

*A note of introduction: An unexpected confrontation at a conference in Vienna led Prof. Neal Zaslaw to spell out his views on Mozart's creative process in this oft-cited essay. Of all Prof. Zaslaw's many articles, it is the one that has most often been put on course reserve at American colleges and universities. And for good reason. Apropos Mozart is honored to welcome Prof. Zaslaw as a Guest Author and to be able to present his article.*

Neal Zaslaw

### Mozart as a working stiff

SEVERAL YEARS ago, I attended a conference sponsored by the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. The theme of the conference concerned the connections between the orchestra and various composers, and I had been asked to discuss Mozart's relations with the Viennese orchestras of his day. In the course of my talk, I revealed in passing that I (and, I might have added, many others studying Mozart) believe that he probably rarely completed a work for which there was no anticipated need. I speculated that because Mozart was usually extremely busy and because composing was in any case a demanding activity, some urgency would have been required before he found the time and energy to compose a piece, and that the motivating force was probably most often his need for cold, hard cash, of which he was perpetually short.<sup>1</sup>

I suppose I must have been at least subliminally aware that, in saying such things, I was being provocatively anti-Romantic, but I was quite taken aback at the vehemence with which my remarks were attacked. The moderator of the session took it upon himself to denounce me from the chair. If memory serves correctly, the gist of what he said was something like this: "Mozart's music could not and should not be compared with the music of such contemporaries as Dittersdorf, Vanhall, Hofmann, or Gyrowetz, because, whereas they were ordinary composers, Mozart was an original genius. Mozart's music belonged only to the highest spheres of creativity."

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1. Neal Zaslaw, "Mozart's Viennese Orchestral Music and Its Relation to His Viennese Orchestras," in Otto Biba and Wolfgang Schuster, eds., *Klang und Komponist: ein Symposium der Wiener Philharmoniker* (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1992), 149-56.

*Neal Zaslaw's "Mozart as a Working Stiff" is taken from On Mozart, edited by James M. Morris (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994) and used with permission.*

Hearing this tirade, I replied, as politely as I could, to the effect: "If I understand you correctly, Professor, then we disagree profoundly. Mozart's music ascended into the higher ether only in the course of the nineteenth century. During his lifetime, it was right down on the ground along with that of the other composers." In the discussion that followed this exchange, it seemed to me then that most of the older Germans and Austrians agreed with the moderator, while the younger German-speakers and the English-speakers apparently thought that what I had said made perfectly good sense. What interests me today is why the matter should be the cause of such strong emotion – a question to which I shall return in due course.

In asserting that Mozart had a practical purpose for each piece he wrote, I meant it in the broadest possible sense. Sometimes there was a formal commission, like that for the *Requiem*, or the *scrittura* he received for most of his operas. At other times Mozart may have felt a general need, such as an upcoming series of Lenten concerts, which would please patrons more if they contained some new piano concertos. It could also occasionally have been a matter of speculation, as with the nearly completed opera *Zaide*, which Mozart and his father hoped to peddle to one of the new "national" theaters springing up in the 1770s, in which German plays and operas were to replace Italian opera and French *opéra comique*. It may have been to celebrate his sister's name day, or to please his patron Michael Puchberg, out of gratitude and friendship – and in the hope that Puchberg would go on lending him money. Or it may have been the sociable desire to entertain himself and his friends with a scatological canon or a *commedia dell'arte* skit for carnival. Publication may have been the goal, as with the six mighty quartets dedicated to Haydn or the three modest children's songs from Mozart's last year. In some cases – for instance, the charming flute and harp concerto of 1778, or the astounding pieces for mechanical organ of 1791 – Mozart heartily disliked the commissions but urgently needed the payments that awaited their completion. As I remarked in my troubling Viennese talk, Mozart did not compose because he was inspired, although inspiration may be why he composed so well. I think it fair to state that, for each of Mozart's more than 800 finished compositions about which we know anything of its origins, some such motivating force can be identified.

But what of the hundreds of Mozart's works about whose origins we know either absolutely nothing or merely a date of creation? Might Mozart not have written some of these out of "pure inspiration," "from inner necessity," or "for posterity" (as the expressions go) rather than to satisfy an immediately practical goal? Let us take the best-known case of this sort – that of the last three symphonies – and subject it to closer scrutiny.

Generations of music lovers have been brought up (as I was) on Alfred Einstein's elegant book, *Mozart, His Character, His Work*, first published in 1946 and still widely available in paperback. Born in Munich in 1880 and the leading Mozart scholar of his generation, Einstein came to the United States

in 1938, fleeing the Nazis. He taught at Smith College and died in California in 1952. Here is how Einstein's classic book introduces us to Mozart's last three symphonies:

To the summer of 1788 belong the three last symphonies Mozart wrote, in E flat (K. 543), G Minor (K. 550), and C Major (K. 551) – all composed within the unbelievably short space of about two months. We know nothing about the occasion for writing these works. It is strange that Mozart should have written symphonies during the summer. Perhaps he hoped to be able to give some "Academies" [concerts] during the winter of 1788-89, and these plans fell through just as those for the following years did. . . . It is possible that Mozart never conducted these three symphonies and never heard them. . . . But this is perhaps symbolic of their position in the history of music and of human endeavor, representing no occasion, no immediate purpose, but an appeal to eternity. [In writing them, Mozart followed] an inner impulse.<sup>2</sup>

Einstein's remarks represent a distillation of attitudes to the last three symphonies found in many earlier German-language biographies and commentaries; and his book was, and remains, so influential that this passage has been quoted or, more often, paraphrased – with or without acknowledgment – in hundreds of program notes written for concerts, recordings, and broadcasts. And not merely paraphrased, but simplified: Einstein's cautious "perhaps," "it is possible," and "nothing is known" harden into certainties, and we are repeatedly informed that Mozart *did* write these symphonies from inner necessity, that there *were* no concerts in the offing, and that Mozart *never* conducted or heard them.

It may be acceptable for Sherlock Holmes to base a brilliant deduction on the fact that the dog did not bark, but according to the rules of logic, it is impermissible to argue from the absence of evidence. If nothing is known, nothing may be concluded. But we do know a bit more than nothing about Mozart's last three symphonies. And since the writing of history, or of biography, is neither more nor less than telling stories by linking the known facts to form a plausible but hypothetical narrative, let us try a new story – mine this time, instead of Einstein's. Here is my story.

In the mid-1780s Mozart was in great demand for piano and composition lessons, for new works, and for public and private concerts in Vienna. From his vigorous freelance activities, he earned a solidly upper-middle-class income, living in expensive, beautifully appointed quarters, dressing elegantly, retaining a servant, and owning his own carriage. As the decade wore on, however, Austria fell into a foolish war with Turkey, the economy

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2. Alfred Einstein, *Mozart, His Character, His Work* (London: Cassell, 1946), 234. For a recent attempt to sustain Einstein's point of view against mine, see Andrew Steptoe, "Mozart and His Last Three Symphonies – A Myth Laid to Rest?" *Musical Times* 132 (November 1991): 550-51.

slid into a depression, and many of Mozart's noble patrons were either at the front or hiding on their country estates. The theaters were closed, many musicians were let go, and Viennese musical life declined precipitously. Predictably, Mozart's income suffered, and, apparently because he either could not or would not adjust his lifestyle in proportion, he began to accumulate debts, which he covered by a series of loans from his Masonic brother Michael Puchberg and others.

In the summer of 1788, Mozart must have been laying plans to deal with his financial crisis. He hoped to put on a series of three subscription concerts that autumn and eventually to arrange a visit to London where, his British friends Michael Kelly, Nancy and Stephen Storace, and Thomas Attwood assured him, he could make a lot more money than in Vienna. For both these plans, new symphonies would be needed. Thus we are not surprised to see entered into the catalogue of his works that Mozart kept at that time three new symphonies, one in E-flat on June 26, one in G minor on July 25, and one in C major on August 10.

Two weeks later, on Sunday, August 24, a Danish visitor to Vienna, Joachim Preisler, called on the Mozarts. Mozart improvised at the piano for what Preisler called "the happiest hour of music that has ever fallen to my lot." While that was happening, as Preisler noted in his diary, Mozart's wife, Constanze, "cut quill-pens for the copyist." We know that Mozart had copying done at home so that he could see to its correctness and, especially, to prevent copyists from stealing his works by making illicit copies for their own use.

It may have been a few weeks after the copyist was hard at work that Mozart wrote an undated letter to Puchberg begging for yet another loan:

I dare to implore you to help me out with a hundred gulden until next week, when my concerts in the [Trattnerhof] Casino are to begin. . . . I take the liberty of sending you two tickets which, as a brother, I beg you to accept without payment, seeing that, as it is, I shall never be able adequately to return the friendship which you have shown me.

Subscription concerts were private events and, as such, were not advertised or reviewed in the Viennese newspapers, nor were there posters; we know about such concerts only in those rare cases in which Mozart or a member of his audience happened to mention them in a letter or diary entry. As for the concerts mentioned in the undated letter to Puchberg, if Mozart had reached the point of having tickets printed, we can reasonably assume that he had signed up a sufficient number of subscribers for the concerts to be put on, and that they were indeed put on.

The G Minor Symphony was in any case certainly performed soon after its completion, because the new versions Mozart prepared, of a single passage in the andante and of the woodwind orchestration of all four movements,

would have been created only for a specific purpose, and these new versions are written on paper of the same date as the paper of the original manuscript. Furthermore, Mozart's own set of orchestral parts, containing emendations in his hand, survives in the library in Graz.

Although the tour to London never materialized, Mozart did travel in Germany, giving public orchestral concerts in Dresden and Leipzig in 1789 and in Frankfurt and Mainz in 1790. Each of these concerts contained at least two symphonies. Finally, a symphony by Mozart was included in a public Viennese concert of April 16, 1791, and repeated the next day: I can see no reason for supposing that Mozart would not have performed his last three symphonies at these five public concerts, and of his private concerts we shall never have an adequate accounting.

The very idea that Mozart would have written three such symphonies, unprecedented in length, complexity, and seriousness, merely to please himself or because he was "inspired" flies in the face of his known attitudes to music and life and the financial straits in which he then found himself.

Here endeth my story. I think it accounts for the possibly relevant facts surrounding Mozart's last three symphonies better than the traditional story does, but if any one can tell me a more convincing story, I will happily abandon mine.

"If you have not got pupils," Leopold Mozart wrote to his son in 1778, "well then compose something more. . . . You must try to sell a work or two to some engraver or other. You must have money in order to live. And if your pupils are in the country, what other way is there for you to make money? You really must do something!" (August 13). "My desire and my hope is to gain honor, fame, and money," his son replied in 1781 to another importuning letter (May 16). "Believe me when I say that I have changed completely. Apart from my health I now think that there is nothing so indispensable as money" (May 26). Poor Mozart! Money was indispensable, and there never was enough of it. And there was probably more behind his claim that he had "changed completely" than simply his desperate need to fend off his father's criticisms with lies or wishful thinking. Many of Leopold Mozart's letters written to his son during the latter's early twenties contain accusations of laziness and disorganization. And even if Leopold's standards were unfairly high for a young man who was accustomed to being cared for and closely directed by his parents, there seems to have been some firm basis in reality for Leopold's accusations. Nonetheless, after settling on his own in Vienna at the age of twenty-five, Mozart's productivity was prodigious. Even given our necessarily incomplete documentation, the number of commissions, concerts, lessons, social events, compositions, and publications he was involved in during his last decade boggles the mind. And do not forget, he did not have a publicist, manager, or secretary, but ran all of this, so to speak, out of his hip pocket.

Even the disillusioned and disappointed Leopold Mozart was forced to acknowledge this state of affairs when he visited his son in Vienna for some ten weeks at the beginning of 1785. A series of letters reporting his stay to Mozart's sister, Nannerl, reveals that the father was discomfited by the son's lavish standard of living and stunned by the incessant rounds of musical and social activity.

So Mozart was worked hard in his childhood by his father and in his maturity by himself. If he did occasionally brag in his letters of his exceptional fluency in composition, simply to have written down all his works was a Herculean labor, without having also conceived them. Mozart occasionally boasted about his fluency in performance too, reporting to his father, for instance, that when he played for one Georg Friedrich Richter, Richter exclaimed, "Good God! How hard I work and sweat – and yet win no applause, and to you, my friend, it is all child's play." To which Mozart replied, "Yes, I too had to work hard, so as not to have to work hard any longer" (April 28, 1784). This reminds us of an anecdote about Bach, who, when asked how he composed so well, is said to have responded, "I have had to work hard; anyone who works just as hard will get just as far." Even though, to be true, the second half of Bach's assertion would have to be amended to "anyone *with my degree of talent* who works just as hard will get just as far," the first half stands as a healthy corrective to misty-eyed statements about "genius" and "creativity."

Why *do* many of Mozart's biographers so badly want him to have composed out of some inner necessity rather than to pay the rent? The short answer is: They still view Mozart through the purple-tinted lenses of Romanticism. There are many complex aspects to this conundrum, and I would like to emphasize two that seem central, which I shall call the *Amadeus* myth and the snobbery-of-those-who-have-never-had-dirt-under-their-fingernails syndrome. Recall the scene near the end of the film *Amadeus*, in which Mozart on his deathbed is struggling to finish the *Requiem*. For some reason – I cannot imagine why – Salieri is alone with Mozart and trying to help him. Observing Mozart continuing to compose the *Requiem* even as his physical strength ebbs, Salieri concludes that Mozart is an *idiot savant* – an obscene punk whom God has inexplicably chosen as his mouthpiece for divine music. This view of Mozart's creative process can be traced back to a notorious forgery – a letter published in 1815 in a widely read Leipzig music magazine, the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*. In this letter, which purports to be a reply to an unnamed baron who has inquired how he composed, "Mozart" is made to write:

When I am, as it were, completely myself, entirely alone, and of good cheer; say traveling 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. If I continue in this way, it soon

occurs to me, how I may turn this or that morsel to account, so as to make a good dish of it, that is to say, agreeably to the rules of counterpoint, to the peculiarities of the various instruments, &c. All this fires my soul, and provided I am not disturbed, my subject enlarges itself, becomes methodized and defined, and the whole, though it be long, stands almost finished and complete 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. . . . When I proceed to write down my ideas, I take out of the bag of my memory, if I may use that phrase, what has previously been collected into it, in the way I have mentioned. For this reason, the committing to paper is done quickly enough, for everything is, as I said before, already finished; and it rarely differs on paper from what it was in my imagination.<sup>3</sup>

Even though this letter itself was denounced as a forgery by Mozart's most important nineteenth-century biographer, Otto Jahn, and has since been repeatedly denounced by other scholars, its substance has become deeply entrenched in Western writings not just about Mozart's peculiar gifts but about the very nature of artistic creation. So permit me briefly to rehearse what we know, from reliable sources, about Mozart's creative process.

We know that Mozart sketched. Many of his sketches were thrown away by Mozart during his lifetime or by his wife after his death, but quite a number have survived, and many of these have now been published in the appendixes of the various volumes of the *New Mozart Edition (Neue Mozart-Ausgabe)*. We know that Mozart often composed with extraordinary speed and fluency but that there were also times when he was stymied, as he himself reports in his letters. A number of pieces were put aside incomplete; some remained that way, while others Mozart returned to months or years later and completed. Most of Mozart's autograph manuscripts are fair copies and contain few corrections; some do show second thoughts and hesitation. (A good example of the last is the C Minor Piano Concerto, K. 491, a facsimile edition of which has been published.)<sup>4</sup>

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3. *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 17:34 (August 23, 1815), cols. 561-66; trans. *Harmonicon* 35 (November 1825 ): 198-200.

4. *Mozart: Piano Concerto in C Minor, K. 491, with a Foreword by Watkins Shaw and a Critical Introduction by Denis Matthews* (Kilkenny, Ireland: Boethius Press, 1979). An important recent monograph, Ulrich Konrad's *Mozarts Schaffensweise: Studien zu den Werkautographen, Skizzen und Entwürfen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1992), demonstrates that we have sketches for one in ten of Mozart's completed works (to say nothing of the sketches that survive for unknown and fragmentary works). Likewise, a recent article, Robert L. Marshall's "Clues to Mozart's Creativity: The Unfinished Compositions," in Peter Ostwald and Leonard S. Zegans, eds., *The Pleasures and Perils of Genius: Mostly Mozart* (Madison, Conn.: International Universities Press, 1993), 145-54, shows that for every four completed works by Mozart there survives one fragmentary work – that is, a work for which he began a fair-copy full score (not simply sketches) that he abandoned before completion.

Despite an extraordinary ability to remember music and to manipulate musical ideas in his head, Mozart required a keyboard instrument when he was at work on compositions of any scope. This little-noticed fact is evidenced in two letters to Mozart's father, one written by his mother from Paris on April 5, 1778, the other written by himself from Vienna on August 1, 1781. Given Mozart's well-documented ability to work in his head, I suspect that the keyboard may have been necessary in the earliest and latest stages of creation: in the earliest stages, during which Mozart may have used his extraordinary gift for improvisation to generate ideas, and in the final stage, during which he could have tried the nearly finished piece to learn if the sounds as realized had the same feel and effect as the sounds as imagined.

Finally, when in his genuine letters Mozart described to his father how he was progressing on a project, the tone and contents are at stark variance with those of the 1815 forgery. Whereas in 1815 pseudo-Mozart is dreamily receiving ideas whence he knows not, in 1782 working on *Die Entführung*, real-Mozart is concerned with concrete matters of craft and the effects that well-calculated rhythms, textures, melodies, and harmonies will have on performers and listeners. Mozart's utterances about such matters have been conveniently gathered together and intelligently annotated in a new book.<sup>5</sup> Taken as a whole, Mozart's vivid remarks obliterate the 1815 forgery and the *Amadeus* myth based on it, substituting a well-focused reality for a blurry fantasy.

As for the snobbery of those who have never had dirt under their fingernails, it reminds me of some fiction I read a long time ago (I do not recall where) in which a group of characters was described as so primitive that they did not know how to acquire money except by working for it. And to many Romantic minds there was apparently something corrupting or demeaning about creating for money rather than out of "pure" inspiration, like the difference between love and prostitution. Mozart's attitude to money, which was something else entirely, has been summed up by Robert Marshall in *Mozart Speaks*: "Mozart by no means despised wealth. . . . But to be respectable and respected, wealth had, indeed, to be *gained* – that is, *earned* by virtue of one's talent and achievements – and not merely inherited."<sup>6</sup> And herein, I believe, lies the locus of cultural concerns that caused the outcry when I gave my anti-Romantic talk in Vienna: people cannot bear the thought that society might have treated an "original genius" like Mozart so badly that he was, so to speak, forced into artistic prostitution to survive, having to peddle his wares on the filthy streets of musical commerce. In the absence of evidence to the contrary – and sometimes even in the presence of such evidence – these people would prefer to imagine Mozart dreaming of posterity rather than of his unpaid rent.

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5. Robert L. Marshall, *Mozart Speaks: Views on Music, Musicians, and the World* (New York: Schirmer, 1991).

6. Marshall, *Mozart Speaks*, 161.

Certainly the idea that exceptionally creative persons should be freed of ordinary responsibilities to pursue their work unimpeded by worldly concerns is of long standing. It was behind the more enlightened aspects of the patronage given by the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, by Renaissance princes, by Orthodox Jewish communities to Talmudic scholars, and by the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study and other modern think tanks and artist colonies. To Romantic minds, a gifted composer was not a highly skilled craftsman but an inspired genius to whom society owed something – and who would, in return, elevate culture by creating "masterpieces" for posterity. Mozart probably would have laughed at this. He was certainly well aware of his worth and had some sense that his music might have importance beyond the immediate occasions for which it was created. But the Romantic attitude would have astonished him, as he bent his every effort to craft pieces for the here and now, carefully calculated to fit the performers, suit the occasion, have an effect upon the listeners, and earn himself further commissions.

Mozart did write more than once that a reason for desiring financial security was that he found it hard to compose when he was upset and could therefore be more productive if he did not have to worry about money. This perfectly sensible and understandable sentiment was, however, expressed in the context of his being unable to imagine a time when he would not have to compose to support himself, and so wishing to make that process as painless and as successful as possible.

Under ideal circumstances – with a commission that appealed to him, with prospects for an excellent and prestigious performance, with the promise of adequate compensation – Mozart doubtless got intense pleasure from composing. It was probably not merely to fend off his father's criticisms of laziness in one of their interminable tiffs during his adolescence that Mozart called composing his "sole delight and passion." Nonetheless, we do not know, nor will we ever know, whether Mozart would have gone on composing at his usual rate or even at all – had he become wealthy and no longer needed to sell his music to put bread on the table.

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