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R.I.P.: A little Night-Musick for a Dear Friend

I.

Busying himself with Mozart's state of mind after learning that Leopold Mozart had died on 28 May 1787, Wolfgang Hildesheimer notes that "*Ein musikalischer Spass* (K. 522). . . was the first work Mozart copied out after the news of his father's death." Then he goes on:

"The autograph manuscript was completed two weeks after the news. . . But since Mozart carried his compositions around in his head for days before setting them down on paper, the idea must have existed earlier. . . It is possible that *Ein musikalischer Spass* was self-therapy, either to conquer his grief or else to laugh off his guilt feelings at his lack of sympathy. We cannot plumb the depths and shallows of Mozart's inner motivations. What occurred to Mozart when his father died? Apparently the ludicrous incompetence of his colleagues and pupils. Absurd, but not unthinkable. It is more probable, however, that nothing conscious occurred to him at all on his father's death, but all the more occurred to him for *Don Giovanni*, instead. . . He must have been following some inner need when writing the *Spass*, for he cannot have had a commission for it. . . It is improbable that the *Spass* was ever performed during Mozart's time. It was simply something for his own enjoyment."
(page 207 of the Marion Faber translation)

As an index to Hildesheimer's mindset regarding Mozart, this passage is revealing. But that is all. It is also quite simply wrong in its underpinning particulars. Research leads Alan Tyson to conclude (in his *Studies of the Autograph Scores*, pp.240-42) that:

-- ". . .it seems a reasonable inference that Mozart started to write out parts for at least the first movement of K.522 *before the end of 1785.*" (my emphasis)

--"The impression is therefore gained that the whole of the first movement was *written out in parts, presumably with a performance in mind*, at any rate before the end of 1786."

And Tyson sums up (p.245), saying, ". . .at least we can now set aside the notion that the work as a whole can be regarded in any way as a reaction, whether poignant or whimsical, to the death of his father Leopold."

But if *Spass* is not what occurred to Mozart in the weeks after learning he was fatherless, was there some other response that found expression in what the composer wrote at the time? Perhaps there could have been, but first we have to go back in time, to a Salzburg winter in the year 1756. . .

II.

Leopold shuddered, pulled the shawl more tightly round his shoulders, and sank disconsolately lower in his rocking chair. Outside, the winds of March howled down the Getreidegasse. Inside, the candle flickered and he strained to read the words printed in the big old Latin *Biblia Sacra*.

He was depressed. For almost three hours in the late afternoon he had tried to teach the little girl how to play the C-major scale on the clavichord. After all, it shouldn't be too hard. There are no sharps or flats and her fingers are long enough even if she is only five years old. But for almost three hours, she had failed to grasp the idea. Either she would go up to D or she would go down to B, never stopping at C in either direction. And she always insisted on playing F-sharp, never F, but F-sharp. Why?, he demanded. I like it, she would giggle and do it again.

Finally, exasperated, he leapt up, threw on a coat, and went walking along the river. By the time he got back, Mama had put the children to bed, the girl in her little cot, the boy in his crib, and the house was quiet.

Mama, who knew her husband's every mood, watched and waited as he ate the evening's bread and cheese in silence and slowly drained his glass of white wine. When he left the table and sat down with the bible in his lap, she took up her knitting and settled in the other chair.

Leopold tried to concentrate on the Latin text, but the small of his back hurt, he had a slight headache, and his frustration would not go away. "F-sharp, for God's sake," he murmured.

"What did you say, dear old fart?," inquired his wife, lovingly.

"Oh, nothing," said Leopold, startled to realize that he had spoken aloud, and went back to the book. In the flickering darkness of the room, only three sounds could be heard: the tick of the clock, the click of the knitting needles, and the icy wind of the 10th of March catching at the window shutters.

Six weeks to the day, the latest child had been born. A boy, another boy. "Dear God, let this one live," Mama had prayed. Joannes Chrysostomus Wolfgangus Theophilus. So far, he seemed to be doing all right, but he was not the most robust of babies.

Leopold read. Mama knitted. The clock ticked. Suddenly, a sound from the bedroom. Leopold closed the book and looked at his wife. She listened, but there was nothing. Hesitantly, husband and wife went back to their occupations. Then, again a sound. Like a soft murmuring.

Leopold heaved the big bible onto the table and walked to the bedroom door. Listening from without, he realized that the sound was coming from the crib. But it was neither a cry nor a whimper, it was a kind of humming. He crept in quietly but, just at that point, Nannerl stirred restlessly in her cot and gave a little snort and the sound from the crib stopped.

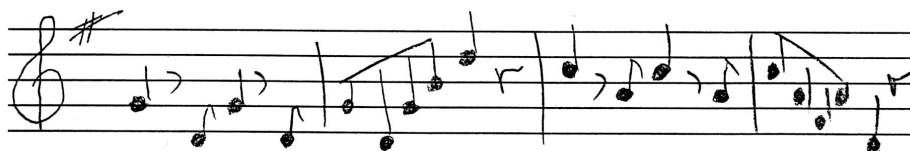
"Damn," said Leopold to himself, "wouldn't you know." And he stood stark still in the middle of the pitch-black room and waited. . .and waited. . .

Then, the soft hum began again. Leopold inched forward in the darkness, until he had reached the side of the crib. Carefully, he leaned down, letting his ear almost touch the mouth of the sleeping baby boy.

The humming recommenced and it was quickly evident that a phrase, no, two phrases, one ascending, the other descending, were involved. Leopold listened intently. In a soft but accentuated hum, the two phrases were repeated over and over again. Fascinated, Leopold mentally sounded the phrases, determined to memorize them.

When he was sure he had them in mind, he tiptoed quickly to the clavichord and began to seek out the notes. The first note was -- there! -- a G, now down to . . .D, then G again, then D, then G, D, G, up to B, and finally to D an octave higher. Excitedly, Leopold realized the ascending phrase must be in G-major. He sought out the second phrase: high C, down to A, C, A, C, A, down to F-sharp, back to A, then a drop to D.

Then he groped for the rhythm and the note-values he had heard. With one finger, he played the phrases over and over again until he was satisfied that he had reproduced them exactly. Then, turning to the nearest thing at hand, he opened to the blank page at the back of the bible, drew five lines, entered the one-sharp signature of the key of G, and notated the following:

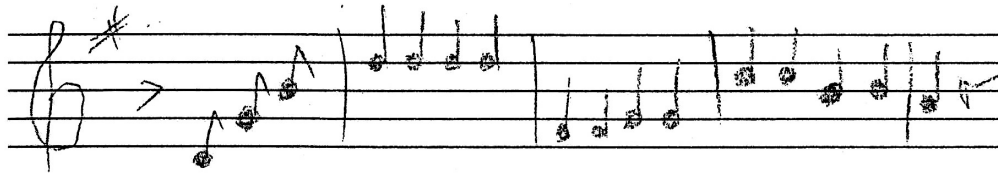


Never interrupting her knitting, Mama followed her husband's activity with her eyes. Obviously the depression was gone, replaced by a growing excitement.

The notation finished, Leopold returned to the clavichord, first playing the phrases with one finger, then in octaves, and finally with chords in the left hand. "Mama!" he exclaimed, "listen to that, isn't that wonderful! That's from our little boy! It really is, I didn't make it up."

"Amazing," said Mama. "A gift from God," said Leopold, and he walked to her side, put his hand on her shoulder and was about to say that that amazing little boy was now six weeks old and it was time that they. . ., when once more, the soft humming of the lad stole into the room.

Electrified, Leopold rushed quietly into the bedroom to listen. Was it the same as before? With all his concentration, Leopold let the sounds fill his ears. No, it was not the same, it was different, more difficult somehow. It came and went several times, first slowly, then more quickly. When Leopold felt sure he had it, he went back to the clavichord. It came out like this:



He notated this beneath the first theme, played them both again, and turned to share his excitement with his wife. But she was not there, she had gone to bed. "Damn," he muttered. Carefully, he wrote "At night, 10.III.756" beneath the two themes, closed the bible and blew out the candle.

In the frigid darkness, he undressed, put on his nightshirt, and listened for the breathing of his wife. Its regular pulse told him she was sleeping. Irresolute, he wondered if he might wake her. It had been a long time and, after all, the baby was six weeks old now. Still, it didn't seem right to rouse her out of a sound sleep. Depression and disconsolation began seeping back in as he settled slowly into bed at her side, pulling his share of the covers over him.

He had just closed his eyes and composed himself for another abstinent night when, suddenly, Mama turned on him, ran her hand up his nightshirt, and tweaked his damson plums. "Now I've got you!" she whispered in his ear with a throaty laugh. And Leopold's resolve, till then so uncertain, stiffened perceptibly.

While winter's wind raced through the Getreidegasse and disappeared down the Salzach, inside, beneath the goosefeather quilt, body heat sent temperatures soaring.

III.

It had been several weeks now since the word had come. It was early June when the news finally reached him that life had taken its leave of his father in Salzburg several days before, on the 28th of May.

There was nothing to do about it. Even if he could have gotten away, he couldn't reach Salzburg from Vienna in time to be there for the funeral. So what was the use of going? He had so much here to do.

Everyone – and that meant Constanze, Carl Thomas, the servants and young Johann Nepomuk Hummel as well – was still involved in getting settled into the house in the Landstrasse. Constanze was midway through her fourth pregnancy and couldn't travel. Meanwhile, *Don Giovanni* was promised for a mid-October premiere in Prague and he had to keep after Da Ponte to get the libretto right. And finally, of course, there were things to be done – string

quintets, lieder, a four-hands piano sonata, and the opera, always the opera. He was very busy.

His wife knew how busy he was. And she knew, too, how busy he kept himself as a way of dealing with the loss of his father. It was not that he dwelt on the subject in morbid monologues. The physical separation of father and son had been a fact of life too long for that. But she saw that a life-long dialogue – one that proceeded apace, whether together or not – had been irretrievably broken.

It was on an evening in early August, in the middle of one of those spaces in his life when the memory of his father seemed particularly present, that his glance fell on the big old Latin bible sitting in the bookcase. His father had unaccountably brought it with him when he and his student, Heinrich Marchand, came to visit two years before. Wolfgang had never looked at it.

The childhood picture of his father poring over the old bible came to mind and he hefted the heavy, moldy-smelling book out of the shelves and onto the table. Absently, he picked through the pages, pausing to make out the occasional Latin phrase and pleased with how much he remembered. The childhood picture having faded away, he turned the bible on its face and was about to close the back cover.

There, in the late last light of a long summer's day, he noticed two barely legible staves of music in his father's hand. "How extraordinary," he thought. He bent down to get a closer look and first found the inscription, "At night, 10.III.756." Thirty-one years ago! What on earth was his father doing, writing notes in the back of a bible "at night" 31 years ago?

His attention turned to the notes, now little more than brown splotches on a mottled yellow page. Still he could make them out, he thought, and his practiced eye passed back and forth, "playing" the music in his mind.

He went to the fortepiano and sounded the first staff and then the second, first just the notes and then with chords, first slowly, then with tempo, making them dance.

"What's that, it's nice," asked his wife.

"It's something my father wrote. A long time ago," he said, extemporizing on the one phrase, then on the other. "He said he wrote it at night." And he got up to look for some notepaper.

"Are you coming to bed?," his wife asked, recognizing the signs of on-setting composition and knowing this could go on all night.

"Later," he said. "Listen, this phrase is just right for an allegro, isn't it?" and with one finger, he played Leopold's first staff.

"I'll see you in the morning," said his wife, smoothing down his blond hair and rubbing his cheek, "don't stay up too late." She turned to move away quickly but he laughed and succeeded in giving her a pat before she got out of reach. Then, eagerly, he began to sketch in the first-violin line of a first movement.

Most of the allegro first movement of a serenade for two violins, viola, violoncello and double bass was finished by the time he went to bed. In the course of the next few days, a minuet and trio, a "romance," another minuet and trio, and a rondo incorporating Leopold's second staff were also completed.

Now, there was only one more thing to do. He opened up the little ledger listing his works that he had kept for the last three years. How should I put it, he asked himself. After a moment's thought, he notated the first two measures of the first movement in the staves on the right-hand page and, opposite them on the left, he wrote:

den 10:ten August

*Eine kleine NachtMusick, bestehend in einem Allegro, Menuett und Trio. -- Romance. Menuett und Trio, und finale.
-- 2 Violini, Viola e Babi.*

What his father had given him, written down on that night so many years ago, he had given back. The circle was closed.

"*Requiescat in pace, mon très cher amy,*" he said, making the sign of the cross, and he softly closed the ledger.

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Notes to the narrative:

1. This fantasy had its origin in a fit of annoyance with the nonsense to be found in reading Hildesheimer's *Mozart*. If you haven't read it, don't bother.

2. The title comes in part from what Mozart wrote when he entered *Eine kleine NachtMusick* in his works-catalog on 10 August 1787, and in part from the salutation to be found in the very first letter written to his father on 17 March 1781 after arriving in Vienna the day before in response to the Archbishop's orders: *Mon très cher amy!* Never before in the extant Mozart letters had Wolfgang presumed to address his father as his *dear friend*.

He had just come from Munich where, in an unparalleled process of epistolary mutual consultation (with Leopold in Salzburg and Mozart in Munich and the letters flying back and forth), Mozart had composed *Idomeneo, re di Creta* (K.366), one of his greatest operas. On 29 January 1781, the product of all this father-son cooperation had its premiere, and Leopold and Mozart's sister were there to savour the young man's triumph. And six weeks later, they were still there, enjoying themselves to the full as they played hooky from Salzburg and visited with friends and relatives, until the Archbishop's command wrenched them back to reality.

Can it be that the collaboration on the opera and the camaraderie that undoubtedly followed had led the 25-year-old Mozart to believe that a new stage in the father-son relationship had been reached, that now he could deal with his father as friend to friend? Apparently Leopold bristled; in any event, the very next letter written a week later reverted to the usual address, *Mon très cher Père*, and every extant letter thereafter as well.

3. The *Biblia Sacra*: The inventory made of Mozart's library (for tax purposes) after he died included a Holy Bible. Analysis suggests it had been published in 1679. How it came into Mozart's possession, whether it had passed down through generations of Mozarts, for example, is unknown.

4. Salty language: The extant Mozart family correspondence clearly documents an earthy, private in-family *façon de parler*. It probably was shared to some extent with the most intimate of friends, but there is nothing in the historical record to suggest that this intra-familial vocabulary was employed in more public circumstances where it would have been inappropriate and possibly offensive. "Damson plums": from a reference to his testicles in a letter of Leopold Mozart to his son, 11 November 1780.

5. In April 1787, the Mozarts – husband, wife, child, servants, and little Hummel – moved from a relatively spacious second-floor apartment in the inner city behind St. Stephen's cathedral to a ground-floor apartment in the Landstrasse quarter beyond the city walls, remaining there until September 1787.

6. The Mozarts' fourth child, a daughter, Theresia, was born on 27 December 1787. She died of intestinal cramps on 29 June 1788.

7. In addition to the work on *Don Giovanni* that must have been going on through the summer and fall of 1787, Mozart listed the following in his works-catalog: 19 April, string quintet in C (K.515); 16 May, string quintet in G minor (K.516); May-June, six songs (K.517-520, K.523, 524); 29 May, four-hand piano sonata (K.521); 14 June, *Ein musikalischer Spass* (K.522); 10 August, *Eine kleine NachtMusick* (K.525); 24 August, violin sonata in A (K.526); 28 October, *Don Giovanni* (K.527).

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