"Amadeus" and Mozart: Setting the Record Straight

By A. Peter Brown

"For the respect his works have commanded of musicians, and the popularity they have enjoyed among wider audiences, he is probably the most admired composer in the history of Western music." With this appraisal the New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, published in 1980, begins its magisterial article on Beethoven. More than a decade later one might not apply this statement to the Teutonic Goliath but to the David of Mozart. Not only is this year (1991) the bicentennial of Mozart's death, it also comes at a time when his pristine classical image has become the preferred taste over Beethoven's more extravedted expression.

Turn your channel to PBS, where Hugh Downs or Peter Ustinov is narrating a Mozart special. Turn to one of the commercial channels, and Mozart's Piano Concerto K. 466 and "Little" G Minor Symphony K. 183/173dB are selling Macintosh computers, Don Giovanni gives class to Cheer laundry detergent, The Marriage of Figaro hawks the Stiroco automobile, the Requiem's Lacrymosa seemingly sanctifies Lee Jeans, and another piano concerto (K. 482) perks Maxwell House coffee. The recovery of a Mozart symphony, even if juvenilia, receives front-page coverage from The New York Times. Dealers and collectors will go to any extreme for a piece of the action; Mozart autographs sell at the same prices as fine paintings, and dealers in one case dismembered the "Andretter" Serenade K. 185, retailing it piecemecal for greater profit. The Marriage of Figaro and Don Giovanni now rival the box-office receipts of La Boheme and Madame Butterfly.

This popularization of Mozart did not come from the opera houses or concert halls -- its most direct beneficiaries -- but from the stage and screen. More than any other factor, the Mozart mania of the 1980s was initiated by Peter Shaffer's play Amadeus. It and the subsequent film directed by Milos Forman did more for Mozart's case than any other factor, the Mozart mania of the 1980s were never imprinted on celluloid; fiction was never segregated from truth.

Amadeus centers on the deep envy of the imperial court composer Antonio Salieri of Mozart's godlike gifts as a composer. Despite Mozart's uncouthness and immaturity, he produced one work after another that seemed divinely sponsored as they transcended his own personality. He was beloved of God -- truly befitting the name "Amadeus." Both the play and the film concern themselves with the most significant decade in the composer's life, beginning with his dismissal from the service of the Archbishop of Salzburg in 1781 until his death ten years later. During this time Mozart resided in Vienna and became a composer free from the daily obligations of court appointments, but encumbered by the quest for financial stability. In this decade Mozart composed a large number of works astonishing for their quality. Amadeus sets much of its action at the Viennese court in order to focus on Salieri's rivalry with Mozart. Though some of its situations might be plausible, much of it is an almost surrealistic distortion of court life and the life of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

Today, more than seven years after the film's release, musicologists are still asked about Wolfgang, Constanze, and Leopold Mozart, the Emperor Joseph II, and Antonio Salieri. Were they really like that? In this "the Mozart year" of 1991, it is time to review this portrayal of a cultural icon in order to begin setting the record straight.

"Fictional ornament" understates the gulf between what was the invention of the authors and historical truth. No doubt both Shaffer and Forman knew the facts of Mozart's biography and were even familiar with some of the historical controversies. Their metamorphosis of Mozart's life was analogous to Da Ponte's transformation of Beaumarchais's play The Marriage of Figaro into an operatic libretto: the length was made to fit the time frame of the medium, the number of characters was reduced, and the situations streamlined and combined.

Yet, the settings and motivations of the characters might still be recreations of eighteenth-century life. If Shaffer and Forman had accomplished or even intended this goal, much of the power of their film would have been diminished for today's audience. Motivations, goals, and feelings, or at least the way they were expressed and retained by men and women of Mozart's day, would have been decidedly different from ours. For example, Wolfgang and Constanze Mozart had six children brought to full term, and only two survived into adulthood, a ratio common for the time. If their reaction to the death of each child were on the same scale as the reaction to a child's death in the 1990s, they would have been in an almost perpetual state of mourning during the decade of their marriage.

Obsessively jealous personality Though titled Amadeus, it is the character of Antonio Salieri (1750-1825) who remains at the center of Shaffer's work. Salieri held high posts in the Viennese imperial musical establishment from 1774 until 1824. In his last years he suffered from senility. Among the rumors circulating in Vienna around 1824 was one saying that Salieri had said he poisoned Mozart. The tale reached Beethoven and many others. In 1825 Salieri's two attendants attested that they had never heard such words from their charge, and a friend of Mozart's physician reported that Wolfgang had died of a fever that was epidemic at that time in Vienna. From an unproved premise Shaffer developed this, the central character in Amadeus, as one obsessed by and murderously jealous of Mozart's genius.

Even more so than on the stage, the film translated what could be accepted as compelling drama into what for many viewers became the time, place, and characters of history. The caveats published with the stage play were never imprinted on celluloid; fiction was never segregated from truth.

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Constance, Mozart's widow, fanned the rumor's flame by endorsing it; she also believed that Salieri had plotted against her husband. But it is more likely, if any hot hostility even existed, that Salieri was protecting his own turf within the imperial establishment. If a court cabal had been so powerful and Salieri so maniacal about preventing Mozart's success, neither The Abduction from the Seraglio, nor The Marriage of Figaro and Cosi fan tutte would have been composed for or performed in the court theaters. In addition, Salieri would certainly not have shared a double operatic bill at the Schönbrunn palace with Mozart in February 1786 if such bad blood existed between them. Furthermore, Mozart did receive a court appointment as Kammermusican in December 1787 and at the time of his death was to be appointed Kapellmeister at St. Stephen's Cathedral. Salieri even attended a performance of The Magic Flute on October 13, 1791, reportedly visited Mozart the day before he died, and, according to one account was a mourner at the funeral on December 6.

If Salieri had been an obsessively jealous personality, as shown in Amadeus, there would have been many opportunities to observe it. As court composer and later imperial Kapellmeister he taught many gifted students. Beethoven studied with him the setting of Italian texts, and Salieri early on recognized Schubert's special gifts: "That one knows everything; he composes operas, songs, quartets, symphonies and whatever you will." In June 1816 the revered Kapellmeister celebrated fifty years in the service of the emperor, which prompted Schubert to enter a private and honest tribute in his diary:

It must be fine and inspiring for a musician to have all his pupils gathered about him, to see how each strives to give of his best in honor of the master's jubilee, to hear in all their compositions the simple expressions of Nature, free from all that eccentricity which tends to govern most composers nowadays, and for which we are indebted -- almost wholly -- to one of our greatest German musicians [Beethoven]. That eccentricity confuses and confounds, without distinguishing between them, tragic and comic, sacred and profane, pleasant and unpleasant, heroic strains and mere noise; it engenders in people not love but madness; it rouses them to scornful laughter instead of lifting up their thoughts to God. To have banned these extravagances from the circle of his pupils, and to have kept them, instead, at the pure source of Nature must be the greatest satisfaction to a musician who, following in Gluck's steps, seeks his inspiration in Nature alone, despite the unnatural influences of the present day.

Anselm Huttrenbrenner reported that Salieri always spoke of Mozart "with exceptional respect," and the two composers were on friendly enough terms so that Salieri would loan Mozart scores from the court library. Apart from Constance's remark, there exists no independent evidence to conclude that Salieri and Mozart were on bad terms. On the contrary, their relationship may have been a healthy professional one.

According to the film, the basis of Salieri's jealousy was his desire, while still a boy in Italy, to become "a great composer like Mozart." That Salieri in old age doubts his confessors' aphorism that "all men are equal in God's eyes," by comparing himself again to Mozart is a stroke of dramatic brilliancy. But the idea, postulated around 1760 by an Italian youth, of a "great composer" is a concept nearly a half-century ahead of its time and almost entirely a nineteenth-century Teutonic idea. In Amadeus, all that remains of the historical Salieri are his posts as court composer and imperial Kapellmeister and his appetite for Viennese bonbons.

Though Salieri never achieved historical greatness, he was rightfully a highly respected and successful composer whose ability to provide operas for the court and to administer its musical establishment cannot be questioned. In contrast, Salieri's music performed in Amadeus is simpleminded and unworthy of his true abilities. There is no question that Mozart's improvisational and performance skills were exceptional; Salieri's remain unknown. However, by showing Salieri as a barely competent musician, the disparity of musical talent is deepened, thereby furthering Shaffer's dramatic plan. Salieri's music may never have achieved immortality, but it was always correct, skillful, and appropriate.

Characters on the periphery

Salieri's employer, the Emperor Joseph II, also receives condescending treatment at odds with what we know of him. Shaffer and Forman portray the emperor as naive and as a poorly trained musician; his struggle through Salieri's easy little march drives this point home. If anything, Joseph II was a musical sophisticate and practitioner of a rather high order. The emperor attended to and participated in the management of his theaters and made time nearly every evening for chamber music in which he often took an active part either on the cello or at the keyboard. During his younger years, he was a student of Wenzel Raimund Birck (1718-63), and in 1762 he played the organ for a litany by Johann Adolf Hasse that was composed expressly to be performed by the imperial family. Joseph's reaction to Mozart's Abduction from the Seraglio was "too many notes." Today, we regard this opinion as inappropriate, but it was widely shared during the eighteenth century by both connoisseurs and amateurs. Mozart's six string quartets dedicated to Haydn were regarded by many as unfathomable and unplayable, for there were "too many wrong notes." Some dissatisfied customers returned the parts to Mozart's publisher Artaria.

Shaffer's architect of Salzburg, Hieronymous Colloredo, is Joseph II's political and philosophical antipode; in Amadeus Joseph wanted to infuriate the architect. In fact, the election of Colloredo after the death of Sigmund Christoph Schrattenbach was a marked change toward Josephian ideals in Salzburg. Schrattenbach's reputation as benevolent and Colloredo's as imperious and difficult have stemmed mainly from the Mozart family correspondence. Judging the architect or anyone else on the basis of the Mozart family's opinions is to judge them from a heavily biased source, whose central interest was to have both secure employment and the freedom to travel. Colloredo demonstrated enlightenment views and actions during his term of office, and Schrattenbach showed benevolence toward the Mozarts. He has been described by Volkmar Braunbehrens as a "crotchety, capricious bigot who professed great piety and would have been better as a children's priest than as bishop."

Mozart's mother had died in Paris in 1778, and his wife's father died in Vienna in 1779. Shaffer and Forman cleverly focus the personalities of the surviving parents with parallels from Don Giovanni and Die Zauberflöte. Leopold Mozart becomes the Commendatore, accompanied by that figure's dark harmonies, and Maria Cacilie Weber becomes the Queen of the Night. Mozart described Frau Weber to his father as a very difficult person, so the analogy to the Queen of the Night becomes a highly suggestive characterization. Thus, Amadeus presents Constanze's mother, as far as we know, in generally accurate terms, even though in the film she remains on the periphery.

An ambivalent relationship

In contrast, Leopold Mozart completes -- with Salieri, Wolfgang, and Constanze -- the quartet of Shaffer's main characters. His relationship to the Commendatore is one based on the surface meaning of the title and bears little other resemblance to the character in Don Giovanni, who dies preserving his daughter's honor. Leopold is also protective,
but in the sense of a meddler and harsh judge of his son. Shaffer's introduction of Leopold as an unexpected visitor to Vienna is not the actual setting in which he first met Constanze; the couple had, in fact, traveled to Salzburg in late 1783 for a family reunion that many have supposed to have not been the most pleasant of visits. In fact, Amadeus collocates the spirit of the 1783 stay in Salzburg with Leopold's 1785 visit to Vienna and with the circumstances of Mozart's economic problems of the later 1780s. Leopold's entry into the Viennese apartment, his observation of wine glasses and dishes from the previous night, his discovery of Constanze still in bed, and his accusatory questions -- don't you have a maid, how is your financial situation, they say you have debts, do you have students, and, to Constanze, are you expecting -- signal more today's folkways of upright living than those of a successful eighteenth-century freelance musician in Vienna. If the questions are not quite right, the message they send to twentieth-century men and women about Leopold is clear enough. No doubt a letter Leopold sent to the Baroness von Waldstadten in Vienna was a central source for the Amadeus character: "When I was a young fellow I used to think that philosophers were people who said little, seldom laughed and turned a sulky face upon the world in general. But my own experiences have completely persuaded me that without knowing it I must be a philosopher."

In contrast, when Leopold actually did visit his son from February 11 to April 25, 1785, Wolfgang was in the midst of high popularity and was financially successful. During the period of Leopold's visit, Mozart gave six subscription concerts (February 11, 18, 25, March 4, 11, and 18); Joseph Haydn visited on February 12 for a reading of the first three of the six quartets that Wolfgang dedicated to him and told Leopold that his son was the greatest composer he knew in person or by reputation. On February 13, Mozart played his Piano Concerto K. 456 at the Burgtheater; February 15 again another Concerto K. 466 at the same house; February 21 performed for Count Zichy; March 10 gave another concert at the Burgtheater; March 13 and 15 the Musicians Society (Tonkünstler Societät) performed Mozart's oratorio Davide Penitente at the Burgtheater; March 20 Mozart was probably booked for Anna Storace's concert; April 2 performed all six of the "Haydn" Quartets at the residence of Baron Wetzlar von Plankenstem; and April 24 the Freemason Cantata K. 471 was heard at the lodge "Zur Eintracht." All this was heady stuff for his father. Not even the tours the family made during the 1760s and 1770s could compare with such activity, and the money Mozart earned in this time was several times Leopold's yearly salary. His father's reaction was, for this old trooper, uncharacteristic: "We never get to bed before one o'clock and I never get up before nine. We lunch at two or half past. The weather is horrible. Every day there are concerts; and the whole time is given up to teaching, music, composing and so forth. I feel rather out of it all. If only the concerts were over! It is impossible for me to describe the rush and bustle. Since my arrival your brother's fortepiano has been taken at least a dozen times to the theatre or some other house. He has had a large fortepiano peda made, which stands under the instrument and is about two feet longer and extremely heavy. It is taken to the Mehlgrube every Friday and has also been taken to Count Zichy's and to Prince Kaunitz's."

After Leopold departed from Vienna, he never saw his son again.

Mozart's relationship with his father was more ambivalent than Amadeus ever allows. Wolfgang's view of his parent was trifocal, with distinctly different and conflicting feelings. There was the father of his early years, who viewed his son as a "god-given miracle" and devoted himself to his education in music (violin, keyboard, and composition) and other branches of learning. Leopold not only fathered him, but also nurtured him in every other way. These early years must have fostered Wolfgang's fondest feelings. But the young Wolfgang was a pliable person, and Leopold was always in control as he directed tours to Paris, London, twice to Vienna, and three times to Italy.

During Wolfgang's early twenties, this relationship was affected in two ways: Leopold could no longer leave Salzburg for extended tours with his son, due to the archbishop's requirements for his residency, and Wolfgang was becoming less of the accommodating youth and more the headstrong adult. If Leopold could no longer share the glory, perhaps Wolfgang was no longer so glorious. Leopold hardly trusted his son, and while Wolfgang was in Paris and other locations, spies reported to him on his son's activities. The goal of this Parisian tour was to find an appointment for Wolfgang, which was never forthcoming. But the trip revealed Wolfgang's weakness for women and an inability to manage his money. The supreme blow was the death of his mother, from which the father-son relationship never recovered; Leopold blamed Wolfgang for her death.

After this taste of freedom from his parents and Salzburg, it became Wolfgang's overriding desire to make the break from the home turf. Being literally kicked out the door from the employ of the archbishop may have liberated Wolfgang, but at the same time it further isolated Leopold, who wanted Wolfgang to return to Salzburg, for he did not believe him capable of independence and self-management. Leopold viewed Wolfgang's not having a court appointment as a recipe for personal disaster, since he felt that the Viennese public would eventually tire of him and that Wolfgang was incapable of managing himself.

In addition, more than Leopold, the archbishop and the local musicians drove Mozart from Salzburg; the city also lacked a venue for a composer disposed toward opera. Lastly, there was the wunderkind factor, from which Wolfgang could certainly never escape as long as he remained in his birth city; everyone recognized him as "the little miracle" and not the young gifted man he was by the mid-1770s. Even though "next to God was Papa," after Wolfgang had established himself in Vienna and married Constanze, the struggle for total independence was essentially won.

Wolfgang was certainly not as clever as Leopold in controlling others for one's own purposes; but Leopold's management style left its residue and may have made it more difficult for Wolfgang to gain the sort of appointment Leopold desired for him. Already in 1769, Johann Adolph Hasse raised a flag: "The said Sig. Mozard is a very handsome, vivacious, graceful and full of good manners; and knowing him, it is difficult to avoid loving him. I am sure that if his development keeps due pace with his years, he will be a prodigy, provided that his father does not perhaps pamper him too much or spoil him by means of excessive eulogies; that is the only thing I fear."

And again in 1771: "Young Mozard is certainly marvelous for his age, and I do love him infinitely. The father, as far as I can see, is equally discontented everywhere, since here too he uttered the same lamentations. He idolizes his son a little too much, and thus does all he can to spoil him; but I have such a high opinion of the boy's natural good sense that I hope he will not be spoiled in spite of the father's adulation, but will grow into an honest fellow."

In December of the same year the Empress Maria Theresia advised her son Ferdinand, governor of Milan, and underlined further concerns: "You ask me to take the young Salzburger into your service. I do not know why, not believing that you have need of a composer or of useless people. If however it would give you pleasure, I have no wish to hinder you. What I say is intended only to prevent your burdening yourself with useless people and giving titles.
to people of that sort. If they are in service it degrades that service when these people go about the world like beggars."

The name Mozart may well have already acquired its own unenviable reputation when Wolfgang was searching for a new post in 1777-78.

To have cast Leopold's Janus-faced black carnival mask as both the Commendatore and the messenger who commissioned the Requiem is another example of Shaffer's theatrical brilliance; however, there is no basis for believing that at any time Mozart thought of this composition for his father's memory. It was ordered by Count Walsegg-Stuppach for his wife, and he pawned it off as his own composition, a common practice of his.

"I love her and she loves me"

If Leopold was "next to God" in Wolfgang's world, his wife Constanze must have been somewhere in the same constellation; she was the mechanism by which he was able to display and enforce his independence, a point well made in Amadeus. At the same time, the portrait of her as an "air-head" willing to participate in Wolfgang's juvenile verbal games involving coprolalia, coprophilia, and sexual overtures in the Salzburg archbishop's Vienna residence prior to a musical academy and reception seems beyond imagination. Again the chronology is adjusted for Shaffer's and Forman's purposes; he could not have been cavorting with Constanze until after his break with the archbishop and certainly not under the eye of Salieri. If we can believe Mozart's own words, he presents a different sequence of events to his father: "One thing more I must tell you, which is that when I resigned the Archbishop's service, our love had not yet begun. It was born of her tender care and attentions when I was living in their house."

In the end, we know little about Constanze. The negative aspects of her character probably derive from Leopold and Mozart's sister, Nannerl. From her conduct as a widow, Constanze must have had considerable musical and business acumen; she did much to further her deceased husband's as well as her own reputation. The accusation in prefeminist literature that she was neither worthy of her husband's genius nor understood it is patently unfair; this charge could have been leveled at any person Wolfgang might have married. Arthur Schurig, in the only book devoted to her, said she was "petty, narrow-minded, vain, greedy, superstitious, and gossipy." To anyone who has read the Mozart family correspondence, all of these adjectives could just as well be applied to her in-laws.

The most complete description of Constanze comes from a not unbiased source: Wolfgang himself, who before their marriage was trying to persuade Leopold of her attributes: "But before I cease to plague you with my chatter, I must make you better acquainted with the character of Constanze. She is not ugly, but at the same time far from beautiful. Her whole beauty consists in two little black eyes and a pretty figure. She has no wit, but she has enough common sense to enable her to fulfill her duties as a wife and mother. It is a downright lie that she is inclined to be extravagant. On the contrary, she is accustomed to be shabbily dressed, for the little that her mother has been able to do for her children, she has done for the two others, but never for Constanze. True, she would like to be neatly and cleanly dressed, but not smartly, and most things that a woman needs she is able to make for herself; and she dresses her own hair every day. Moreover she understands housekeeping and has the kindest heart in the world. I love her and she loves me with all her heart. Tell me whether I could wish myself a better wife?"

Finally, Shaffer and Forman imply that Constanze may have been unfaithful while she was in Baden for extended cures. It has been proposed elsewhere that she had an affair with Mozart's purported pupil and copyst, Franz Xaver Süßmayr, who was also in Baden during some of this time. As part of the argument some writers have pointed out that after Mozart's death her health seems to have returned and remained good. But it should be noted that she was never again pregnant. It has also been suggested that their son, born on July 26, 1791, named Franz Xaver Wolfgang, may have been Süßmayr's. This hypothesis is also untenable, for Franz Xaver Wolfgang carried his legitimate father's most distinctive genetic mark: a missihapen left ear.

In the end, the evidence does not support a negative view of Constanze. Criticism comes chiefly from those not well disposed to her and from a male-biased musicological community. Granted, Constanze's alteration of family letters has certainly irritated scholars and raised suspicions about her motivations, but that is applying twentieth-century views of biography to the more protective one of earlier times. Perhaps Constanze is best compared to another woman in Mozart's life, his mother, Anna Maria Walburga Pertl. We know little about her, but from what we do know, both in ability and proclivity, she might be the most viable parallel. Both women were able to act with propriety for the circumstances, yet maintain a great degree of anonymity.

An ordinary mind and silly jokes

Amadeus' most controversial portrait is that of Wolfgang himself. How does one characterize an unexplainable phenomenon? While the problem for many lesser composers of Haydn's and Mozart's age is a lack of personal documentation, for Mozart and his family there is a plethora, including diaries, extended letters, notices and reviews in the press, and memoirs, as well as catalogs and autographs of the music itself. Yet, in a perceptive essay Alan Tyson asks: "What do we really know of Mozart or what can we know of Mozart?" Just how much does this bountiful documentation open to us the mind of a musical savant? Does the biography support the music, or is there no relationship between the man and the art? To the last question Shaffer would give a resounding "No." Shaffer's Wolfgang, in the words of his Salieri, was "a giggling dirty-minded creature." And as Shaffer's Süssmayr wonders about the "miraculous" nature and "sublimity" of the music, the dichotomy of the man and his music deepens. Thus, an implied but central question in Amadeus is: Does a relationship of Mozart's personality to his artistic products exist?

Such a question again comes out of the nineteenth century, not the eighteenth. In Mozart's time the prerequisites for a composer were neither genius nor the assertion of an individual artistic personality. Rather, it was a question of craftsmanship and the ability to provide new music appropriate to an occasion. A lexicon of musical ideas existed, designed and accepted for certain types of expression. A composer could select from this bank and create a musical product fully comprehensible to his audience. Mozart was able to manipulate this vocabulary both technically and affectively so as to create new depths of expression. It is within the essential style of the eighteenth century's last decades that Mozart operated. Thus, one should not be surprised that the man and the music may not have been congruent. Karoline Pichler, a Biedermeier woman of letters, observed: "Mozart and Haydn, whom I knew well, were men in whose personal intercourse there was absolutely no other sign of unusual power of intellect and almost no trace of intellectual culture, nor of any scholarly or other higher interests. A rather ordinary turn of mind, silly jokes and in the case of the former, an irresponsible way of life, were all that distinguished them in society; and yet what depths, what worlds of fantasy, harmony, melody and feeling lay concealed behind this unpromising exterior."
The Salieri of Amadeus, when confronted with Mozart's autographs, remarked on seeing no corrections in the scores: "It is miraculous." Such an observation is also not quite correct. While Mozart, like any composer of his time, had the craft to produce works with unusual rapidity, there were a number of false starts and compositions left in progress over a period of one or two years. For some compositions sketches survive, and one must believe that these were more common than the number of extant examples indicates. Regarding the six quartets dedicated to Haydn, Mozart acknowledged in the letter that prefaced their publication: "They are, indeed, the fruit of a long and laborious study." When Shaffer's Wolfgang tells Schikaneder that The Magic Flute is all in his "noodle" and just needs to be written down, this is something less than a half-truth. Certainly, the concept and much of the composition may have already been formulated; the act of setting the notes on paper certainly engenders changes. For operas, once the rehearsals began, all sorts of revisions might occur to accommodate both the drama and the cast.

The ideas about eighteenth-century opera that Shaffer presents in Amadeus in some cases are accurate and in others are miscarriages of history. For example, the creation of an opera began with the selection of a subject. Then a poet was commissioned to prepare the text, and lastly a composer was hired with the expectation that he would tailor the arias to the already engaged singers. To present the court with an already completed opera was not correct protocol. Thus, in Amadeus the director of the Imperial Opera, Franz Xaver Orsini-Rosenberg, was only expecting the normal practice when he expressed wonderment at Mozart's presumptuousness in selecting a libretto, particularly of a drama -- in this case Figaro -- already forbidden to appear on the stage.

Amadeus also makes the point that The Abduction from the Seraglio is special because it is Turkish and takes place in a harem; such a setting was not unusual, and in fact Mozart had previously worked on a fragment known to us as Zaida with a similar location. When Mozart tries to make the case for The Marriage of Figaro as an opera, he is arguing for the genre of the opera buffa as opposed to opera seria, as if opera buffa were something totally unfamiliar to Joseph II and Vienna. This, too, is totally false. Opera buffa had played in the Viennese theaters with great success. When he compares the stiffness of a "Hercules" (that is, an opera-seria-type character) to the comic lightness of a "Hairdresser" (that is, Figaro himself), he finds the "Hairdresser" much more appealing. This had already been acknowledged by Viennese audiences through the success of Paisiello's Barber of Seville, to which The Marriage of Figaro was a sequel. Opera seria is portrayed as a dead genre in the 1780s; according to words placed in Mozart's mouth, it "shits marble."

Such an idea about opera seria was fostered by German musicologists needlessly trying to elevate further Mozart's position on the historical horizon as the first German master of a new genre, opera buffa. Mozart's last opera, The Clemency of Titus, also was an opera seria; it continued to breathe well into the nineteenth century, as testified by the popularity not only of Titus but of later representatives of the genre by such Italian composers as Mayr, Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini, and Verdi. In Amadeus, Mozart's speech to the emperor on the great finales in Figaro, pointing to their length, absence of recitative, and the accumulation of characters from a duet to the entire cast, is purported to be a new idea. In fact, it comes from his librettist Lorenzo da Ponte. However, da Ponte wrote this as a description of what the audience demanded, and, regardless of its dramatic viability, it had to be. Even the reception of Figaro is altered for dramatic purposes; Amadeus views it as a failure. In truth, the emperor had to forbid encores so that performances of an already lengthy opera would not continue without end.

Lastly, one must take issue with the way the operatic performances themselves were led. In Amadeus both Salieri and Mozart conducted their operas in the manner to which today's audiences are accustomed. Such was not the case in the eighteenth century; conductorial responsibilities were divided between the concertmaster, who was responsible for the orchestra, and the keyboardist, who was in charge of the vocal forces and played a supporting role for the orchestral music. For the first several performances of an opera, the composer directed from the harpsichord or fortepiano with a few leading gestures aimed at the singers.

"Young and clean-minded Mozart"

A primary issue in both stage and screen versions is Mozart's behavior: his cavorting with Constanze in a public room of a noble residence, his use of inappropriate language, his excessive drinking, his lack of respect for the emperor and archbishop, his public parody of Salieri, his high self-opinion, and his general insensitivity to propriety. That which took place in view of the Salzburg archbishop and the emperor would have resulted in banishment from court or worse. Even though protocol had been loosened during the reign of the "people's" emperor, it is almost unimaginable that anyone would tell Joseph II that something he said was "absurd." Again, the result would have meant that none of the Viennese operas would have been commissioned or composed and that no venue for them would have existed. Certainly, Mozart must have treated the emperor and his entourage with some special care.

Mozart's drinking runs as a sub-theme throughout the plot in Amadeus. But in reality, it seems that he rarely drank to excess, though in his last year or two his drinking did appear to have increased. During the summer of 1791 when Constanze was in Baden, "he used to drink champagne with Schikaneder all morning, and punch all night." But this report stems from Ignaz Ernst Ferdinand Karl Arnold, who was without firsthand knowledge. While alcoholic writers are legion, the condition seems rare among composers; it is possible that great music was composed under the influence, but not with such consistency or productivity.

Amadeus also brings up the issue of Mozart's extramarital conduct. The scene is after the first performance of The Abduction from the Seraglio. Constanze Weber is introduced to the emperor as Mozart's fiancee. Thereupon Cavalliери, the prima donna and in fact Salieri's mistress, slugs Mozart. Salieri replies under his breath, "Mozart's had her." About Mozart's sexual encounters, apart from Constanze, one can only speculate. Some biographers have it that Mozart was in love with almost all of his keyboard students, his prima donas, and his cousin "the Bösle," to whom he wrote a series of scatological letters. Whether Mozart was infatuated, in love, or had sexual liaisons with all or none of these women cannot be proven one way or the other. If he did, Mozart's catalog might have rivaled that of Don Giovanni's. But one must note two letters that suggest prudence and restraint. The first one concerns the Bohemian composer Joseph Myslivecek's syphilis; his nose had become ulcerated and was nearly gone. Mozart experienced his appearance at firsthand and was well aware of the cause of this disfigurement, for he wrote to his father: "There are people who think that no one can love a poor girl without having evil designs; and that charming word maitresse, wh--e in our tongue, is really much too charming! But I am no Brunetti! no Myslivecek! I am a Mozart, and a young and clean-minded Mozart."

In December 1781 he again wrote: "You must, therefore, allow me to disclose to you my reasons, which, moreover, are very well founded. The voice of nature speaks as loud in me as in others, louder, perhaps, than in many a big strong lout of a fellow. I simply cannot live as most young men do in these days. In the first place, I have too much religion; in the second place, I have too great a love of my
neighbour and too high a feeling of honour to seduce an innocent girl; and, in the third place, I have too much horror and disgust, too much dread and fear of diseases and too much care for my health to fool about with whores."

It is certainly possible that Mozart was again posturing for his father, as he did with some frequency during and after his tour to Paris and back in 1777-78. Still, the Mysliweck encounter must have made a lasting impression about the dangers of loose living, especially for one so conscious of his own appearance.

Unappreciated and misunderstood

Some postmortems lead us to believe that Mozart's early death was precipitated, if not caused, by the way he lived during his last years, a conclusion that could also be drawn from the last portions of Amadeus. Others favored the poisoning theory. Attempts to diagnose Mozart's last illness from both medical and lay observation have put forth a variety of non-communicable causes ranging from typhus to rheumatic fever. The most thorough investigation, by Dr. Peter J. Davies, concludes that Mozart died of Schonlein-Henoch syndrome caused by a streptococcal infection contracted at a Masonic lodge meeting on November 18. Attempted diagnoses after two hundred years remain unconvincing. Nevertheless, the specific cause of death would not have had so much ink spilled over it if it were not for the rumors of poisoning.

More fascinating than Mozart's terminal illness is Davies' conclusion about what drove the composer during his adult years. Why and how did he produce so much during some periods and so little during others? Dr. Davies believes that Mozart suffered from a cyclothymic disorder with ups and downs in mood, but without psychotic tendencies. He points out that "artists are capable of astonishing bursts of creative activity . . . and Mozart is the ultimate example." Beginning with the late 1770s, Davies detects five such bursts: (1) Mannheim, 1777-78; (2) Munich, 1780-81; (3) Vienna, first half of 1786; (4) Vienna, summer 1788; and (5) Vienna, first quarter of 1791. For example, during Davies' third burst, Mozart finished The Marriage of Figaro, The Impresario, the two piano concertos K. 488 and 491, the piano quartet K. 493, the horn concerto K. 495, and some smaller works. On the other hand, periods of overt productivity (that is, the completion of a work) should not be allowed to obscure times of covert preparation. With the excitement of a premiere like Figaro, Mozart's behavior, according to Davies, might go somewhat off the rails. Davies also finds a narcissistic dependency, requiring "a regular supply of love from an esteemed love object." With this combination of psychological factors and the general problems of security encountered by a free-lance musician, it is no wonder that Mozart may have had at times some difficulty coping.

Amadeus portrays Mozart in the nineteenth-century fashion as an unappreciated and misunderstood genius whose financial situation was either borderline or impoverished, with only a few coins left. Yet, according to Shaffer's and Forman's film version, he lived throughout the period after 1781 in a luxurious apartment in central Vienna. In fact, Mozart changed residence frequently, and his income, according to recent studies, was unusually high for a musician, placing him during some years in the top 10 percent of all Vienna's inhabitants. Either way, Mozart was never poor by the standards of his time. The idea of an impoverished composer comes from a series of letters he wrote to his Masonic brother Michael Puchberg from 1788 to 1791 asking for loans. For example, on July 12, 1789, he writes:

DEAREST, MOST BELOVED FRIEND AND MOST HONOURABLE B.O.

Great God! I would not wish my worst enemy to be in my present position. And if you, most beloved friend and brother, forsake me, we are altogether lost, both my unfortunate and blameless self and my poor sick wife and child. Only the other day when I was with you I was longing to open my heart to you, but I had not the courage to do so -- and indeed I should still not have the courage -- for, as it is, I only dare to write and I tremble as I do so -- and I should not even dare to write, were I not certain that you know me, that you are aware of my circumstances, and that you are wholly convinced of my innocence as my unfortunate and most distressing situation is concerned. Good God! I am coming to you not with thanks but with fresh entreaties! Instead of paying my debts I am asking for more money!

From these letters and the lack of other data, it has been concluded that Mozart was rejected by the Viennese.

Rather than a single reason, a number of factors contributed to his worsening financial situation. Mozart's income came from five sources: public and private appearances as a pianist, the giving of subscription concerts, teaching, commissions, and the publication of his music. Such endeavors were heavily affected, as they are today, by economic conditions and related factors. In the late 1780s Austria was occupied with the Turkish war, and many of Mozart's patrons were serving in the military or were not at their Viennese residences; even the emperor was in the field during 1788. Constanze had been ill, requiring her to go to Baden for a cure; at one point her condition with an ulcerated ankle was potentially serious. Cures at the spring baths, used only by the wealthy, must have been expensive. During the late 1780s Mozart appears to have been trying to streamline his income-producing activities from several sources to composition alone. Despite the general as well as their particular economic situation, the Mozarts continued to live in their accustomed style, resulting in temporary problems of cash flow. The situation was exacerbated by their failure to save any money during his high-flying first six or seven years of the 1780s and by a judgment against Mozart in 1791 resulting from a suit brought by Prince Karl Lichnowsky that required a substantial payment. Nevertheless, had Mozart lived, he would probably have equaled or exceeded Haydn's considerable earnings during the 1790s.

During the early 1780s, the disparity of high-income estimates with expenses led the Mozart scholar Uwe Kramer to ask what happened to Mozart's money. Kramer concluded that much of this cash was gambled away at billiards and cards. This theory has met with mixed reactions ranging from rejection to the acceptance of it as at least a possibility. Though it can neither be proven nor disproven, some statements about Mozart's style of living could be read as disguised references to gambling. Peter J. Davies believes that Mozart's personality traits, combined with his environment, could have made him prone to such compulsive behavior.

The Amadeus version of Mozart's last days and interment are a combination of imagination and discredited tradition. Imagination dominates the Shaffer and Forman film version of Mozart's last days, where Salieri's attendance at a performance of The Magic Flute on October 13, 1791, is placed in time close to Mozart's death on December 5. Shaffer's version has Salieri assisting Mozart with the Requiem during a brief final illness. In actuality, Mozart's widow pursued at least three composers to complete Mozart's last work before settling on Franz Xaver Süssmayer as the collaborator, and the final illness lasted for three weeks, not a matter of hours. It was Constanze and her family who lovingly cared for him, an irony that would never have been appreciated by his father and sister. Mozart's
funeral and burial were arranged by the Baron Gottfried van Swieten, who adhered to the Josephian burial guidelines and was cognizant of the deceased's financial situation. Amadeus presents a probably accurate picture of the burial. To today's eyes, the dumping of a bagged body into a communal grave must seem the ultimate insult, but it must be stressed that in 1791 this was the burial experienced by about 85 percent of Vienna's population. It was the norm, not an interment reserved only for the impoverished.

Wrongheaded interpretations

Amadeus is but one of several recent attempts to exploit the continued fascination with Mozart during the last two hundred and thirty years. Two recent widely read books also freely interpret Mozart's biography and psyche: Wolfgang Hildesheimer's Mozart and Francis Carr's Mozart and Constanze. Hildesheimer provides many insights with his close readings of the letters, but his speculations about Mozart's love life and his emotional detachment from the world around him have little support. He views the man's expression as artificial and insensitive, erroneously measuring Mozart against today's expected modes of reaction to given situations. Unfamiliar with recent research, he supports some of the old fictions and adds some of his own. Like Amadeus, his Mozart is a fascinating character, and the work contains penetrating insights together with many wrongheaded interpretations.

Another dilettante biographer, Francis Carr, also gives the impression of a search for historical truth by using documents and by thanking the learned men of the Mozarteum in Salzburg for their assistance. Carr revives the poisoning hypothesis, accusing not Salieri, but Franz Hofdemel because of an affair (manufactured by Carr) that Mozart had with Hofdemel's wife Magdalena, one of his piano students. Hofdemel, days after Mozart's death, disfigured his wife and then committed suicide. While the sorry fate of the Hofdemels is true, the only additional connection to be made with Mozart is that he was a Masonic brother and creditor of the composer. Otherwise, only the coincidence of time and place can be made between Mozart's death and Hofdemel's suicide. Carr's book is nothing but tabloid biography masquerading under documentation.

Amadeus the play and movie, as well as the books by Hildesheimer and Carr, derived their success from the unquestionable fascination Mozart holds for us today. Without the name of Mozart, the deep interest in these artifacts of our own culture would not exist. For those who want letters, memoirs, and other primary sources in order to make their own interpretation, these are readily available, but they cannot be taken as "just the facts," for nearly every writer of letters and memoirs, as well as the purveyors of rumors, had his own agendas and beliefs. It is from the documents themselves and their interpretation that the Mozartean mythologies flourished.

Why does Mozart command so much attention? Perhaps it stems from the eternally misguided effort to understand the man behind the music. Although Mozart's music is often recognized as universal, it has received varying interpretations of its essential meaning. For example, critical opinion of the Symphony No. 40 in G Minor K. 550 is one of total admiration, but its character has remained elusive. Robert Schumann found it classical in the strict sense, full of Grecian "lightness and grace." Alfred Einstein thought it a "fatalistic piece of chamber music." Jens Peter Larsen believed it was not the expression of a private mood. Robbins Landon stated that it belongs to a series of works revealing the downside of Mozart's manic tendencies, while Jack Westrup found it the spirit of opera buffa. Probably no work of the symphonic canon elicits such a wide range of affective reactions from knowledgeable critics. But perhaps it is this variety of reactions to his music that explains the varied interpretations of the person. Perhaps it is only in this sense that the biographies with their explanations of the man parallel the receptions of the music. While one can attempt to set the historical record straight, Shaffer's and Forman's Salieri had it right on one count: the phenomenon of Mozart transcends explanation.

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