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# RETHINKING MOZART

On the 250th anniversary of his birth, a more realistic picture of the composer's musical genius is emerging.

BY ANDREW MORAVCSIK

**M**OZART HAS OVERTAKEN Beethoven, the favorite son of the 19th century, as the most admired composer in the history of Western music. He has the most recordings. Classical radio stations run a morning Mozart hour. Before the sophisticated audiences of Manhattan, he alone gets his own annual festival: Mostly Mozart. Many believe (despite meager scientific evidence) that if one plays Mozart's music to babies in the womb, they will grow up smarter and more musical—perhaps even a genius like Wolfgang.

In our minds, Mozart has become the archetypal genius, a divinely inspired wunderkind for whom composing came easily. He was talented and therefore—so the Hollywood script of "Amadeus" tells us—a counterculture rebel who wore crazy clothes, told racy jokes and slumped with the downtrodden. Eventually he suffered the inevitable martyrdom of being misunderstood. Lesser minds, led by imperial composer Antonio Salieri, plotted against him. In the end, his audience deserted him. He died penniless, and was cast into a pauper's grave.



**THE MAN AND THE MYTH:** Visitors flock to Mozart's Salzburg birth house, the composer as depicted in a 19th-century lithograph

Yet what we know of Mozart's life suggests that all these preconceptions are false. He was neither poor nor underappreciated. Composing did not always come easily to him. And he was not a scatological social misfit. But he was a genius.

Mozart was an astonishingly productive composer. In 35 short years, he wrote more than 600 works—enough music to fill nearly 200 CDs. Nearly every year, Mozart wrote more music than the Beatles recorded in their entire career. He excelled in every leading musical form of his era, composing 41 symphonies, 27 piano concertos, 26 string quartets, 21 operas, 17 piano sonatas, 15 masses and a host of other pieces.

And had he not died young, what we have would be known as mere "middle period" Mozart.

It is strikingly original music. Mozart invented the modern piano concerto, in part to show off his



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own virtuosity. His late symphonies, grand in scale and sonority, pointed the way to Beethoven. His string quartets won praise from his friend Joseph Haydn (who invented the genre) as “the greatest composer I know.” At his best—above all in his mature operas—Mozart ranks with the likes of Shakespeare and Rembrandt as creator of some of humankind’s most moving art. He was, the authoritative *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* concludes, “the most universal composer in the history of Western music.”

Mozart was a piano virtuoso at 6; a great composer at 18. He was legendary, above all, for his ability to improvise. His memory was extraordinary, and included the ability to sit down after hearing a piece for the first time and write it down. He could compose while doing other things: he wrote one piece while playing pool, another while bowling.

Yet while most great musicians were prodigies, only a small percentage of prodigies become mature musicians, let alone transcendent composers. Mozart beat the odds because he had everything else going for him.

His father, Leopold Mozart, was a professional composer and one of Europe’s leading music teachers. Surely he ranks among history’s pushiest stage dads, giving up nearly all his outside activities to manage his son’s extraordinary talent. Leopold promoted the young prodigy by spreading myths about Wolfgang’s ability to play piano and violin without any lessons, but behind the scenes he made his young son practice hard. The same goes for composing. Of Wolfgang’s early minuets, Princeton musicologist Scott Burnham quips: “It’s pretty clear Papa was helping him with his homework.”

Mozart was also in the right place. His birthplace of Salzburg was small, but it lay in the musical epicenter of Europe. Young Wolfgang spent most of his youth traveling to the top cultural spots—Italy, Germany, Austria, France, England—where he learned all the current musical styles.

Even in his maturity, and despite a gift for melodic invention, Mozart often struggled for musical breakthroughs. His greatest string quartets—the six he dedicated to Haydn—required three years of work. Before producing his first great German opera, “*The Abduction From the Seraglio*,” he started three successive operas and left them incomplete—though he already had 12 others under his belt.

In his prime, living in Vienna, Mozart was no starving recluse, but an 18th-century Yuppie who spent money compulsively. He remained practical about his

livelihood, never writing a piece unless he expected to earn some cash. He spent his income—\$100,000 a year or more in current dollars—on fancy apartments, fine food, servants, a comfortable carriage, fancy clothes and his family. His favorite possession was a flashy red silk coat. Far from feeling contempt for aristocrats, Mozart wanted to fit in with them.

In his last years, war and recession interrupted Viennese concert life and medical problems plagued his wife, Konstanze. He was forced to borrow from friends, giving rise to the myth of his poverty. Had he lived just a few more years, however, he almost certainly would have followed his friend Haydn to lucra-

tive London. His music was already popular across Europe, and Mozart might well have emerged as its pre-eminent composer. When he died, he was cast into a common grave not because he was poor, but because every commoner, by imperial decree, got the same treatment.

Yet the story of the maligned and misunderstood artist persists. In the modern world, we cling to the romantic notion that geniuses must live this way—thanks in part to the image that Beethoven, a generation after Mozart, cultivated. But Mozart was a creature of the 18th-century Enlightenment. He knew his music was better than most, and he said so. But he did not adopt—and would not have under-

stood—the role of the distant romantic hero possessed of extraordinary genius. In his greatest works, “The Magic Flute” or “The Marriage of Figaro,” Mozart appeals to both the most popular and the most sophisticated musical awareness within us. And he renders in music the subtlest shadings of human emotions—love, jealousy, duty and wit—with a naturalness and human sympathy that has never been equaled in opera. It is music, so pianist Robert Levin puts it, that “holds up a mirror and lets us see ourselves.” No wonder our love affair with Mozart goes on.

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ANNIVERSARY HYPE

Critics can deconstruct his legacy all they want. But it won't keep fans from snatching up those Mozart golf balls.

# THE BIRTHDAY BASH

BY TARA PEPPER

**W**hatever the source or extent of Mozart's genius, there is no doubt about his entrenched popular appeal. The world's concert halls are gearing up for the 250th anniversary of his birth on Jan. 27 with a year of commemorative events. His hometown of Salzburg will host 260 concerts and 55 masses devoted to his music, and the Salzburg Festival (July 21 to Aug. 31) will feature performances of all 22 of his operas. Vienna, where the composer died in 1791, will showcase five new opera productions at the restored Theater an der Wien. In November the city will host a festival of new music inspired by Mozart and organized by Peter Sellars, who will also unveil his new, contemporary production of Mozart's unfinished opera “Zaide” there in May. It will travel to Mostly Mozart festivals in London and New York in June and July. In Paris, film director Michael Haneke will present a new production of “Don Giovanni” later this month. (Mozart's official birthday Web site details celebrations at [mozart2006.net](http://mozart2006.net).)



TONI ANZENBERGER—ANZENBERGER

**BIG BUSINESS:** Souvenirs range from the kitschy to the useful

To be sure, the anniversary means big business. Austria's national tourist board estimates that the Mozart brand is worth \$8.8 billion. Salzburg stores are stocked with Mozart T shirts, calendars, beer, wine, milkshakes, golf balls, baby bottles—even a Mozart bra that plays “Eine Kleine Nachtmusik” when it is unfastened. “Salzburg and Vienna have both invested huge amounts in the anniversary, both as a means of attracting tourism and boosting their national status,” says Lon-

don Evening Standard critic Norman Lebrecht.

The anniversary has also prompted a flurry of more useful offerings. In his new documentary, “In Search of Mozart,” director Phil Grabsky followed the composer's footsteps 40,000 kilometers around Europe, interviewing conductors and musicians. He provides new interpretations of his music and letters, depicting Mozart in his historical context as a hardworking entrepreneur. “There were a lot of myths and inaccuracies about

Mozart's life in [the 1984 film] ‘Amadeus’ that need to be revised,” he says. Julian Rushton's new biography, “Mozart: His Life and Work,” attributes the composer's genius less to divine gifts than to perseverance. “We're moving on to view him a bit more dispassionately,” says Rushton. Critic Anthony Holden recently published a study of Mozart's librettist, “The Man Who Wrote Mozart: The Extraordinary Life of Lorenzo Da Ponte,” and Cambridge University Press has issued a lavish new Mozart Encyclopedia.

Perhaps Mozart will best be remembered for deepening the range of emotion that instruments could express. If you see any of the commemorative concerts this year, search out the moments of greatness—the cataclysmic finale of “Don Giovanni,” written months after the death of his father, or the Clarinet Concerto in A. The intense emotional ambiguity makes it nearly impossible to tell if the music is sad or joyous. At the heart of works like these is Mozart's understanding that the most beautiful, lively phrase can be fully appreciated only in the shadow of its antithesis. When death in a minor key lingers in the cello section, or haunts a sparkling piano trill like unearthly thunder, something close to musical perfection is reached. And no one has come close to Mozart in creating those kinds of emotional contradictions.