

*A note of introduction:* *On 27 January 2006 in the Golden Room of the Augsburg town hall, Prof. Dr. Ulrich Konrad gave his talk opening the Mozart-Year 2006 festivities under the auspices of the City of Augsburg and the German Mozart Society.*

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## A Secret without a Solution: The Wonder that is Wolfgang Amadé Mozart

Shouldn't each of us be able to recall his or her first true encounter with the music of Wolfgang Amadé Mozart, provided, of course, that we've kept our ears open? I'm not referring here to some passing awareness that took place somehow, somewhere, but rather to an experiencing of melodies, sounds, and rhythms that made us stop and listen, that suddenly and compellingly wrenched us out of the well-worn soundtrack of our daily music listening. And yet, when we try to remember this significant moment in our musical life, then we may realize that it has long since slipped away. Chance impressions that imprint themselves on our consciousness can be just as fleeting as the music itself. Or, to put the matter more appropriately perhaps, should we say rather that these impressions are often so profound that we simply are unable to recall exactly when it was that the music of Mozart began to take life in us without our really having noticed it?

Be that as it may, surely every listener who has been tapped by the magic wand of one of Mozart's compositions knows that, upon hearing it, he or she has been transformed. One is filled with wonderment at the power of this music, music that often somehow strikes us as so playful, so marvellously simple. One is amazed that a single note, such as the high B flat of the oboe at the beginning of the Adagio in the great B-flat major wind serenade K 361, known as the *Gran Partita*, sounds in this moment as though it came into the world for the very first time. With astonishment, the listener hears how one slight melodic turn with a couple of notes can prefigure a whole other world – oh, what we cannot sense in the "eleison" ("have mercy upon us") when the soprano and chorus sing "Christe eleison" ("Christ, have mercy upon us") from the Great Mass in C-minor K 427. What fascination ultimately overcomes the listener when, in the Terzettino "Soave sia il vento" ("May the breezes blow gently") from the dramma giocoso *Così fan tutte* K 588, the tremulous yearning of the lovers' farewell freezes into an unworldly glassy sound of pure suspense, as though a gust of icy wind were blowing upon the souls of those singing. These are but three moments, events only seconds long, small technical musical details: and yet, what indescribable emotional power!

Who was this Mozart, this man who, with small, abstract graphic symbols precisely written down upon thousands upon thousands of sheets of music paper, knew how to move us emotionally and intellectually in equal measure? Who is Mozart today, 250 years after his father proudly reported to an acquaintance in his hometown of Augsburg that his wife "on 27 January at 8 in the evening. . .

had successfully been delivered of a boy" and the lad was called "Joannes, Chrisostomus, Wolfgang, Gottlieb"? The difficult relationship between the reality of his life as he lived it then and the life we live today already finds expression in the name the music world uses for the composer: out of the "Gottlieb" in his father's letter, the "Theophilus" in the baptismal register, the "Amadeo" or "Amadé" that the composer himself used, has come "Amadeus." This form for his name appears in an official document for the first time in the death register of St. Stephan's cathedral in Vienna.

Let us take this fact as a sign: the living Mozart preferred to call himself Amadé, the Mozart that posterity has sought uninterruptedly for over 200 years to make its own is called Amadeus. Amadé being accessible to us only in part and every approach to him having been frustrated by contemporary views that are constantly changing (a frustration destined to continue), the efforts to clarify Mozart's life and to understand his personality as well as his art have resulted in bringing forth totally contrary portrayals of the man. The demonic Mozart of the Romantic era, for example, the Apollonian Darling of the Gods of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, or the Classical-Popstar of the "Amadeus" film from the 1980s, known and recognized around the world: it may be that these perceptions of Mozart present individual facets of the inscrutable Amadé but mostly they reflect the times of their origin.

A very old picturization of Mozart, one that is simultaneously an enduring explanation for his incredible artistic endowment, was bestowed on him with the use of the theological term "miracle." Leopold Mozart believed – and he earnestly believed it in the strictest sense of the word – that his son not only was a wonder of nature sent into the world by the grace of God, but that he was also a person through whom God regularly worked His miracles. This is a view embraced by many since time immemorial. While it of course leads to no solution to the puzzle of Mozart's unparalleled musical gifts, leaving the secret of his art unsolved, still it might offer a possible way of understanding – or that's how it would seem, at any rate. And yet sceptical thoughts with regard to the idea of the "miracle Mozart" persist and will not go away. When we choose to make out of Mozart an animated coin-operated composing machine into which the Higher Powers have only to insert their Coins of Grace in order to set the operating mechanism of artistic production in motion, aren't we in effect transporting Mozart to some remote place far beyond our reach? Or as Karl Mannheim put it, are we not being too quick to seek our salvation in the irrational when, by right, reason in all its clarity and stringency must prevail?

For over 150 years, Mozart research has endeavored to secure a coherent body of knowledge about Mozart and his works. We will surely achieve a closer approach to Mozart if we do not idealise him as a miracle-working creature sent from God or as a gift sent, in all perfection, from heaven to earth, but rather see him – more realistically – as a man of flesh and blood, at one with all mankind, self-confident and possessed of free will. In *Die Zauberflöte*, one of the Speakers in the assembly of priests surrounding Sarastro questions Tamino's suitability for the forthcoming trials, sceptically noting that he is a prince. Sarastro counters vigorously, saying, "More than that! He is a man!" and this puts an end to all further objections. The emphatic assertion of Mozart's humanity is, of course, far removed from that shallow "just like us"-attitude that would like to downgrade Mozart to the level of an everyday person and thus, with the stroke of a pen, be

relieved of the effort to understand him. Mozart was neither a divine being, nor was he an average citizen of the 18<sup>th</sup> century; he was a person with extraordinary musical abilities and skills, someone who, better than anyone else, understood how to give musical expression to an artistic world pulsing with humanity. In his daily life, Mozart may not always have been the surest judge of character, but in his music, there has never been one with a deeper insight into the human condition.

The works of the composer stand quite in contrast to the tension between the Amadé of history and the Amadeus of posterity's imagining. Indeed, in the very moment of being heard they seem to have no history at all. When we hear them, they confront us with no sense of distance between the past and the present. Søren Kierkegaard's perceptive formulation – that life is lived looking forward and understood looking back – applies to our reconstruction of Mozart's life but not to how we experience his music: it possesses a vital immediacy that in the forward flow of its sound is only to be forwards understood. That is, we cannot hear it historically, no matter how much we exert ourselves to achieve historical understanding; it is, as with all music, of course, always present only in the here and now.

Nevertheless, we should not regard it as given that this vital immediacy of Mozart's music simply pours sonorously forth in some incomparable way. The saying that music is a language everyone understands is well-intended but misses the point. Even Mozart has had to experience exactly the reverse. Today's constant coverage of Mozart in the media and the global presence of Mozart's music, as well as the fact that he is the most performed composer of the so-called Classical music, still does not tempt the attentive observer of the contemporary scene, even in the midst of this year's anniversary festivities, to overlook the fact that a large part of mankind is totally indifferent to Mozart's music. Moreover, the share of Mozart's approximately 825 compositions that is actively present in our collective consciousness is, numerically speaking, small. In their programs dedicated to classical music, German radio stations broadcast around 200 Mozart works; the average music lover will be able readily to call to mind perhaps 25 of his works. An informed understanding of art will not complain about this constriction of the repertoire, just as Mozart probably never gave a thought to how long his music would be important to people.

To be sure, he had clear ideas about the listeners he was addressing himself to and what he wanted to see in his audiences. As he put it once, his works should be "music for all kinds of people" – "but not for those with long ears." Musical donkeys, in other words, or as he also called them, "people as listeners who don't understand anything or who don't want to understand anything" didn't mean a thing to him. It was the "*Kenner*" – the connoisseurs – who must receive "*satisfaction*"; and moreover when the less learned – the "*Nichtkenner*" – were also "*satisfied*" with his music "*without knowing why*", then he felt he had reached an almost perfect goal. The artistic imperative present in these comments of Mozart's signified no small challenge to the audiences of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. And it has not lessened down to today, provided we are prepared to take him seriously at his word.

The prodigious quantity of his output – documented in some 23,000 large-size pages of the New Mozart-Edition – is first and foremost the result of a continuous, intensive, concentrated, demanding, and highly deliberate compositional process, resulting in the creation of an enormous body of music. For a period just short of thirty years, Mozart (to use his words) immersed himself unceasingly in music, it was on his mind the whole day long, he planned, studied, and reflected. These words signify no mindless outpouring, no autonomic-impulsive growth of musical brain cells, so to speak, but rather the work and activity – taking up most of Mozart's life – of a forward-looking, purposeful, perfection-assured intelligence. Mozart's older friend and musical colleague Joseph Haydn characterized it most accurately when he said his younger friend had "taste and, what is more, the most profound knowledge of the art of composition." With these words, Haydn was saying that Mozart possessed a comprehensive knowledge of the music of his time and had assimilated this abundant knowledge with the assuredness born of an unerring judgment for aesthetic excellence, in other words, a highly cultivated sense of rightness. Added to that was a well-nigh unlimited command of compositional technique, one he was free to employ with total assurance.

The sheer unfathomable wealth of Mozart's oeuvre is the most fascinating compositional and humanly delightful riddle in the history of Western music, a secret that in the last analysis allows no solution – as is the case with all great art. This music fulfills like no other the yearning of many people for a perfect world, with all turmoil banished and all conflict reconciled. It is experienced as a counterforce that brings order out of chaos: in its greatest moments, there where the sensitive listener is seized by overwhelming emotion, the *harmonia mundi*, the harmony of the human race with itself and the world appears to be possible. Yes, we are allowed to evoke the power of Mozart's music in this way, for the utopian potential that this music possesses is the property of all mankind.

In the times of classical Greece, the thought arose that a sense of wonder lies at the beginning of all striving after knowledge. The wonderful Greek word used for it by Plato and Aristotle is *thaumazein*. A sense of wonder at the insoluble secret of Mozart's music as the starting point for thinking about it belongs to one of the most priceless experiences a happy fate has made possible. Is that one of the "traces of transcendence" that Hans Küng sought in Mozart's music? Do we want to join George Bernard Shaw in his conviction that Mozart's is "the only music yet written that would not sound out of place in the mouth of God"? It would probably be best simply to pose these questions and not try to answer them, for to say either yes or no would merely seem to bring clarity to the case of Mozart's secret. But we all have the rest of our musical lives to pursue these questions in a lively and active involvement with his music. I am sure of one thing: our astonishment at Mozart will not soon come to an end, except perhaps – leaving the last word to Mozart himself – among those with long ears. But they have no sense of wonder for anything anyways.

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