

4 Mozart and late eighteenth-century aesthetics

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Mozart was keenly aware of and interested in the views of his contemporaries on matters of aesthetics, but curiously it has taken almost two centuries for us to recognize this fact and to realize how critical some of this thinking may have been in influencing him as a composer. The reasons for this hiatus are not entirely straightforward, but emerge in part in the vast literature on Mozart prior to the final decades of the twentieth century. One of the simpler possibilities appears to be that writers on music in general or Mozart in particular rarely had much interest in fields other than music, and in any event often preferred to treat music as a self-contained entity, relatively free from the influence of other disciplines. The prevailing view of Mozart emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when the focus lay on his genius – a peculiar notion of genius shaped by early nineteenth-century Romanticism and fostered by giants of German philosophy later in the century, including Hegel, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. For some, Mozart's genius had to be demonically inspired,¹ while for others that genius placed him as an eternal child figure, living in a childlike dream realm detached from reality and, of course, blissfully devoid of education.² Writing in the middle of the twentieth century, Alfred Einstein believed Mozart was 'a child and always remained one',³ and even as late as 1971 Michael Levey continued to support a modification of the Mozart-as-child phenomenon, suggesting that 'what has often been described as the childlike quality which he retained into adulthood was in fact a retention of energy: pure, unhindered and of almost explosive force'.⁴

Leopold Mozart

In the late twentieth century a number of writers challenged various Mozart myths effectively by invoking documentation that had previously been ignored, or by interpreting evidence in the light of eighteenth-century considerations.⁵ Of great importance here has been the assessment of the role of Leopold Mozart in his son's life, and the evaluation of how that role changed as the relationship between father and son changed. Before this issue could be sorted out, the full correspondence among members of the Mozart family had to be available, and this finally happened with the

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publication of *Mozart: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen* commencing in 1962.⁶ Earlier opinion about Leopold's role fluctuated as wildly as attitudes about Wolfgang as genius, ranging from Leopold as the wise mentor and father to Schurig's view of him as a narrow-minded philistine.⁷ As long as Leopold was considered only in his capacity as a Kapellmeister, little could be understood about the breadth of education he could offer his children. While knowledge of his awareness of moral philosophy and a range of other fields has emerged gradually over a number of years, in the last decade of the twentieth century Josef Mančal gave this issue the attention it deserved, revealing Leopold's profound knowledge of the major writers of the Enlightenment.⁸

Leopold's career as a student of logic and jurisprudence at the University of Salzburg came to a shabby end after one year of study, but in no way did that diminish his love of study – especially that of moral philosophy.⁹ Before leaving his native Augsburg he had developed a serious interest in the works of Johann Christoph Gottsched and Christian Fürchtegott Gellert. As the leading German writer of the Enlightenment in the mid-eighteenth century, Gellert exerted a strong influence not only at home but abroad, emphasizing the crucial role of morality in enlightened thought. Leopold took great pride in disseminating his works in Salzburg, and felt so committed to his advocacy of the Protestant Gellert that he even wrote to him, eliciting a letter of thanks in return. Not only did the young Mozart hear about Gellert from his father, but he also received a volume of Gellert's *Geistliche Oden und Lieder* from Baron von Böse as a gift, prompting Leopold to inform Lorenz Hagenauer in 1764 that the Baron had exhorted Mozart to 'read it often – and feel its god-like songs and lend them (in these spiritual hours of feeling) your irresistible harmonies: so that the callous despiser of religion may read them – and take notice – may hear them – and fall down and worship God'.¹⁰ Just as Leopold took Gellert to be the ultimate arbiter of taste in issues of religion and morality, so he accorded Gellert's aesthetic views on issues such as tailoring works for an audience and the purpose of art in general a similarly high status.

Leopold's own education in Augsburg at the Jesuit Gymnasium of St Salvator and the Lyceum, in addition to the study of Latin, French and Italian, included instruction in astronomy, geometry, mineralogy and biology, and he passed on these interests enthusiastically to his son. In the area of music theory and criticism, Leopold knew the works of all of the major writers well, as one would expect considering his own outstanding contribution to the field. As early as 1755 he identified Glarianus, Zarlino, Bontemps, Kepler, Vogt, Neidhart, Euler, Scheibe, Prinz, Werkmeister, Fux, Mattheson, Mizler, Spiess, Marpurg and Quantz in a letter to his Augsburg friend Johann Jakob Lotter. Two decades later he wrote about these and other critics to his son:

There must be some good material in it [Vogler's *Kurpfälzische Tonschule*], since he could copy out the *Clavier Methode* from [C. P. E.] Bach's book, follow the instructions of the *Singmethode* of Tosi and Agricola, and the instructions for composition and harmony from Fux, Riepel, Marpurg, Mattheson, Spiess, Scheibe, d'Alembert, Rameau and a lot of others, and offer them as a shorter system, which I have long had in mind.¹¹

Other discussions in the correspondence about specific compositional approaches or aesthetic positions, sometimes with specific writers' or composers' ideas in mind, leave us in no doubt that Mozart had been well instructed by his father on these issues, if in fact he did not learn about them from other sources.

The Mozart correspondence

While we learn much from the letters between Mozart and his father of what Mozart may have known, we must nevertheless be wary of what they tell us about Mozart's own views. Gellert turns out to be a good case in point. When he died in 1769, Leopold certainly took the news badly, lamenting the great loss. But Mozart, not yet fourteen years old, breathed a sigh of relief in complete contrast, drolly remarking to Nannerl, with a pun on Gellert and the word *gelehrt* (learned): 'I have nothing new except that Herr gelehrt, the poet from Leipzig, died, and since his death has composed no more poetry.'¹² He would not have dared to say such a thing to his father, but with his sister he could share a jest about his father's hero, undermining the authority of this celebrated moralist. When Mozart and his father discuss, in the next decade, aesthetic issues that related directly to Gellert's views, such as how to gain audience approbation or various aspects of morality, we should not necessarily assume that the two are in agreement, in spite of what Mozart may say.

The letters have proved to be fairly unreliable sources of Mozart's views, especially the letters to his father, and in this respect must be read as one would read any correspondence from the eighteenth century. Correspondents often wrote with the assumption that their letters would be widely disseminated if not actually published, especially if both parties were already famous. Leopold treated all of his early letters to Hagenhauer as raw material for the biography he intended to write about his son, and given the style of his letters to Mozart in 1777–9 we have no reason to doubt that he still had publication in mind. He uses Gellert's directives on letter writing as his model, including Gellert's persuasiveness and moral tone. Various issues on which Leopold persistently chided Mozart, especially concerning his behaviour, would have been demeaningly inappropriate for an addressee in

his early twenties, but this did not deter Leopold, who apparently directed much of his chiding to a presumed larger audience.

In responding to these letters, Mozart used various strategies, counterbalancing his father's strategies with some of his own. These included adopting a tone of obsequiousness or simply being agreeable as a ruse; this tactic worked as long as Leopold could not observe (or hear about) actions to the contrary. It proved difficult for Mozart to keep this up in the face of stinging insults, and at times he could not resist lashing out, returning invective at the level he received it. This brought no success, since harsh words only prompted even more excoriating replies from Leopold. Where the bludgeon failed, the rapier proved much more successful, and Mozart discovered the effectiveness of dissimulation and outright lying, assuring his father of his industry in writing new works that in fact he had no intention of writing, or of good behaviour that actually left much to be desired.¹³ An interesting deception in this respect concerns one of the great thinkers of the eighteenth century, Voltaire, whom Leopold could not respect because of his challenges to God and religion. Writing but a few hours after the death of his mother, Mozart slipped in this nasty comment about the recently deceased Voltaire: 'Now I have a piece of news for you which you may already know, namely, that the godless archrogue Voltaire, so to speak, has kicked the bucket like a dog, like a beast! That is the fruit of his labour.'¹⁴ The chances that Mozart shared his father's view of Voltaire seem remote in the extreme. Now sharing quarters with Voltaire's dear friend Madame d'Épinay, and being on the best of terms with her, and in future years showing his subscription to Voltaire's views time and again, Mozart was indulging in the same type of epistolary deception that Voltaire himself practised, writing what he thought his addressee would want to hear.

Mozart's reading

The idea of Mozart as an active reader does not fit the psychological or genius profile that many commentators have constructed for him; even as recently as 1977 Wolfgang Hildesheimer could 'hardly imagine that Mozart was a great reader, except as a purposeful seeker of scores and libretti'.¹⁵ According to his widow Constanze he enjoyed reading, although her remark to this effect may have been part of the mythmaking in which she immediately indulged after his death. We have the inventory of his library, included among the documents pertaining to his estate, published in Appendix II of Otto Erich Deutsch's *Mozart: A Documentary Biography*, although we should not assume that his reading was limited to these volumes or that he necessarily read them all. In fact, he personally knew a number of the

authors well, figures of the German and Austrian Enlightenment, including Salomon Gessner, Christoph Martin Wieland, Joseph von Sonnenfels, and Aloys Blumauer, and it seems inconceivable that he would not have read from the works of people with whom he actually engaged in discussion. As for some of the other writers, such as Molière, Moses Mendelssohn and Johann Pezzl, evidence suggests he knew their works; the closeness of his own *Don Giovanni* to Molière's *Dom Juan* or the telltale similarity between his comments to his father in his last known letter to him and passages from Mendelssohn's *Phädon*¹⁶ bear this out.

In all probability Mozart read at least parts of the books in his library, including authors such as Ovid, Johann Jakob Ebert, Jean Frédéric Osterwald, Ewald Christian von Kleist, Adolf von Knigge and Johann Heinrich Campe, as well as the authors noted above. One should not, of course, jump to any conclusions – positive or negative – about influence in matters of aesthetics. In most cases we lack evidence of his views about these writers, and when he expresses opinions to his father, as he does about Voltaire or Sonnenfels, we are probably hearing only what Mozart would have wished his father to have heard. Something closer to Mozart's own views, gleaned from his operas or other possible evidence, may often contradict his remarks to his father. It seems fairly safe to assume that through reading or direct contact with noted writers Mozart encountered a wide range of philosophical and aesthetic opinions.

Friends and acquaintances

From a very early age Mozart came into contact with significant figures of the Enlightenment, among them monarchs and other leaders and ministers of state, composers, poets, critics, freemasons, shapers of public opinion, *philosophes*, ambassadors and *salonnières*. Some were already friends or acquaintances of his father, and he could therefore often approach them with a letter of introduction if not the warm embrace of Leopold's friendship. In some cases the contact may have been fleeting, but in others it extended for long periods of time, sufficient for establishing thorough familiarity.

Mozart's first exposure to the Enlightenment occurred at home in Salzburg, although since the source of it was, aside from his father, the much detested Archbishop Hieronymus Colloredo, Mozart should not be blamed for not recognizing anything of an enlightened or reforming nature. In spite of his treatment of the Mozarts, Colloredo brought reforms to both church and state, promoting education, populating the Benedictine University of Salzburg with more German professors, reforming the system of privileges and agrarian economy, restructuring the military and financial

systems, and supporting the arts – especially music and the theatre.¹⁷ If Mozart had been able to suspend his distaste for Colloredo long enough to notice ('the Mufti H. C. is a prick,' he wrote to his father, who did not disagree but protested at the language Mozart used), he would have seen a society and a role for music in society much improved from the previous generation.

At the tender age of twelve, Mozart, with his father, encountered Gluck in Vienna. Far from adulating the great composer, and incredulous that someone would doubt the abilities of his precocious son, Leopold imagined a conspiracy against them led by Gluck. As the finest composer of opera living in the 1760s, and one with a strong position on the relative roles of music and text, Gluck had much to offer a young composer such as Mozart, but Mozart's view of Gluck does not accurately emerge in his comments to his father in the early 1780s when he again met up with Gluck in Vienna. The apparently contradictory positions will be discussed below in relation to Mozart's famous remarks about *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*. A figure much more congenial to the Mozarts, who met them in 1770 in Bologna, was Padre Giovanni Battista Martini, a renowned music scholar and teacher of composition. They discussed not only composition but also matters of music history. Mozart surely discovered much from Martini in both practical and aesthetic domains, and the mutual respect did not flag over the years.

While travelling with his mother in 1777 and 1778 in search of a suitable position, Mozart met a number of leading figures, including Wieland in Mannheim. Two individuals stand out, one of whom Leopold knew well: the German Baron Melchior Grimm, now living in Paris, and his French mistress Madame Louise d'Epinay. As the Russian ambassador of Catherine the Great in Paris and the driving force behind the *Correspondance littéraire*, Grimm was a force to be reckoned with, and he advised Mozart on numerous matters during the half year Mozart spent in Paris in 1778, most notably on how to win the approval of French audiences. Mozart may have followed Grimm's advice in writing his 'Paris' Symphony, but after a falling out with Grimm because of his alleged stinginess and apparent refusal to introduce Mozart to important members of Parisian society Mozart had little good to say about him.

In contrast to his relationship with Grimm, Mozart remained on the best of terms with Madame d'Epinay, moving into her apartment shortly after his mother's death, and regularly taking meals with her. As one of the great intellectual forces in France, she wrote prolifically and contributed regularly to the *Correspondance littéraire* with essays on politics, philosophy, economics and the theatre. A close friend of all the leading *philosophes*, she in all probability discussed with Mozart in their many hours together such matters as Voltaire's scepticism, Denis Diderot's questions about world order

and uses of literary disguise, and Baron d'Holbach's challenges to Christian principles. She may also have talked about Rousseau, with whom she had fallen out, and the vilification she experienced from him, in part in his *Confessions*.

After moving to Vienna in 1781, Mozart quickly met leading representatives of the Enlightenment, some through his association with freemasons and others through his involvement in the world of opera and theatre. These people included Aloys Blumauer, Johann Baptist von Alxinger, Michel Denis, Lorenz Leopold Haschka, Ignaz von Born, Franz Sales von Greiner, Tobias Philipp Gebler, Joseph von Sonnenfels, Gottfried van Swieten and Gottlieb Leon. Some of these were members of the lodge 'Zur wahren Eintracht', under the leadership of Born and Sonnenfels, and Mozart regularly attended this lodge although he did not join since he already belonged to 'Zur Wohlthätigkeit'. He could also meet many of the same people at non-masonic gatherings such as the literary or music salons of Greiner and van Swieten. Also in Vienna, Mozart could not help but pay close attention to Joseph II, whose efforts to reform the Habsburg Empire during the early 1780s left a lasting impression on a grateful Viennese population, if not necessarily on people in the farther flung reaches of the Empire.

Aesthetic approaches

As Mozart matured as a composer, he approached his art and his listening public not as one possessed by some detached quality of genius living in his own ethereal world, but as an artist who fully understood the nature of his audience and how that audience should be engaged. The audience could vary from country to country or even from city to city, and Leopold, himself thoroughly familiar with the principles of gaining approbation, made certain his son understood these principles. Especially during Mozart's Paris sojourn, Leopold hammered away at this necessity, stressing that 'should you be engaged to write a contrapuntal work or something of that sort for the *concert spirituel*, work it out with the greatest care, and listen in advance to what is being composed and what people like best'. Leopold kept up this theme in other letters:

your whole reputation depends on your first work. Before you write it, listen and think about the taste of the nation; hear and observe their operas. I know you well; you can imitate anything . . . Discuss the text in advance with *Baron Grimm* and with *Noverre* and make sketches and let them hear them. Everybody does that. Voltaire reads his poems aloud to his friends, listens to their judgement and makes revisions.¹⁸

Grimm himself had complained to Leopold about the poor taste of the French, and one can only imagine that Leopold had in mind that his son should appeal to the lowest common denominator among the audience.

Leopold's understanding of the connection that should exist between an artist and his audience as well as the goals of works of art came directly from principles espoused by Gellert, whose mid-century values emphasized that if a writer's works were to achieve moral value they must be made accessible to all, featuring a predominantly natural tone.¹⁹ Gellert's own model was one of the most influential writers of the early eighteenth century, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, who noted in his *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* that 'an author's art and labour are for his reader's sake alone'.²⁰ Eventually Leopold took this principle to the extreme, and in accounting for Grimm's advice advised his son 'to think about not only the musical, but also *the unmusical public*. You know that for every *ten real connoisseurs* there are a *hundred illiterates*. Therefore do not forget the so-called *popular style*, which tickles *long ears*.'²¹ Mozart's reply, that 'concerning the so-called popular taste, do not worry about it, since there is music in my opera for all kinds of people – with the exception of long ears',²² may have indulged a joke about *Langohren*, but it also suggests, as does his music, that he had rejected this notion.

Leopold very much admired Sonnenfels, who had become the most important authority on matters of taste and the purpose of art in the Habsburg realm during the 1760s and 1770s, and when Mozart met him in 1781 his remarks to his father about Sonnenfels' reforms appeared to take Sonnenfels' position. In a protracted and bitter fight with actors, playwrights and theatre managers, Sonnenfels had succeeded in ramming through legislation to get rid of the popular theatrical figure Hanswurst, leaving the mission of the theatre 'to defend the good, to fight evil, to uphold authority, to obviate subversion'.²³ Shortly before the famous discourse on the role of opera emerging from correspondence on *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, Mozart discussed with his father the issue of mixing comic and serious features in opera, making unmistakable references to Sonnenfels in the process:

do you really believe that I would write an *opéra comique* the same way as an opera seria? In an opera seria there should be less frivolity and more erudition and sensibility, as in an opera buffa there should be less of the learned and all the more frivolity and merriment. That people also want to have comic music in an opera seria, I cannot prevent. But here [in Vienna] they correctly differentiate on this point. I definitely find in music that Hanswurst has not yet been eradicated, and in this case the French are right.²⁴

If Mozart suggested here, invoking the taste of the French, that the continued appearance of Hanswurst was in some way unfortunate, he contradicted this entirely in his next work, *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, in which Hanswurst plays a large role – in a Turkish disguise as Osmin. Later in *Die Zauberflöte* Hanswurst would resurface again in the form of Papageno, whose musical role far outstrips that of the character some might imagine to be the hero, Tamino.

The letters Mozart wrote to his father in September and October 1781 while he was composing *Die Entführung* are generally taken as the clearest indicators of his aesthetic views as they apply to opera, explaining, it would seem, compositional processes and even giving what amounts to a dictum on the balancing of text and music. As with all of Mozart's letters to his father, especially after the bitter exchanges in late 1778 and the beginning of 1779, the context must be understood. Mozart had now defied his father's wish that he should stay in Salzburg and receive a meagre but steady salary to pay back the debt he owed him. On the one hand, Mozart hoped to relieve some of the tension by returning to what Leopold had always thrived on in the past – discussion of his latest composition. On the other, he needed to convince Leopold that he had made the right decision in leaving the Archbishop's service, and that he could make much more money in Vienna than in Salzburg. To succeed he would need to present the work in the best possible light, in fact in a way that would sound very much as if it were framed by Leopold's own views and biases, and in a number of instances these descriptions do not correspond to the work that finally emerged. Mozart's strategy appeared to work up to a point, provided that Leopold did not try to interfere by attempting to advise and influence, as he had in his mediation between Mozart in Munich and the librettist Giambattista Varesco in Salzburg during the composition of *Idomeneo*. Once again Leopold overstepped the bounds and as punishment Mozart excluded him from discussions of Acts 2 and 3, writing nothing more on the subject after 13 October 1780.

Of the various comments made about *Die Entführung*, including the remark that although Osmin oversteps all sense of order the music must never offend the ear and must still give pleasure, the point which receives the greatest attention, because of its apparent status as an aesthetic pronouncement, is his statement that 'in an opera the poetry must absolutely be the obedient daughter of the music.'²⁵ This seems directly to contradict Gluck's famous dictum, given in the preface to *Alceste*, that music should play a subordinate role to poetry. Gluck no doubt had good reason to state his position so baldly, responding to the flimsy or distorted texts of opera seria, and the profusion of music designed for the aggrandizement of singers; taking the remark out of context as a general statement of Gluck's own aesthetic view

seems to miss the point. Doing the same with the opinion Mozart expressed to his father falls even wider of the mark. Leopold, even at this late date, probably still nursed the old wound of an imagined conspiracy led by Gluck against him in 1768, and reading a view contrary to Gluck's from his son no doubt gave him the satisfaction for which Mozart would have wished. The relationship of text and music proves far too complex to be reduced to this type of epigram, and Mozart surely knew this better than anyone.

Enlightenment issues

Strictly speaking, the study of aesthetics concerns matters of taste and the principles of art, but in the eighteenth century it necessarily went further since taste and morality were inexorably linked. Aesthetics therefore represented a central issue of philosophical discourse and the unfolding of the Enlightenment. As morality was increasingly defined in secular ways, its focus shifted from a religious notion of rules of behaviour to a cultivation of the best human qualities or refinement of taste. The Enlightenment saw works of art as one of the best means for achieving this refinement, and it did not have to be accomplished through overt fostering of virtue. The more indirect cultivation of the sensibilities proved just as effective, and novels or instrumental music could reach a higher level than *geistliche Lieder* or moral weeklies. Since Gellert had been instrumental in developing these ideas in Germany, Mozart knew them well through his father and other Gellert enthusiasts in his father's circle. Among the finest writers and composers a shift occurred from the older notion of art as moral persuasion to a new conception of art as being independent of this function, existing rather for its own sake or for the satisfaction of the individual artist.

The Enlightenment also fostered lively debate on a wide range of social issues, and during much of the reign of Joseph II discussion could occur with relative freedom, at least until the crisis in the provinces in 1787 that caused the Habsburg Empire to revert back to its more traditional role as a police state. Various social reforms were not only debated actively but put into practice by Joseph and his ministers, including the abolition of serfdom, restricting the use of torture in the judicial system, and the notion of universal accessibility to education. Along with reform came a broader debate that proved troublesome to those in authority, and probably triggered some of the backlash in 1787. In the heady early days of Joseph's reign authority itself became susceptible to challenge, both religious and state, and possibilities arose for the improved lot of those previously marginalized by society, especially women. These matters could find their way into literature and music; much of this thought emanated from the *philosophes* or others

in France, and as vigorously as censors tried to keep their writing out of the Habsburg territories it always managed to find its way in.

Since travel outside the realm was not restricted, as it was later in the century and early in the nineteenth century, one could visit France, as Mozart did, and gain exposure to a world of thought that had touched Austria in only a peripheral fashion. Even before reaching Paris in 1778, Mozart encountered people and ideas travelling through Protestant Germany that would later fire his imagination, such as the volume of Molière's plays he received from Fridolin Weber in Mannheim just before departing for Paris. A great new world of thought surely opened up to him in the presence of his Paris hosts – if not from the somewhat stuffy Baron Grimm, then certainly from the more liberated Madame d'Epinau. As a leading intellectual she would have had little sympathy for prevailing views about women, such as the misogynist notions of her nemesis Rousseau, and it does not seem impossible that Mozart's treatment of women in the operas written after his Paris sojourn, including Susanna in *Le nozze di Figaro*, Pamina in *Die Zauberflöte* and even Elettra in *Idomeneo*, was somehow connected to his awareness of what Madame d'Epinau represented. Even *Così fan tutte*, which on the surface appears to support an older misogynistic view of women, surreptitiously does the opposite as it dismantles the symmetry that represents the status quo.

The 1780s, a limited window on change and transformation during which Joseph tried to pull his realm into the modern world, brimmed with contradictions as some sought to gain unheard of freedoms while Joseph fully intended to keep firm control. The oxymoron 'enlightened despotism' characterized this era, and Mozart felt the pull of the reform side more than most, being acquainted with thought emanating from France, where defiance to the authority of the state would erupt into violence before the end of the 1780s and where challenges to the benevolence and even existence of God were mounted by Voltaire and d'Holbach. Some of these attitudes surface in Mozart's letters, although often obliquely so as not to offend his correspondent, especially if it happened to be his father. The challenges to state and religious authority emerge much more succinctly in the late operas, in fact in each opera from *Idomeneo* onwards, sometimes in very subtle ways that require hearing such challenges covertly in the music instead of more overtly in the texts. In these operas Mozart appeared to be pushing beyond the boundaries of the Enlightenment itself, and in order to do this he had to be acutely aware of current events, the aesthetic, political and philosophical views of the past, and the most current thought emerging from France and elsewhere. It appears that he was more than up to the task.