

Mozart turns two hundred and fifty

Part 4: Mozart in Vienna

By Laura Villon
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The following is the fourth of a five-part series of articles. (See Parts 1, 2, 3) It contains references to numerous works of music by Mozart. We encourage readers to listen to these pieces, long samples of which are available free of charge on www.classical.com.

In Salzburg the Archbishop rehired Wolfgang as court organist and tripled his annual salary to 450 florins. Mozart continued to develop his orchestral and sacred compositions, but what he longed to write was opera.

The opportunity came when the Bavarian Elector commissioned a festive opera for the Munich Carnival season of January 1781. “In *Ideomeneo, re di Creta*, Mozart depicted serious, heroic emotion with a richness unparalleled elsewhere in his operas” (Britannica 5).

From Munich, Archbishop Colloredo summoned him to his Viennese palace, the Deutsches Haus, to play at courtly receptions. It was here that the well-known fight with Colloredo took place. Mozart was thrown out of the Throne Room and the service of the Salzburg court with the infamous “kick in the rear” by chamberlain Count Arco. With his dismissal from the Salzburg court, the 25-year-old declared his independence from his domineering father.

Wolfgang was eager to make a name for himself in Vienna. The transition from a feudal to a bourgeois society found expression in the very different careers of the two greatest musicians of the age. Whereas Haydn had worked faithfully for 30 years for the Esterhazy prince, Mozart would try to succeed as a freelance musician in the administrative and cultural center of the Hapsburg Empire. Was not the Emperor Joseph II constructing a national German theater which required operatic works? Would not the wealthy bourgeois and nobility pay for his compositions?

And pay they did! Mozart had to limit the number of his pupils to four. His day did not have enough hours. He composed, gave lessons three times a week for the fabulous sum of one-half ducat each, visited the all-important social salons, performed at concerts, and composed. He made a lot of money, but as a freelance musician his position was still precarious, and he frequently incurred debt to carry out his projects.

Vienna was a vibrant city, full of music, dancing, and masked balls, at which the Viennese flirted in *Così Van Tutte* style. The stifling class restrictions of Salzburg were much less pervasive in Vienna. The wealthy middle class decked itself out in grand ceremonial costume, and mingled with the nobility at the intellectual and artistic salons and at masked balls. The Emperor himself, hating court ritual, attended the salons.

There was social mobility. The title of Count could be purchased for 20,000 gulden. Not a few wealthy tradesmen and financiers brought noble status to the family through a propitious marriage. And many a noble eschewed the idle character of his class to engage in more productive activities, required by the economic growth of the empire, of which Vienna was the center.

In 1782, Joseph’s “Decrees of Tolerance” permitted certain wealthy Jews to participate in economic areas previously restricted to them, no longer requiring their conversion to Christianity.

Mozart lodged at one point with the Arnstein family, headed by Vienna’s most prominent Jew. The young Arnsteins mixed as equals with bourgeois and nobles in a Viennese society no longer restricted to old noble families. A daughter-in-law, Fanny Arnstein, would lead one of Europe’s intellectual salons during the Napoleonic era.

During his first years in Vienna, Mozart both earned and spent a large amount, trying to keep up with the nobility, music master to ladies of wealthy houses, he made his way in a handsome red coat decorated with mother-of-pearl buttons. From the salons and his brother Freemasons, which he joined in Vienna, Mozart drew both friends and wealthy supporters who would sponsor his works.

Among his most important supporters (and his pupil) was the beautiful and brilliant Maria Wilhelmina, wife of Count Thun-Hohenstein of Bohemia. At her salon and that of her friend Imperial Vice-Chancellor Count Cobenzl, political and scientific ideas of the Enlightenment were discussed, and music was ever-present.

Near the Arnsteins lived the widow Frau Weber and her four musical daughters. As a young man, Mozart had fallen in love with the eldest, Aloysia, now married to the actor and artist Joseph Lange. He turned his attention to the middle daughter Constanze, and against the vehement objections of his father Leopold and his sister Nannerl, married her in August 1782.

“When we had been joined together, both my wife and I began to weep,” Mozart wrote his father. Contrary to the portrait drawn in the movie *Amadeus*, Constanze appears to have been a loving, supportive, and frugal wife for her husband. Together they would have six children, of whom only two would survive to adulthood. After his early death, Costanze was responsible for keeping both his name and his music alive into the nineteenth century.

When Emperor Joseph II succeeded his mother the Empress in 1780, he set out to reform the autocratic system of which he himself was the head. He extended uniform taxation to nobles and church lands, enacted legal equality, established a universal educational system, and tolerated the presence of Jews, Lutherans, Calvinists and others, hoping to stimulate economic growth.

The nobility, however, resented the reforms, and the middle class who was supposed to benefit now wanted a voice in affairs, a situation the enlightened despot Joseph could not tolerate. At the end of his reign, faced with a revolt in his northern provinces of present-day Belgium, as well as a revolt of the Hungarian nobility, he sought to reverse many of these measures.

Joseph’s autocratic reversal was starkly revealed when he intervened in the capital case of a convicted nobleman. Against his own decrees of equality before the law, he ordered the man executed in medieval style by being dragged through the streets, tortured by hot pincers and broken with the wheel. This cruelty destroyed forever his reputation as an enlightened monarch.

Nevertheless, one of his reforms was to promote the establishment of a

German National Theatre. The Singspiel was a popular form of comic opera, traditionally played in the theaters outside the city walls to working class and middle class audiences. It was sung in German, with spoken dialog and recitative, often based on fantastic fairy tale themes and replete with monstrous creatures as well as circus-like characters.

The Emperor desired to make Vienna, rather than its northern rival Berlin, the center of Germany's literary and musical development. He sought to bring the German Singspiel into the palace *Burgtheater* frequented by the upper classes. The presence of the talented Mozart in Vienna was propitious. Shortly after Mozart's arrival in Vienna, rumors abounded that Joseph would ask him to set a libretto to music, for the visit of the Grand Duke Paul of Russia.

The new German opera selected was *The Abduction from the Seraglio* [*Die Entführung aus dem Serail*], the story pilfered from a recent Berlin production and poorly rewritten by Gottlieb Stephanie, head of the National Singspiel. Mozart himself rewrote parts of the opera to better suit the dramatic action. We know something of the evolution of the libretto from Wolfgang's letters to his father in Salzburg.

"In an opera, the poetry must perforce be the obedient daughter of the music," Mozart wrote. The arias were longer, more elaborately developed and expressive, than hitherto. He used Turkish chromatic effects and instruments to give the work its Eastern flavor.

The opera premiered on July 16, 1782 to great success and a substantial box office at Joseph's royal *Burgtheater*. Mozart's name became known throughout Germany, as *The Abduction* was performed everywhere by traveling and provincial companies

Listen: The Abduction from the Seraglio, K384

After Mozart's complex work, the Emperor decided to end his German Theatre experiment. Privately, the Emperor preferred light Italian music; the drama of Gluck, Mozart and Haydn was too demanding for the royal ear. (In one memorable scene in *Amadeus*, the monarch complains that Mozart's *Abduction* contained "too many notes.") Joseph recalled his Italian opera buffa troupe, brought Salieri back from Italy, and sent the German Singspiel back to be performed in the popular suburban theatres.

Mozart was disillusioned by the collapse of the German Theatre, but he did accede to the Emperor's desire that he write Italian opera. Over the next nine years, he wrote five glorious operas, four in Italian and the last a Singspiel in German.

Now began one of the most famous collaborations in dramatic history: Mozart's work with Lorenzo da Ponte. Da Ponte was a libertine priest, a converted Jew, thrown out of Venice for his radical political teachings. He ended his days in 1838 as an opera promoter and Professor of Italian at Columbia University in New York.

Their first collaboration was *The Marriage of Figaro* [*le Nozze di Figaro*], based on a revolutionary trio by the French playwright Beaumarchais. Da Ponte worked the libretto as Mozart requested, changing meter and lines to his dramatic requirements, and removing all sections which might offend the Hapsburg monarch. Joseph was thrilled with the result; he thought the opera "divine." The Viennese public greeted the demanding music with ambiguity, and only later embraced it.

Listen: The Marriage of Figaro K492

With *Figaro* of 1786 and his subsequent operas, Mozart managed something new—the musical representation of the world. As biographer Hajo Holbjorn memorably wrote, at this point Mozart acquired "the capacity for embracing the whole breadth of human life by having characters from all social stations and from among all human types" (228).

Mozart combined his mastery of compositional technique with an extraordinary insight into the complex interplay of social conventions and human emotions to create operas that rank among the greatest works ever created for the theater.

It is impossible to begin to do justice to a work such as *Figaro* in a few

sentences. The opera presents the human comedy with a wit and compassion that remain as fresh today as they were in 1786. No doubt, the opera provided a devastating satire on the decaying social order of the day. The essential revolutionary subversiveness of Beaumarchais' stage work remains in Mozart's operatic adaptation. But this is no mere political tract, of relevance only to students of the French Revolution. Amidst music of unsurpassed beauty, Mozart gives life to a vast range of human emotions, frailties and foibles.

In one great scene, the Countess plots with her maid to stage a mock tryst that will deliver a well-deserved comeuppance to a faithless and foolish husband whom the Countess still loves. She plans to disguise herself as the maid, thus trapping her husband in the act of deception. The aria sets the rendezvous underneath the pine trees in the garden, the song going back and forth between the Countess and her maid, resembling the wind whispering through the trees. What could be more magical? There is not a single moment in the opera where the composer falters in his grasp of social and psychological truth, and each act builds towards the mad and wonderfully comical confusion of the ending, followed by the purest forgiveness imaginable. The audience laughs as it wipes the tears from its eyes.

Mozart's opera was a wild success in Prague, to which he traveled with Constanze twice in 1787. "For here they talk about nothing but Figaro. Nothing is played, sung or whistled but Figaro. No opera is drawing like Figaro. Nothing, nothing, but Figaro," Mozart wrote to Vienna.

And then there is the immortal drama of *Don Giovanni*. Mozart's creation, commissioned for the Mozart-mad Prague public, defies simplistic interpretation and analysis. Even after 220 years neither the story nor the music have lost any of their power to fascinate. Don Giovanni may well be the most complex character in all of opera. His demonic drive to seduce and copulate evokes a mixture of awe, revulsion, jealousy, admiration, astonishment—to identify only a few responses. There is something utterly mad about the Don's relentless and unending hunt. As Leporello relates in the magnificent "Catalog" aria, the Don does not care whether the subject of his attention is young, old, fat, thin, pretty, ugly, smart, stupid, tall or short. And who is the Don? A reactionary and decadent nobleman, who has nothing to do with his time other than to add to his list of conquests—as many as a dozen per day? Or is he a sexual and social revolutionary, contemptuous of all hypocritical conventions? Does he love women or hate them? These questions have been debated since Mozart's opera premiered in 1787.

Mozart was, without question, among the greatest dramatists who ever lived. Every character is fully realized with a unique musical personality. And in this opera, the Don's female nemeses are endowed with great comic attributes. It is not just the Don who desires them. They are equally determined to possess the Don. Mozart's women are deliciously erotic, and not in the least ashamed of it.

The climax of the opera, the defiant Don's confrontation with the giant stone statue of a man he had earlier killed, attains a level of dramatic intensity that is arguably without equal. The statue demands that Don Giovanni repent his sins in the face of death. Fearlessly the Don refuses, and amidst music that expresses the terror of the situation and the mad, implacable courage of the defiant hero (or anti-hero), the Don is dragged down into Hell.

But this unforgettable and chilling scene is not yet the end of the opera. With hardly a pause after the crashing chords that accompany the Don's descent into Hell, the scene shifts at once to the smoldering ruins of his residence. Before it stand all the other main characters whose lives were somehow defined by their odd and conflicted relation to the Don: his long-suffering and adoring servant and partner in vice, Leporello; the jilted Donna Elvira who is equally unrelenting in her hate and love of the Don; the vengeful Donna Anna whose ambiguous response to her attempted seduction (or perhaps rape) by the Don set the opera into

motion; the ineffectual Don Octavio, whose professions of love for Donna Anna never seem to get beyond grandiloquent throat-clearing; Zerlina, a clever peasant girl who seems somehow to be the only person able to handle the Don without losing her composure; and, finally, Zerlina's fiancé, Masetto, who is way over his head in trying to compete with Don Giovanni in matters of seduction and sex. Now, in the aftermath of the Don's demise, they all wonder what their lives will be like without the central unifying force of his mighty personality. Mozart combines their conflicting visions in a monumental vocal fugue, and in this way he brings down the operatic curtain on one of the most extraordinary achievements of human culture.

Listen: Don Giovanni K527

On Mozart's return to Vienna, the old opera master Gluck had died, and Mozart was appointed Imperial Chamber Musician, with a yearly salary of 800 florins to write dances for the masked balls of the Court.

The third and last collaboration with Da Ponte was *Così Fan Tutte* [*So do They All, or Women Are Like That*], performed for the Emperor in January 1790. Da Ponte wrote the original libretto, with Mozart as usual heavily influencing the text.

The opera has been described as an Enlightenment exploration of marriage and the idea of women's equal capacity to feel passion, as well as "the subtlest, most consistent, and most symmetrical of the three ... a penetrating essay on human feelings and their mature recognition" (Britannica 11).

Listen: Così Fan Tutte, K588

To be continued

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