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Mozart in Vienna: The Myth of "The Best Place in the World"

I.

Mozart has been set upon by thieves. Never before has a composer been so mercilessly pillaged and plundered as Wolfgang Gottlieb Mozart in the 200th year after his death. The things that are being done -- and marketed -- in his name have for the most part nothing, absolutely nothing, to do with him as a person or with his works. The name Mozart has come to serve as a bare and empty canvas on which anything, anything at all, can be painted -- dreams, desires, crazy clothes, kitsch-trinkets, psychological compensations, the interpretations of meaning, whatever you want. Mozart today is a fantasyland, just as he was in the 19th century, one perpetually available to the problems and drives and hang-ups of the age.

His life history was and is a vast open-pit mine, exposed and unguarded, lying there for people to use as they will. The life of no other composer has had to endure such a proliferation of legends; nor has the death itself (in Mozart's case, the consequence of an infectious illness) of any other composer set so much fantasy in motion. It is not the death of Johann Sebastian Bach, or Robert Schumann, or Anton Webern, each in its own way a more spectacular one, that stirs up the emotions, but the trite, mundane death of Wolfgang Mozart. Medical historians are continually producing tomes heavy with descriptions of his medical symptoms that are nothing short of amazing, as though bodily specimens had been available for examination.

And just as with his life, so with his compositions. The history of the staging of Mozart's operas (to take but one example) is simultaneously the history of social mores within the context of those socio-cultural circumstances pertaining at the time. In the case of "Così fan tutte," an opera that fired its inflammatory arrows straight into the heart of bourgeois morality, people even wrote totally new librettos in alleged consonance with the music (which was defenceless against such rape). When you take a look at the record, it is clear that no other composer has had to suffer so much violence as Mozart. From later generations, I mean. Not from his contemporaries, who understood him fairly well and reacted accordingly.

The bad old days when people felt driven by Mozart's pitiless scrutiny of the double standard to rewrite the text of "Così" have passed, of course. In these liberal times you can say anything you want, and no one is listening closely anyways. We admire the phenomenal voices on the ramp at the opera, but we cannot understand what they are singing. At performances, we clap for an exciting stage setting, but when the all-too insistent means of the production's direction brings us face-to-face with what it is really all about, then we defend Mozart's music against it -- against what in fact it means. . . . Of course, each piece of music must be interpreted by the performer, for only thus can it be heard (this is particularly true of the opera!). This work of "translation" must begin anew over and over again. For its greatest enemy is the tendency to do things "according to tradition," repeatedly serving up the same old thing, scratching the same old itch in the same old place. But in this regard, we should not complain. We are free to do what we want.

Everywhere in Vienna these days, in advertisements, on billboards and signs, you can read the following:

"Mozart -- für mein Metier der beste Ort der Welt"

"Mozart -- for my line of work, the best place in the world "

The citation is not only a quotation, it is a statement for today. A lovely myth, catchy, so worded that it sticks in the memory. Mozart makes it easy for Vienna to set itself apart from that other Mozart-city, that city unloved by Mozart which has usurped him just the same. There is no doubt about it: Salzburg is not a good place for Mozart. It wasn't then and it isn't now.

Myth creates order. Without myth, chaos threatens, as the people of antiquity knew. Myth expresses the inexplicable, the unknowable, the realms that lie beyond knowing, and makes them manageable.

But in the work biography has to do, myth has no place. It is not that biographical research is able ultimately to explain everything, but that is not its task. It can only try to show a person in all his complexity. To do this, it needs perspective. We see better from a distance than from too close. For it is more than a matter of the connections between the details. And another thing: it always involves another person, one not personally known to the biographer. Biographers who become too familiar with their "heroes" are finally only talking about themselves, about their ideals and desires and visions. And those who, writing about Mozart, call him "Wolferl" have lost all respect for his person and his works; they come up, at best, with their own kind of personal-kitsch.

II.

Mozart had not been even three weeks in Vienna when, on 4 April 1781, he was writing his father: "I tell you this is a marvellous place -- and the best place in the world for my line of work.--everyone says so.--and I like it here, so I will do everything I can to take advantage of it. Be assured that I mean to earn as much money as possible; for next to good health, that is the best thing to have." Obviously he was already flirting with the thought of staying permanently in Vienna for it was only four days later that he made his first mention of his plan to leave the service of the Salzburg Archbishop. Talk about "the best place in the world" went with his approach to dealing with his father in letters; it was hardly based on a very realistic estimate or the actual possibilities in Vienna and not at all on their financial implications.

And Leopold Mozart was a rigorous letter-reader, one who looked for the meaning behind every word. What "line of work" was Mozart actually talking about? What suddenly made Vienna the world's best place when he had in fact experienced some bitter set-backs there? And if money making had first priority, just what specific commissions or appointments stood in prospect? Whatever the case, Leopold Mozart was fully justified in his doubt. He surely remembered well the intrigues and jostling that had succeeded in preventing Mozart's first opera, "La finta semplice," from being performed in Vienna in 1768.

That showed that not even a Wunderkind, who was hardly to be feared as a long-term competitor, could have his works presented here; the influence of Emperor Joseph II himself was powerless against this resistance. And later the Viennese court had taken the trouble to extend its far-reaching tentacles all the way to Italy to prevent Mozart from obtaining an appointment there. At any rate, it seems clear to me that the third trip to Vienna (in the summer of 1773) was somehow involved with the courts in northern Italy, even though Leopold Mozart could not have known the language by which Empress Maria Theresa virtually forbade her sons living in Italy to offer Mozart a position.

As for Salzburg, it of course enjoyed the life-long loathing of the Mozarts. From them, there is hardly a single friendly word for this city in which Leopold Mozart was to pass fifty years and which today puts itself forward as Mozart-city with an unparalleled fetishism. This was not just a matter of the conflict with the reigning Prince-Archbishop Colloredo, who had rather down-to-earth ideas about the duties his subjects had to fulfil and who saw no particular reason why he should make an exception of the Mozarts.

The Mozart family suffered perennially from the restricted intellectual climate of the city. If Leopold Mozart looked on Augsburg as a city of "Abderiten" -- smug, materialistic, narrow-minded people (after the inhabitants of Abdera in Asia Minor, regarded by antiquity as simpletons) -- so the intellectual narrowness and rigidity of Salzburg filled him with an all-pervading hopelessness. In the realm of music too the boundaries were narrowly set. The court music was modest and the church music had had its wings clipped by Enlightenment reforms inspired by Joseph II. The serenades and divertimentos written for social occasions were well received of course, but the pearls and polished gems that Mozart served up hardly found an audience equal to their worth. There were few possibilities for concertizing and, as for an opera house (Mozart's prime objective), there was none at all.

The entire family yearned to get away from Salzburg, and Mozart was to be the one who would make this all possible. In this, the family had always been in agreement, and certainly this was the case in the winter of 1780/81 when Leopold and Wolfgang Mozart together quite deliberately exceeded the leave of absence they had been granted for the production of "Idomeneo" in Munich.

For the Mozarts, Salzburg offered nothing but a social safety-net. But what daring young artist on the flying trapeze wants to spend any time in the net?

Mozart often talked about his profession and in doing so showed he had very distinct preferences. Facing the need to leave Mannheim in early 1778 and go on to Paris, he asserted as one reason for his reluctance:

"because I have been thinking about what I must do in Paris. I could only make a go of it by taking students and I am not cut out for that kind of work. . .I am quite ready to give lessons as a favor, especially when I see that someone has talent, and pleasure and interest in learning. But to have to go to a house at a given time or to have to wait around at home for someone, that's not for me, no matter how much it may bring in. That's impossible. I'll leave that to those who can't do anything else except play the piano. I am a composer and was born to be a Kapellmeister. The talent for composing that the good Lord so generously bestowed on me (I think I can say this without boasting for I feel it more than ever) is something I cannot and should not bury in this way; and that's what would happen with lots of students, for it is a very unsettling line of work. I would rather neglect the piano, to put it this way, than composing. Because the piano is just a sideline with me, although thank God -- a very important sideline" (7 February 1778).

Leopold Mozart's comment on this came back immediately:

"you write: I am a composer, I should not bury my gift for composing, etc. etc.: who said you should? -- but by fiddling around you really will end up doing it. To make your reputation in the world as a composer, you have to be either in Paris, Vienna, or in Italy. . .the piano must be your introduction to your betters and make them interested in you, then you can have something engraved for subscriptions, which will bring a little

more in than when you compose 6 quartets for some Italian nobleman and all you get for it are some ducats or even just a snuff box with 3 ducats. In this regard, it is better in Vienna; at least there you can sell compositions on a subscription basis" (23 February 1778).

It is evident from such written exchanges that Vienna was a constant topic of conversation between the Mozarts. A Kapellmeister's position was the ultimate goal. For Mozart, that meant: with an opera house where he would make his name as an opera composer. Mozart's performances as a piano virtuoso were to serve merely as the means by which he put himself forward as a composer. Teaching activities were not only of lesser importance but were a nuisance and, in the last analysis, not worthy of him. And Leopold Mozart was certainly in accord with this order of priorities.

III.

As the decision in early June 1781 to stay in Vienna was sealed with that notorious kick in the pants from Count Arco (delivered not at the behest of the Archbishop to be sure, but rather at the end of a fairly crude but nonetheless well-intentioned effort to negotiate between family friends), precisely that situation arrived for Mozart which Leopold Mozart had foreseen and which was only to be expected: in that "marvellous place -- the best place in the world for my line of work," there was nothing to do but to begin with what Mozart was "not cut out for." Mozart had no work other than giving piano lessons by "going to a house at a given time," and when the noble lady-students left Vienna for holidays in the country, he was forced to holiday too -- without pay. In that first year, there were neither concert performances to give nor commissions for compositions. The hopes for a position as Kapellmeister were to go on for years, ever more unlikely and -- in the end -- never to be fulfilled.

An opera commission was soon obtained but a year would pass before the premiere of "Abduction from the Seraglio" was held and Mozart had to wait till then to be paid. It was the Emperor -- who would turn out to be a friend and benefactor time and again throughout the Vienna years and who came forward especially in difficult times -- who organized that well-paid competition with Muzio Clementi on Christmas Eve in 1781. Times for Mozart in Vienna were never again so hard as they were in this first year. And he was not even able to admit it all too openly because he felt driven to justify himself to his father. For in the last analysis, he had made his decision to stay in Vienna against his father's offered advice and expressed wishes. But the decision made, you can hardly say that Vienna had in turn generously welcomed the formerly celebrated Wunderkind -- whose name was known to all -- with open arms.

To be sure, there had been many fundamental changes in Vienna. The imperial residency continued to play a somewhat subordinate role because, however pretentious the title, little real power attached to the imperial status. As seat of the Habsburg inheritance that reached from the Netherlands to Siebenbürgen, from Italy to the border with Prussia, however, Vienna was a European metropolis. Under Maria Theresa, the court had maintained its opulent and ceremonial ways. Moreover, there was, along with the large corps of civil servants needed to administer such a giant realm, a great many members of the nobility who chose to live not on their landed properties but instead most of the time in Vienna and who maintained grand city-palaces comparable in affluence and show with those of many Bavarian principalities. There were ten princes among them, and the number of counts ran up to four or five dozen. By their presence in Vienna they protected their power and influence, many of them also being active in the highest governmental offices.

They all took some part in the life of the court and belonged in greater or lesser degree to the court itself.

Then, in 1780, Maria Theresa died and Joseph II became sole Regent of the Habsburg empire (he had already been crowned Emperor 15 years before), and significant changes took place in the Habsburg residency, changes with fundamental implications for Vienna's music-life as well. Joseph II's court displayed little of the splendor one would expect of an absolute ruler with such pretensions to power. Quite the contrary: here all went according to simplicity and frugality. Joseph II largely dispensed with an active court life, with court ceremony, with the display of power and wealth and absolute authority. He would reign with a constantly growing army of officials but without a visible focal point in the form of a court. Even the lords and ladies of the chamber were dismissed, the number of servants was reduced, rooms stood empty and remained unused. Parts of the residence were boarded up to save on the need to guard them. Grand social occasions given by the court hardly ever took place; Joseph II had no family that might have provided the impetus for them. If the Emperor wanted diversion, he did not invite people to the Hofburg but took himself to the town-villas of the nobility and mixed with his subjects.

In short, the social life of Vienna became decentralised and took place in the nobles' palaces, many of them as elegantly outfitted as any royal household. Some of them even sported their own orchestras. Numerous salons of the nobility emerged, and one particular consequence of the absence of a court-centered social life appears to have been that these salons were in no way aimed solely at the nobility alone but were marked instead by their accessibility to persons of other social degrees; in many cases they stood open to the moneyed middle class present in Vienna. Bourgeois salons also developed which members of the nobility frequented with no reluctance. Emperor Joseph II furthered this openness with many of his reforms and, by his own behavior, set a personal example.

The absence of a court-centered social life also seems very much to have fostered the development of the public concert life in Vienna that had its beginnings in this Josephine decade. Here again the Emperor served as a kind of initiator: he made the Burgtheater available to musicians to use as a concert hall on days when no theater piece was being played and would himself show up as a paying guest. And the Viennese were always music - enthusiasts anyways, something most evident in the blossoming of amateur musical activities. This word "amateur" was in no wise derogatory, by the way, but merely distinguished between non-professional and professional musicians. Often the level of musical skill among amateurs reached that of professionals. To master a musical instrument was simply the thing to do and Vienna was -- as Mozart put it -- "das Clavierland." People didn't just sit and listen to music, they played it themselves. And here too Joseph II with his daily round of chamber music (its significance is all too little appreciated) set the example. One result was that the demand for new music, for new compositions, grew and grew and music-copying firms and music publishers acquired increasing importance.

This move in the direction of a music life open to the public at large existed to such a marked degree perhaps only in London as well, where the historical forces at work were considerably more advanced. Their Viennese parallel can be found in the program and goals of the "Nationaltheater." As the name suggests, this was no longer just a matter of a theater for the court but one there for audiences of all classes. Representational activities of the court that demanded use of the theater had virtually ceased. The introduction of the German-language Singspiel heralded one more step in this direction. As

it turned out, this experiment was implemented with uncertain and half-hearted efforts and it ultimately failed. The expectation that the needs of the new genre could be met entirely from the talent immediately available in Vienna soon proved false. Instead of then going to the best of the German-language composers elsewhere with commissions, the move was taken to fill up the program schedule with works translated from French and Italian, a compromise that gave the lie to all the initial high-sounding objectives of a national theater.

Before that point was reached, however, Mozart had received a commission to compose a Singspiel, its inception coming in those last weeks when he still was in the service of the Archbishop of Salzburg. It seems highly likely that the Emperor himself originated the plan for he busied himself with the details of running the Nationaltheater to a degree that was tantamount to acting as its director. He not only personally engaged the singers and negotiated their contracts but even helped determine the season's program. In the so-called chamber music rounds much of the then new opera literature was discussed and performed; Joseph II ordered the latest successes from all over Europe and stayed well informed on the newest developments, and passed his suggestions on to the Nationaltheater.

IV.

The success of Mozart's Singspiel, "Abduction from the Seraglio," proved of little help. Soon thereafter German-language Singspiel in the Nationaltheater was abandoned and, in its place, the Italian Opera was installed once again, with other singers, other leadership, and a clear preference for opera in the Neapolitan tradition. The playbill was dominated by the works of Paisiello, Sarti, Cimarosa, Anfossi, and Allessandri, pretty and pleasing pieces but certainly nothing in the way of innovative music-theater. The influence of Count Rosenberg-Orsini made itself felt, for he was the theater director in fact and as such was the head of the Italian faction at the Vienna Opera (and not Salieri, despite what you always hear). It was Count Rosenberg-Orsini too who was Mozart's actual antagonist, constantly having to be reined in or reversed in this regard by the Emperor himself.

But it was not only in connection with the opera that it took Mozart time to gain access. Even in that field where he was best known -- as a pianist -- recognition came hard. It took a year before he was able to appear in a concert of his own at the Burgtheater and, thereafter, a couple of times in concerts in the Augarten. Only from the autumn of 1782 on did he succeed in penetrating the salons. But his efforts at the subscription sale of manuscript copies of his piano concertos K413, K414, and K415 were so stretched out that Mozart ran into serious financial difficulties.

And then, suddenly, Mozart was the talk of the town: he almost killed himself with concert appearances, from all quarters came pleas to participate in others' concerts, and (most important) he was engaged to present series of concerts in the major salons of Prince Gallizin and Count Johann Nepomuk Esterhazy. Enjoying the favor of the hour, Mozart organized and presented concerts of his own. The list of subscribers to one of these has come down to us in Mozart's hand and it contains the names of everyone who was anyone in Vienna at the time. This was the period of the great series of piano concertos, nine in all in just the two years of 1784 and 1785. In addition, there was a wealth of chamber music for piano as well as sonatas, variations, and separate pieces written by Mozart for himself as performer. As piano virtuoso, Mozart presented exclusively his own works, for he wanted to make his name not as a pianist but as a composer.

And the audiences were enthusiastic! It goes without saying that his earnings went up accordingly and made it possible for Mozart to live well as a freelance composer. His income (so far as we can establish it) was at the level of a high government official and exceeded the normal wages of a musician by far. Haydn, for example, when he worked for Prince Nicolaus I Esterhazy, had to make do with about 1,000 Gulden including payments in kind (of course, he also had a considerable side-income from music publishers). Mozart, on the other hand, disposed of three times as much and lived like a star, spending his money as fast as it came in.

It was only after this long, two-year stretch of getting established that Vienna turned out after all to be a "marvellous place -- and the best place in the world for my line of work." And in fact, except for London (as Haydn would experience later), no other place offered the performance possibilities that Vienna did. But it was only "the best place" for what came "next to good health" for Mozart the piano virtuoso -- and for him, the piano was just a "good sideline." If he could have been a Kapellmeister or a court-composer, Mozart would have gladly gone to Munich. And that was Leopold Mozart's preferred destination, for he had many friends there and it would have made it possible to bring the whole family out of detested Salzburg and keep it together -- Leopold Mozart's ultimate objective. But in Munich, Mozart would have had only limited possibilities to perform as a pianist and his catalog of works would certainly have ended up looking quite different. Even in Mannheim -- before the court moved to Munich -- there was no audience except the society of the court. Of course, the Mannheim orchestra was the best imaginable and the musicians not only were generously paid but even received extended periods to study (with pay) in Italy; but in Mannheim there was hardly anyone else to interact with except other musicians. In this respect, Vienna was totally different: the free and easy mingling of the various social groups greatly facilitated the public activities of an artist who had to pay for his independence from a fixed position with his dependence on the public's favor, on patrons and interested persons from circles of all sorts.

V.

But: playing the piano was not Mozart's chosen line of work, and neither was composing for the piano. His metier was opera. And it was not until the fall of 1785 that Mozart finally got the opportunity to compose an "Italian" opera. Of course this had partly to do with how long Mozart took to search out promising material and texts, and with the fact that he demanded a librettist who was prepared to cooperate with him in tailoring a libretto to his ideas.

At the time Mozart first met him, Da Ponte still had had relatively little opera-writing experience; perhaps this is one reason why he was so amenable to working closely with the composer. And Mozart offered him a project that was a challenge of the highest order. It was not a case of the usual buffo opera with a middling silly theme but rather a work of unparalleled political brisance and, for good measure, absolutely virgin territory in the realm of music-theatre. "La folle journée ou le Mariage de Figaro" was a political theater piece whose "chronique scandaleuse" in Paris was known to all. Performance of the play in Vienna by Schikaneder's troupe had consequently been forbidden because no one wanted to provide the occasion for any turmoil. Of course no one wanted to brandish the threat of censorship either -- that would not go well with the context of Joseph II's reforms. So the authorities allowed the printing of the play's text in Vienna. Joseph II personally decreed this last touch, for as he said, he knew "this piece." To propose making an opera of precisely this play at this time was a very self-assured and politically sensitive venture, one that required a fine feel for the political situation.

It certainly was not naiveté that caused Mozart to land on this text. For in its existing form it was completely unsuited as an opera and even after it had been reworked and adapted, the result would still be a musical drama without precedent. Mozart must have been aware, that, even if he succeeded in turning it into an opera, it would inevitably meet with strong reservations, not least because the opera was sure to offend one part of the audience at the Nationaltheater: that part of the nobility still clinging with accustomed hauteur to its hereditary rights. Naturally the play's theme of the "*ius primae noctis*" no longer played any role as such, but the general abolition of the privileges of the nobility (a major point in Joseph II's program of reforms) was very much a matter of the moment. Aristocratic privileges had already been dismantled in judicial matters, placing the nobleman on the same level with the farmer and the laborer; the proposal to abolish the nobility's freedom from taxation was still being fought over. And this was an opera that would insist on the equality of persons and portray the aristocracy in all its worn-out, if already ineffectual characteristics.

Just how far Mozart and Da Ponte went in taking sides with the Josephine reforms is shown by the way they managed to make the French material more radical while appearing to render it harmless. With Beaumarchais, the scandalous aspect consisted of his verbal attacks on the nobility right up to that drastic monologue in the fifth act when he called the very institution of the aristocracy into question. Mozart and Da Ponte would cut out all such objectionable material of course, but in doing so, what remains only talk in Beaumarchais is transformed into action, thus heightening its effect.

It will certainly have been clear to Mozart that "Le nozze di Figaro" would provoke part of the Nationaltheater's audience. But Joseph II not only personally championed the opera's presentation but also prevailed over intrigues against it. Moreover, he later arranged for its first performances in Italy (in Monza and Florence) and he even directed it be performed as part of the festivities for the wedding of an archduchess in Prague. He often used opera to hold up a mirror of warning to the aristocracy, as a lesson for future regents. At the marriage of his nephew and successor Franz, he had the even more pointed Beaumarchais opera "Tarare" (composed by Salieri at the same time Mozart was working on "Figaro") performed in an Italian-language adaptation by Da Ponte (renamed, it was the opera "Axur, Re d'Ormus", which by the way is still awaiting a second running in Vienna). . .

The political message embedded in "Figaro" was clearly understood by the people at the time; for us today it is much more difficult to grasp. It should have been the task of musicologists to make this historical significance clear, instead of developing an essentially non-political approach and talking about an opera "of the human foibles and misunderstandings that go with life" (Anna Amalie Abert). But then, Mozart's operas have remained musicology's step-children. And even Da Ponte's libretti are still pregnant with conflict and controversy. At first, "Figaro" was not a big success in Vienna; indeed, it could hardly have been otherwise for the challenge was too great in every respect. When it was newly staged in August 1789, however, against the background of the first reports of the French revolution, its success was much greater.

VI.

It would appear as though Mozart had just been waiting for this first big break in composing opera to start cutting back on performing at the piano as interpreter of his own compositions. For him, the piano was indeed only "a sideline, although a very important sideline." It is characteristic of him that in a letter to his father on 10 April 1784, he wrote about his quintet for piano and winds (K452) as follows: "by the way, I have |:to tell the truth:| lately grown

tired of it -- from playing it so often -- and it is no less an honor to me that my audiences never tire of it." Performing for the public was not what mattered most to Mozart; what mattered was composing. Performances featuring his own works were only a means to an end. The great frequency of the piano in the instrumental ensembles for which he composed is accounted for by the fact that Mozart always wrote for specific performance occasions and for a long time that meant composing for himself as one of the performers.

As opera composing engaged him more and more, he reduced his public appearances correspondingly and changed to quite different instrumental groupings, indeed from 1788 on only rarely including the piano. In these times came the string quintets, the late quartets, the preoccupation with trying out new instruments and new settings. Of the six piano sonatas he had in mind for the Prussian princess, he ended up composing only one (K576) despite the prospect of good money. On the other hand, he delved deeply into the clarinet and, with his clarinet quintet (K581) and his concerto for clarinet and orchestra (K622), created the first compendium of this instrument's musical possibilities. A major interest of Mozart's was the exploration of the lower tonal regions; in this connection, for example, the aria for basso with obbligato contrabass (K612) can be mentioned as an essay in the exceptionally difficult problems of composing for such an unwieldy instrument, work that Mozart obviously undertook in collaboration with a virtuoso on the contrabass. And his compositions for the glass armonica are also noteworthy as experiments with new regions of tonal expression.

All of these things were written for specific performances but they were anything but customary fare. Mozart was becoming less and less ready to compromise and increasingly demanding of his audiences, and he clearly felt he could afford it. True, the years 1788 and 1789 brought a calamitous slump in his income, which led to the dramatic pleas to Michael Puchberg for financial help. The reasons, however, are readily seen: it was the time of the Turkish War, a time that caused Vienna's concert life as well as prospects for commissions or publishing compositions to sink to practically nothing. On top of that came the illness of Constanze and, for Mozart, nothing was too dear for her care. He insisted that she go to Baden for the expensive course of treatment there while Constanze would rather have stayed in Vienna, as clearly emerges from a reading of the extant letters. (The absurd gossip about her "lovers" comes out of the overheated imaginings of later generations, a form of projection that even Mozart himself fell victim to: think of all the romantic liaisons with all the sopranos that have been attributed to him. But in connection with this level of petty myth, let me say one thing: there is no proof whatever of a single love affair of either Mozart or Constanze other than the one between the two of them.)

VII.

In any event, from 1790 on, Mozart's financial situation quickly recovered, thanks in part to the commission for "Cosi fan tutte" personally procured for him by the Emperor. The commission was even accompanied by an honorarium twice the usual amount, a matter of particular note given the legendary frugality of Joseph II. Apparently the Emperor (who not long before had granted Mozart the post of Kammerkompositeur -- essentially a purely honorary position for the 31-year old composer) was aware of his financial distress and wanted to help him out at a critical time. As a result, Mozart was able to pay back a portion of his debts to Michael Puchberg, and we know that in his last year he made more money than he ever had before. (He still had debts of course, but in spite of them Mozart generously came through with loans for characters of such financially dubious reputations as his clarinet-playing friend, Anton Stadler, who

had already twice filed for bankruptcy. After Mozart's death, Stadler's debts to the estate were looked on as being irrecoverable. . . .)

In other words, the notion of Mozart's steady descent into poverty is groundless. If you were to draw a curve depicting the progress of Mozart's financial success, you would have to begin with a low point in 1781, followed by a painfully slow rise and reaching a very high level by the end of 1783. Then there would be a dip for the years 1788/89, with a clear ascent to the highest point of income in Mozart's last year. . . .

But this preoccupation with Mozart's income tends to reduce the question of his success, of his accomplishments, to a matter of economics. Just as counting the number of persons present at his funeral ceremony tells us as little about the depth of their sorrow as about their perception of what the loss of this unparalleled composer meant. Any attempt to measure success by external data is fallacious. The performers, the interpreters of a composition have always received more applause than its composer and more money as well. Mozart himself earned several times more for a single concert appearance than he did from the sale of a piano concerto whose beauty still enchants us two hundred years later. If the only signs of recognition that mattered to Mozart were applause and concert fees, then it would in fact be difficult to understand why he so obviously cut back on playing the piano.

You could even go a step farther and ask why Mozart did not simply pack up and move to Prague where his operas evoked storms of enthusiasm in contrast to their somewhat ambiguous reception in Vienna. The fees he received in Prague were just as high, nor were they picky about his giving performances for his own benefit, and Prague too had a wealthy nobility. It was certainly not that Mozart had any reservations about his public there, although the ardor for Mozart was not untinged by Prague's anti-Vienna feelings. In this respect, Mozart had been absorbed into the local patriotism that grew out of the violence of the Habsburgs in prosecuting the Catholic Reformation. There are many reflections of this to be found in the biography of Mozart written by the Czech teacher and music critic, Franz Xaver Niemetschek (a work unjustifiably raised to the level of a so-called reliable source by traditional Mozart research).

Mozart stayed anchored in Vienna for reasons that went far beyond purely economic considerations or the vagaries of success. Even the contacts with local music publishers that had opened up and contributed to the dissemination of his compositions were not a sufficient tie. For the Viennese printers could not compare with those of Paris or London for the accuracy of their work, to say nothing of its quality. Moreover, the foreign business connections of the Viennese publishers were extremely limited, while those of printers in France, England, or Holland were much more extensive. But then Mozart had never busied himself with the publication of his works in the thoroughly professional way that Haydn, with his nose for business, had. On his trip to Frankfurt in 1790, for example, Mozart had evidently not bothered to look in on André in Offenbach (who soon after Mozart's death would turn out to be one of his best and most ambitious publishers) or on Schott in Mainz, two firms whose unlimited interest for him he could count on.

Vienna's compelling attraction for Mozart came from its life as a metropolis, as an intellectual, cultural, and social center where influences and trends of the most variegated sorts came together in a kaleidoscope of colors, an exciting place of the most diverse currents and ideas. None of his Vienna operas could have originated in a court theater that was better suited, Mannheim and Munich included. Moreover, they owed their very existence to Mozart's participation in a society in ferment (and his keen observation of it), a society

clearly able to manifest itself in Joseph II's Vienna with all its hopes and fears for the unprecedented modernizing efforts of an absolute despot. Each of his operas amounted to a vigorous intervention into an on-going debate and, with its choice of material, each risked provoking extreme reactions.

A reproach constantly levelled at Mozart was, how could he have made music of such depth and beauty victim to such miserable libretti -- a charge made against not only "Cosi fan tutte" but, equally hard, against "Don Giovanni" as well, the latter a work that criticized the increasingly dogmatic tendencies of the theater in Joseph II's times. Moreover, in "Don Giovanni," Mozart very deliberately transported performance characteristics of the ostracized "suburban"-theater (that is, outside the city walls and for the common folk) to the royal stage. The promptings in this direction came out of Mozart's own experiences in a Vienna where the suburban theatres were particularly active and even the "Don Giovanni" story had been performed in pantomimes on various stages since at least 1783. The sureness of his instinct in the further development of such impulses is shown by "Die Zauberflöte." Out of his zest for improvising on current themes came the wealth of allusions in his operas to topical matters familiar to his audiences such as Mesmerism, the balloon ascensions of Blanchard, and the like. Even in connection with his music, Mozart did not hold back from incorporating topical references, whether they involved the music for the banquet scene in "Don Giovanni" or the arie, "Come scoglio immoto resta," from "Cosi fan tutte" which parodied an aria from Salieri's opera, "La cifra," that had premiered only four weeks before.

VIII.

During his years in Vienna, Mozart hardly travelled at all. The composer -- who had come to know almost all of Europe as a child and youth and eagerly inhaled new impressions everywhere, who could proudly say of himself, "I can take over and imitate every art and style of composition" -- remained more than ten years in one place, apart from one visit to his father in Salzburg and occasional short trips of a few weeks' duration. Everything he needed to satisfy his urge for intensive socializing and his need to be constantly busy he found in metropolitan Vienna. For him, there was only one alternative, one he never lost sight of even though he could never bring himself to take the final decision: London -- the only city on a par with Vienna in the freedom of its ways, in its social ambience and its musical diversity. Towards the end of his life, when concrete invitations to go to London were put to Mozart, only consideration for his family and his tie to Constanze caused him yet again to postpone such a venture. (Constanze was expecting her sixth child -- only the second that would survive -- and for Mozart, it was unthinkable to go without her.)

And yet, Vienna never actually became home to Mozart. In Vienna, he was someone from out of town, and so it remained. And the company he kept was with outsiders, with persons whose position in society was by no means assured, who kept their antennae out for possible peril and reacted with seismograph-precision to political developments. For remember, this was the eve of the French Revolution and the atmosphere was charged and heavy with portent. These tensions Mozart captured brilliantly in his overture to "Figaro."

In the circle of Mozart's friends and acquaintances, for example, there were a remarkable number of Jews (still a taboo subject of Mozart research). Despite the Tolerance Edict of Joseph II, their position in Viennese society was still not firmly established, and the oppression they had suffered under Maria Theresa continued to be felt among them. Practically every biography mentions Mozart's apartment "auf dem Graben" (at the corner of Habsburgergasse), but seldom do they also point out that the rest of the house was occupied by the

Arnsteiner family, the only Jewish family permitted to choose its own quarters (all the others were required to live in houses set aside for Jews; they were even denied a ghetto). And Mozart, being there, obviously had close contacts with the Arnsteiners. Raimund Baron Wetzlar von Plankenstern stood as godfather to Mozart's first son, another sign of his unusual openness towards Vienna's Jews. Wetzlar's home was a meeting place for Jews and it was here that Mozart first met Lorenzo Da Ponte. Although Da Ponte wore the habit of a Catholic priest, he always placed great stock in his Jewish ancestry. In short, Mozart's familiar territory was not limited just to the famous salons and a few fellow musicians.

Mozart had no illusions about Vienna. Regarding the theater here, he once wrote that he was fully aware "that the Viennese love to run you down." He was as prepared to flatter his audiences as he was to impose uncompromising demands on them. If you wished to formulate an idea of Mozart's aesthetics, you would have to emphasize that he strived to combine the easy and unadorned with the difficult and demanding, that he spoke of the "popular" and of that which "makes one sweat." "Die Zauberflöte" is a perfect example of this. It ranges from a typical Viennese ditty ("Der Vogelfänger bin ich ja") to the artistic counterpoint in the overture and in the scene with the men in armor. Another example is the elaborately worked-out rondo on the theme of the completely simple folk tune, "Komm, lieber Mai, und mache die Bäume wieder grün".

In a word, the aesthetic of Mozart is people-centered. You might even say it is a political aesthetic, a program of the Enlightenment. He is constantly seeking to show not just one side but, at the same time, the other side as well. With Mozart, there are no "good" and "evil" persons, no principles personified of black and white, but rather complex beings who through their actions -- suffering and triumphant, malignant and benign -- come to know themselves in all their attributes. He seeks to get at the heart of man's being, not in singling out one special virtue but in trying to comprehend his complex nature. Mozart is a composer of the mind and not just of the emotions, and thus his abiding mode of expression is the drama and not the descriptive epic.

Mozart's music is one of contrasts, often strident but never "to the point of being unbearable", as he once put it. To his contemporaries, this was much clearer than it is to us today. Johann Friedrich Reichardt spoke of the "mixture of opposite characteristics and styles" -- and meant it as a criticism. Hans Georg Nägeli went even farther and characterized Mozart as, "despite all his unquestioned skill. . .the composer with the least style among the great artists" and accused him of "indulging in exaggerated and excessive contrasts." The perceptions that lie back of such a judgment are of course quite precise and have something to teach us today, even though we may find the critical undertone extraneous.

Summing up: in the last analysis, it was the city of Vienna that gave Mozart that way of life and those contradictory impulses that ultimately made the works of the Vienna years possible. For these compositions, Vienna was perhaps indeed "the best place in the world" -- we know of none better. Whether it was also "a marvellous place," well, that's another matter. . . .

Translation: Bruce Cooper Clarke, July 1991

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