzburg; there was grit in his oyster, and he communicated these attitudes to his son. But Leopold was incapable of producing a pearl; Wolfgang Amadeus by contrast produced them abundantly.

Which raises the question, intimately bound up with the idea of genius, of invention, imagination, ideas, originality. Mozart generated them and his father did not; how is that to be explained? This brings me to the final topic of this paper.

³⁸ Stafford, *Mozart's Death*, pp. 171-2; Stanley Sadie, *Mozart: the early years 1756-1781*, Oxford, 2006, pp. 369-70

³⁹ Stafford, *Mozart's Death*, pp. 231-3; Julia Moore, „Mozart in the Market-Place“, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 114 (1989), pp. 18-42

How did Mozart understand and describe himself? How did his father understand him? Our best hope of finding an answer lies in that substantial body of letters between father and son: what do they reveal?

Arguably Mozart's father was the first to project his son as a genius. Guided by the index to the standard German edition of the letters, the reader finds him applying this term to his son seven times – once in each of the years 1763, 1768 and 1777, and four times in 1778.⁴⁰ This is rather scanty in so voluminous a correspondence. Furthermore, Leopold's usage of the word does not carry some of the meanings which it accumulated in the nineteenth century. One of the seven clearly means genius in the sense of character or disposition.⁴¹ Devout (though a little anti-clerical) Catholic that he was, he regularly wrote about his son's exceptionalism as a divine gift, a gift which it was his and Wolfgang's duty to employ.⁴² This duty licensed the father to carry the little boy and adolescent around Europe, revealing his gifts to the world, and in the process making some money. Writing back to Salzburg he justified their absence in this way, referring constantly to the astonishment and wonder of those who heard his boy perform.⁴³ The astonishment he describes is astonishment at the performance of one so young. Nowhere does Leopold employ the notion of *inspiration* coming from God – that component of later ideas of genius is entirely absent. God's gift to his son, as he sees it, is abilities, *Talente*, talents, a word which he uses interchangeably with *Genie*, never making the later distinction between genius and talent.⁴⁴ In all these ways his conception of genius was a traditional one, untouched by the ideas of the Sturm und Drang.

There is an interesting exchange of letters between father and son in 1778. These letters discuss the issue of originality and invention. They deploy the term 'Genie' and, properly interpreted, give an insight into what Mozart and his father understood by that word. They also reveal how later commentators carry their own preconceptions back into the past.

Mozart to his father, Paris, 14 May 1778 (Emily Anderson's translation)

I think I told you in my last letter that the Duc de Guines, whose daughter is my pupil in composition, plays the flute extremely well, and that she plays the harp magnificently. She has a great deal of talent and (1) **even genius**, and in particular a marvellous memory,

⁴⁰ *Mozart Briefe und Aufzeichnungen*, 53/40-2, 139/7ff, 369/130-3, 429/149-51, 170-2, 478/269, 490/17

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 490/17

⁴² *ibid.*, 420/174

⁴³ e.g., *ibid.*, 34/52-4, 56/32-3, 63/72, 68/45-6

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 369/130-3, 429/170ff.

so that she can play all her pieces, actually about two hundred, by heart. She is, however, extremely doubtful as to whether she has any (2) **talent** for composition, especially as regards invention or ideas. ... If she gets no (3) **inspirations or ideas** (for at present she really has none whatever), then it is to no purpose, for - God knows - I can't give her any. ... I gave her her fourth lesson today and, so far as the rules of composition and harmony are concerned, I am fairly well satisfied with her. She filled in quite a good bass for the first minuet, the melody of which I had given her, and she has already begun to write in three parts. But she very soon gets bored, and I am unable to help her; for as yet I cannot proceed more quickly. It is too soon, even if there really were genius there, but unfortunately there is none. Everything has to be done by rule. She has no ideas whatever - nothing comes.⁴⁵

From the standard German edition

1. sie hat viell Talent, und genie
2. sie zweifelt aber starck ob sie auch genie zur Composition hat
3. wenn sie keine ideen oder gedancken bekommt⁴⁶

Leopold Mozart to his son, Salzburg, 28 May 1778

You say that you have given the Duke's daughter her fourth lesson and you seem to expect her to be able to invent melodies. Do you think that everyone has got your genius? Let her alone. It will come in time!⁴⁷

On a quick and casual reading, these passages do not challenge the nineteenth and twentieth century notion of genius as outstanding, unteachable natural ability. But as we read more closely, we begin to doubt whether Mozart and his father share that conception. Mozart writes that his pupil has no inspiration or ideas, but also that she possesses even genius. Leopold remarks that not everyone has his son's genius, but then he may be suggesting - this is a possible reading - that the pupil will acquire genius in time, that genius can be taught.

Our doubts increase when we consult the original German. Emily Anderson's translation says 'she has a great deal of talent, and even genius'. I think that word 'even' is doing a lot of work there, making sense of the passage in accordance with a twentieth-century understanding of 'genius'. From this twentieth-century point of view, it is odd that Mozart should refer to his pupil as a genius; but that word 'even' reduces the oddity. It suggests that

⁴⁵ Emily Anderson (editor & translator) *Letters of Mozart and his Family*, 3rd ed., London, 1985, p. 538

⁴⁶ *Mozart Briefe und Aufzeichnungen*, 449/59-77

⁴⁷ Anderson, *Letters*, p. 541

maybe she has **just a little bit** of genius, it qualifies the attribution of genius to her, plays it down a bit. But the word 'even' is not in the original German; Mozart baldly writes 'she has much talent and genius'.

Further down, Anderson has Mozart writing 'if she gets no inspirations' - inspiration, that idea so closely connected to the nineteenth and twentieth century conception of genius. But Mozart does not use that word; he writes 'if she gets no ideas or thoughts'. Anderson's translation is subtly adjusting the text so that it will make sense to a twentieth-century reader. This is surely why she has substituted 'talent' for 'genius' in the passage where Mozart writes 'She is, however, extremely doubtful as to whether she has any genius for composition'. From the point of view of twentieth-century usage, 'genius' is out of place here; obviously this ordinary girl does not have genius, because geniuses are rare and outstanding. Mozart must mean talent rather than genius.

But of course, if we remove our twentieth-century spectacles, Mozart does *not* mean talent rather than genius, because he does not make that distinction. 'Genie' as used by Mozart does not mean rare and transcendent ability; it simply means talent, or gift, an aptitude for something (such as playing the clavier, or composing) which many people may have.

It is perhaps significant that the standard modern German edition of the Mozart letters indexes the one use of 'Genie' in the letter from Leopold to his son, but fails to index the 3 uses of 'Genie' in Mozart's letter to his father. I would suggest that the German editors have fallen into the same trap as Emily Anderson. They index Leopold's use of the word, because 'Do you think that everyone has got your genius' can be read in accordance with modern understandings of genius. They opt not to index Mozart's use of the word because, from their point of view, he is not using it properly. The *word* in his letter does not refer to the *concept* which they wish to index, so they ignore it.

Mozart's own letters record only two occasions when he refers to his own 'Genie':

Mozart to his father, Paris, 18 July 1778

Meanwhile in the fond hope that the day will come – and the sooner the better – when we shall all be happy, I intend, in God's name, to persevere in my life *here*, which is totally opposed to my genius, inclinations, knowledge and sympathies.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Anderson, *Letters*, pp. 572-3

Mozart to his father, Paris, 31 July 1778

For I cannot deny, and must indeed confess, that I shall be delighted to be released from this place. For giving lessons here is no joke. Unless you wear yourself out by taking a *large number of pupils*, you cannot make much money. You must not think that this is laziness on my part. No, indeed! It just goes utterly against my genius and my manner of life. You know that I am, so to speak, soaked in music, that I am immersed in it all day long and that I love to plan works, study and meditate. Well, I am prevented from all this by my way of life here.⁴⁹

This is the old usage, common in eighteenth-century Germany and England, of genius meaning the character or disposition, the bent or inclination, of the individual. In both cases when Mozart uses the word about himself, he uses it in this sense; we have no record of him using it to refer to outstanding gifts. Nowhere does he describe his own artistic productivity in romantic terms, as a spontaneous outpouring or inspired rapture, coming to him as in a dream from he knows not where. Mozart himself is more likely to write about the effort he put into his works - for example, in the dedication to Haydn of the set of six quartets he says 'They are, indeed, the fruit of a long and laborious study'. Or he takes pride in his technical mastery which will be understood and appreciated by 'Kenner', by experts. In a letter to his father dated 28 December 1782 he writes 'These concertos [K413, 414 and 415] are a happy medium between what is too easy and too difficult; they are very brilliant, pleasing to the ear, and natural, without being vapid. There are passages here and there from which the connoisseurs [Kenner] alone can derive satisfaction; but these passages are written in such a way that the less learned [die nicht-Kenner]⁵⁰ cannot fail to be pleased, though without knowing why.'⁵¹ His creativity did not stem from some mysterious other world, or express itself heedless of social requirements: he prided himself in his skill which enabled him to produce what the occasion demanded. He was not alienated from, but thoroughly connected to, his musical environment. This comes out, I think, in the following passage:

Mozart to his father, Paris, 11 September 1778

A fellow of mediocre talent will remain a mediocrity, whether he travels or not; but one of superior talent (which without impiety I cannot deny that I possess) will go to seed if he always remains in the same place.⁵²

Note that he refers to talent, not genius (yes, the translation is correct this time); and what he is saying here, and in the longer passage from which the

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 587

⁵⁰ *Mozart Briefe und Aufzeichnungen*, 715/9-13

⁵¹ Anderson, *Letters*, p. 833

⁵² *ibid.*, p. 612

quotation comes, is that talent can only come to fruition if the artist meets and mingles with other artists. There is no hint here of the lonely genius, drawing his inspiration from his inner resources, or from a divine or demonic afflatus.

The real Mozart expressed pride in his craft, in the compositional skills he had learned from other musicians and taken to a high level. Much recent scholarship has emphasised the relationship of his creativity to his social milieu. Instead of an unreflective genius who composed in a dream, it has given us, as in Konrad Küster's recent biography, a musician of the highest technical competence for whom composition presented a series of intellectual and aesthetic challenges that could only be surmounted with considerable effort.⁵³ Such an artist cannot be thought of as a Papageno.

Arguably 'genius' has outlived its (always dubious) usefulness as a concept: to an extent it has persistently expressed an inability or unwillingness to understand artistic and scientific greatness, originality and creativity and has perhaps been an excuse for not thinking about these component ideas systematically. More recent work by psychologists and sociologists has begun the task of demystifying it, searching for genetic, social and cultural explanations of the components of 'genius'. Such work has tended to explode many of the myths, showing that great artists and scientists may be slightly more likely to suffer from depressive illness but for the most part enjoy mental health. They tend to show ability on a broad front, not the narrow excellence of some autistics. And their achievement requires not isolation but rather a social environment which provides them with at least a minimum of training, support and recognition.⁵⁴

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⁵³ Konrad Küster, *Mozart: a Musical Biography*, Oxford, 1996

⁵⁴ See A. Steptoe, ed., *Genius and the Mind*