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**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**

Austrian composer

- **Born:** January 27, 1756
- **Birthplace:** Salzburg, Austria
- **Died:** December 5, 1791
- **Place of death:** Vienna, Austria

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**Early Life**

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (VAWLF-gahng ah-mah-DAY-oos MOHT-sahrt) was the second of the seven children born to Leopold Mozart and Anna Maria Mozart to survive infancy. He and his older sister, Maria Anna (Nannerl), received the full benefit of the musical education bestowed on them by their father, himself a composer. Although both children proved to be musically precocious, greater attention was lavished on young Mozart. By 1762, both he and Nannerl were attracting much attention, both in their native Salzburg and in the musically more prestigious capital city of Vienna. In 1763, the family set off for Paris and London, with the young Mozart giving performances along the way, both to extend his reputation and to help defray the family's expenses.



Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.  
(Library of Congress)

Mozart's early European travels were especially important to his development. He was able to display his talent and skills and thereby dispel any doubts held by those who had not heard him. More important, he was exposed to a wide variety of styles, which he would master and synthesize into a personal style at once imitative and distinctive. Still more important was the trip father and son took seven years later to Italy, then a hotbed of musical experiments. Already a precocious and prodigious composer of a wide variety of musical forms, Mozart now added opera to his growing list of accomplishments, as well as five new symphonies in a newly adopted Italian style. Exactly how much of the work attributed to this child prodigy was actually and solely composed by him is impossible to determine. Many of the manuscripts survive only in Leopold's hand or in texts heavily corrected by him.

Nevertheless, it is clear that Mozart's talent was far in excess of the opportunities available to him in Salzburg, whose archbishop considered the young musician little more than a servant. Realizing that his son's prospects would be brighter elsewhere, Leopold traveled with him to Vienna. Mozart came under the influence of the Viennese classical style, which characterizes the symphonies he wrote during this period. The works he wrote during his stay in Vienna also mark his leap from precocity to mastery, even genius.

By 1777, the situation in Salzburg had deteriorated so much that Leopold asked for his son's release from service, which, after some initial reluctance, the archbishop granted. Whether that release was the consequence or the cause of Mozart's growing independence is difficult to determine. While traveling with his mother to Mannheim, he fell in love with Aloysia Weber (whose sister, Constanze, he would later marry), much to his father's displeasure. When his mother died on July 3, 1777, Mozart was suddenly on his own, and when his father summarily ordered him home, he made the return trip slowly and reluctantly. Still under his father's influence and once again in the archbishop's service, Mozart, on temporary leave from the latter, traveled to Munich to write the opera *Idomeneo, rè di creta* (1781; *Idomeno, King of Crete*, 1951); when he returned to Vienna, he made his decisive break both from home and from the archbishop.

Thus began Mozart's Vienna period, which lasted from 1781 until his death a decade later. It was to be a period of triumph and frustration, of independence and decline. It began with the success of the opera *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (1782; *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, 1827), written in German rather than the more conventionally accepted Italian, and this was soon followed by his marriage to Constanze, which Leopold

opposed and which may well have been orchestrated by the bride's conniving mother. For better or worse, Mozart had in a sense come of age.

## Life's Work

One may say that Mozart matured either very early or very late, depending on whether one defines maturity along musical or psychological lines. Short, slightly built, and pallid, perhaps sickly, yet energetic and prodigiously talented, Mozart had to face a host of difficulties during his Vienna period, including a strained relationship with a father who has alternately been described as a tyrant and as a selfless, tireless promoter of his son's career, financial problems exacerbated by marital responsibilities that Mozart may have been poorly prepared to handle, a love of artistic independence that put him at odds with the very people upon whom his success and financial well-being depended, and, corollary to this last, his failure ever to obtain positions and pay commensurate with his talent. Clearly, the picture of Mozart ruined by an uneducated spendthrift wife who was herself the cause of the rift that occurred between father and son is far too simplistic, particularly in the way it absolves Mozart of all responsibility and elevates the greatest of all the composers of the classical period into a caricature of legendary Romantic genius.

The sheer variety of forms in which Mozart was able to compose so many works of incomparable distinction during this period proves not to be surprising when one considers the breadth of his early training and exposure. More surprising is the fact that Mozart seemed never to tire of experimenting, borrowing from others yet transforming their works and styles into something new and entirely his own. One detects in the six string quartets he composed from 1781 to 1784, modeled on the works of [Joseph Haydn](#) (and dedicated to him), a new sense of strength and discipline. Mozart simultaneously sought to make his music—his piano concertos in particular—able to please both musical connoisseurs and less sophisticated listeners.

Although Mozart wrote only four symphonies during the 1781-1784 period—and one of these, *Haffner* (1782), originated as a serenade—the piano concertos of the mid-1780's differ from the earlier ones chiefly in their being decidedly symphonic in structure and effect. The experiments in style and structure that he undertook at this time indicate that Mozart was reaching a turning point. He was done with that desire to synthesize existing forms and styles that had characterized his earlier work. In the works composed from 1785 to 1788, the change becomes especially noticeable. The style is freer, the texture deeper and more sensuous, yet even this change would not be Mozart's last. By 1789, his style had changed again, becoming, as one critic noted, "more austere and refined, more motivic and contrapuntal, more economical in its use of materials and harmonically and texturally less rich."

The second half of the decade witnessed the growth not only of Mozart's reputation throughout Europe but of his financial difficulties as well. Even as he sought ways to supplement his income, he managed to produce many of his greatest works. He wrote two of his three DaPonte operas in quick succession, *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786; the marriage of Figaro) and *Don Giovanni* (1787), written the year of his father's death. His three final symphonies were arguably the greatest of the forty-one he produced. They included *Die Zauberflöte* (1791; *The Magic Flute*, 1911), in which he successfully combined serious music and subject matter with the popular form of the German singspiel, all for production on the stage of Emanuel Schikaneder's theater, located in a working-class suburb. Despite its popular success, *The Magic Flute* had one especially unfortunate result. Interpreted by some as a betrayal of the secret rituals of the Order of Freemasons, which Mozart had joined in 1784, the opera led to his estrangement from one of his few remaining sources of income, his fellow Masons in general and baron von Swieten in particular, who had long served as one of Mozart's most ardent champions and most consistent patrons.

Not surprisingly, Mozart's remarkable achievements, as well as his untimely death at age thirty-five, have given rise to a number of equally remarkable legends, many of which focus on his final year. In was in that year, 1791, that he received from Count Walsegg-Stuppach a commission to write in secret a requiem mass, which the count planned to have performed as his own composition. While working on the requiem (a work he would not live to complete), Mozart had premonitions of his own death, or so goes the legend retrospectively concocted by certain imaginative biographers. The facts are that Mozart died on December 5, 1791, of rheumatic fever, not, as some have speculated, of uremia brought on by years of alcoholic (as well as sexual) excess or of poison administered by his "rival," Antonio Salieri, whose generosity toward many of his contemporaries is a matter of record.

However odd by modern standards, the circumstances of Mozart's burial conform to the Viennese practice of the time: The corpse went unaccompanied to the cemetery and was buried in a mass grave. Yet that did not prevent others from seeing in it further evidence of Mozart's having been a romantic outcast whose genius went unrecognized and unrewarded in his own time. Similarly, although Mozart's precocity is a fact, the claim that he could effortlessly compose first and only drafts of some of the most brilliant music ever written is less true. Mozart, it seems, did revise on occasion, and although he did often compose rapidly (often out of financial necessity), he generally did so less rapidly than his adulators have claimed. Available evidence suggests, for example, that he did not write *La Clemenza di Tito* (1791; *The Clemency of Titus*, 1930) in eighteen days—some of it in a carriage—though he may have composed all of its arias in so short a span.

Finally, dramatic as it may be for a biographer (as recently as [Wolfgang Hildesheimer](#) in 1982) to claim a significant Oedipal relation between the death of Leopold and the composition of *Ein musikalischer Spass* (1787; a musical joke) a short time after, scholarly research makes clear that Mozart could not have conceived it as a joke aimed at his dead father, because most of it was written before Leopold died. This is not to say that certain of the conclusions drawn by Mozart's most responsible Freudian critics do not have a certain validity. Brigid Brophy, for example, is surely right in seeing Mozart as a deeply divided figure in revolt against, as well as paradoxically obedient to, not only his father but also all figures and forms of authority, including the archbishop, emperor, Church, and Masons, as well as other, more established and older composers and the musical traditions Mozart absorbed, mastered, and transformed.

## Significance

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's reputation is rivaled by only a handful of composers and surpassed by none. His work is as renowned for its melodic beauty, rich texture, innovativeness, and formal perfection as Mozart is for his virtuosity, improvisation, and ability to imitate and combine popular and serious forms. Above all, one must be impressed by the sheer variety of Mozart's compositions, as well as by the excellence of the music he created in each of the many forms in which he worked: sacred, chamber, orchestral, keyboard, and both serious and comic opera. Even in the composition of works in an admittedly minor form, such as the dances he wrote in his capacity as court *Kammermusicus* (to which he was appointed in 1787 at less than half the salary of his predecessor, Christoph Gluck), he displays the same variety and craftsmanship evident in his quartets, concertos, symphonies, and operas.

Although his reputation has grown immensely in the twentieth century, his genius did not go unrecognized during his own lifetime. Genius, however, did not necessarily translate into either financial security or popular acclaim, especially in the case of a composer who was often believed to put too many demands on his listeners and who tended toward innovation rather than predictability and conventionality. Although his preeminence among composers is universally accepted and his operas generally recognized as having changed the very

nature of that form, both the man and his art remain at least partly shrouded in legend. The popularity of Peter Shaffer's brilliant play *Amadeus* (1979) and the 1984 film version by Miloš Forman will, when balanced by the meticulous scholarship of researchers such as Alan Tyson, ensure greater understanding of Mozart and his art.

## Bibliography

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Gutman, Robert W. *Mozart: A Cultural Biography*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1999. Gutman's comprehensive biography describes Mozart's artistic evolution and personal maturity, placing his life and compositions within the context of intellectual, political, and artistic developments in eighteenth century Europe. His explanations of Mozart's musical compositions can be easily understood by the general reader.

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not so much supplanted Jahn's work as supplemented it, adding new facts or reading them in a different light.

Keefe, Simon, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Mozart*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Collection of essays about numerous topics, including Mozart's life, compositional methods, compositions, and his reception in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Landon, H. C. Robbins. *1791: Mozart's Last Year*. New York: Macmillan, 1988. Landon does not so much offer new material as bring together material unearthed by previous scholars. In doing so he manages to demystify Mozart's final year, which has been the subject of so many legends. Landon is particularly interested in correcting what he believes are the errors popularized by Hildesheimer and Peter Shaffer.

Landon, H. C. Robbins, and Donald Mitchell, eds. *The Mozart Companion*. 1956. Reprint. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981. An excellent and comprehensive selection of essays on a wide variety of topics: Mozart's style and influence, keyboard music, concertos, operas, concert arias, church music, and even Mozart portraits.

Shaffer, Peter. *Amadeus*. New York: Harper & Row, 1980. Shaffer's popular and controversial play was first performed in London and later made into a film directed by Miloš Forman. The play closely follows Hildesheimer's psychoanalytical reading of Mozart's character, but Shaffer presents his story in a more theatrical, or even fictional, manner, from the point of view of Mozart's "rival," Antonio Salieri. The play is not biography (nor does it claim to be); it is, rather, a brilliant meditation on genius.

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