Mozart's Women

His Family, His Friends, His Music

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Extract

Prelude

AT THE end of the 1820s, three elderly widows lived in two separate households in Salzburg. One of them, bedridden and blind, led an almost reclusive existence in a third-floor apartment in Sigmund-Haffnergasse (whose back windows overlooked, had she been able to see them, those of the house in Getreidegasse where she had been born). The other two, sisters whose lives had converged again after the deaths of their husbands, enjoyed marvellous mountain views from their house and garden in the Nonnberggasse, a narrow street running along the cliff under the shadow of Salzburg's fortress. Between them, these women had shared, witnessed and contributed to the life of the greatest musical genius the world has ever known, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

Although much of the story of Mozart, and of the women in his life, took place elsewhere, it is in the town of Salzburg that it begins, episodically continues, and ultimately (posthumously) ends. He himself was born there on 27 January 1756. He was the last of seven children, of whom only he and his sister Maria Anna (known as Nannerl) survived, born to Leopold and Maria Anna Mozart. At a very early age Wolfgang's phenomenal musical gifts were recognized by his parents, and much of his childhood was spent travelling through the major cities and capitals of Europe, where the small child played, composed and grew. His sister too was

musically gifted, so at first the whole family travelled together, parading the two children on more or less equal terms. Later, when Nannerl approached adulthood, the women were left behind in Salzburg.

Yet despite the dazzling distribution of young Wolfgang's talents, and for all that his brilliance was universally recognized and praised, he could secure no permanent employment in any of the places he visited. He returned to Salzburg in his late teens, and joined his father in the musical service of its Prince-Archbishop. At the age of twenty-one he undertook another long journey in search of more stimulating employment, this time accompanied by his mother. But this trip resulted only in disaster, and yet again Wolfgang found himself back in Salzburg, where he felt trapped and unappreciated. During a temporary residence in Vienna, still in the service of his Salzburg Archbishop, he allowed himself to be ignominiously dismissed from his employment, and so entered the wholly precarious world of life as a freelance musician. But by now he had made many excellent contacts with musical patrons and friends, and for the next decade he poured his music into the opera houses, concert halls and musical salons of the Austrian capital. He married Constanze Weber, from another gifted musical family, and she bore him several children, of whom, again, only two survived. But the monumental achievements of the 1780s actually occurred against a backdrop of endless struggle, hardship and loss: the young couple were regularly short of money. By the time Wolfgang's fortunes were recovering, in 1791, his never-robust health had collapsed. He died in Vienna in December 1791, at the age of thirty-five.

In the years after Mozart's death, his widow Constanze, supported continually by her mother and sisters, gradually began to organize his musical legacy, arranging performances and publications. In 1809 she remarried. Her second husband, Georg Nissen, was a Danish diplomat, and in 1810 she returned with him to Copenhagen where they lived for ten years. On his retirement in 1820 they moved to Salzburg, for Nissen was undertaking the first

major biography of Mozart. He died in 1826 before finishing it, but Constanze saw it into publication. She lived out the rest of her life in Salzburg, where she was treated with the greatest respect: at last, in the mid-nineteenth century, the town was beginning to appreciate the extraordinary genius it had raised, and lost. Constanze's gentle dignity and her quietly civilized lifestyle were noted by her visitors. She shared her last years with her younger sister Sophie, by then also widowed, and later still, in the 1830s, with her one remaining older sister Aloysia, whom, as it happened, Mozart had loved before he married Constanze.

Mozart's sister Nannerl, meanwhile, had been largely concerned with domestic responsibilities since her retreat from her brother's limelight. In 1784, at the relatively late age of thirty-three, she had married a much older widower, Johann Baptist Franz von Berchtold zu Sonnenburg, moved to St Gilgen where he was Prefect, and acquired five stepchildren. Only after the death of her brother in 1791 did she filter back into the Mozart narrative, supplying early memories and anecdotes to biographers. When her husband died in 1801, she returned to live in Salzburg, supporting herself and her own children by giving piano lessons, until her failing eyesight and physical frailty prevented this. She outlived her brother by nearly forty years.

And so, at the end of their lives, the women who had been closest to Mozart were all back in the town of his birth, observing caring courtesies in their communications with one another. In fact they head a whole roster of women who inspired, fascinated, supported, amused, aroused and sometimes hurt Mozart throughout his life. And since he was the creator of some of the most vividly drawn and brilliantly understood women on the operatic stage, his entire rich female acquaintance bears close examination.

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THIS CONCENTRATION ON women by no means ignores the importance to Mozart of male company and friendship. He was naturally gregarious, and from his childhood quite at ease in any company,

whether in an Imperial palace or his local inn. His closest friends were often fine musicians too – the clarinettist Anton Stadler, the violinist Franz Hofer (who married Mozart's sister-in-law Josefa Weber), and of course Joseph Haydn. With all these and many others, Mozart enjoyed a warm camaraderie, which embraced both profundity and buffoonery. He liked male clubs, societies and fraternities, and became a Freemason in his late twenties. And the most important single influence in his life was his father Leopold, in whose company he spent practically every day of his first twenty-one years. The relationship between father and son was highly complex, and deteriorated distressingly after Wolfgang escaped his father's daily scrutiny. Ultimately the remarkable Leopold Mozart emerges as a tyrannical and paranoid man, who did and said unforgivable things to his son. But the bond between them was based on deep love and shared experience of travel and music. Leopold's death in 1787 was a major loss to Wolfgang, from which he never really recovered.

Mozart's large and diverse circle of female acquaintance similarly included many extremely talented musicians – singers and instrumentalists – with whom he enjoyed that most fulfilling experience, artistic collaboration. But beyond that, he turned unfailingly to women for support: for the whispering of confidences and the baring of his soul, for playful release from the mental and emotional pressures of constant creativity, for the boisterous normality of a domestic hurly-burly, and for the physical joy and comfort of sexual relations. Much of his attitude to women, his respect, his sympathy, his perspicacious understanding, can be gleaned from his music. And then there are the letters – from him, to him, and about him. The surviving material inevitably has many gaps in it, some of extremely eloquent significance. Nevertheless it is a rich source of information, which in the case of Mozart's own letters offers insights too into his compositions. He was as fluent and inventive with words as he was with music. His letters have pace, narrative, dramatic contrast and great passion. At times they seem to be verbal equivalents of his famed improvisa-

tions at the keyboard: he could take an idea (be it descriptive, or practical, or even scatological), and develop it with fantastical imagination. He loved jokes and puns and ciphers, and often wrote in a veritable counterpoint of languages.

And from this brilliant store of self-expression, the personality of Mozart emerges. The sunny, sweet, willing child, entirely nonchalant about his genius which he nonetheless recognized, displayed a spirit of optimism which proved invaluable to him as he grew up. This essential cheerfulness was frequently battered, and therefore became somewhat embittered, in the course of an adult life which can only really be described as a monumental struggle, for all its dazzling achievement. So we perceive immense courage and fortitude too, and a heartrending vulnerability. Mozart clearly needed emotional support from those closest to him. And from the many women who loved him – his mother and sister, his wife and her sisters, his colleagues in the theatrical communities where he was so much in his element – he received it.

Mozart's Family

MOZART NEVER knew either of his grandmothers. His mother's mother, Eva Rosina Pertl, died in the care of her pregnant daughter a few months before he was born. His father's mother, Anna Maria Mozart, could have heard her seven-year-old grandson perform in Augsburg in 1763, but had long since fallen out irreparably with her own son Leopold, and kept her obstinate distance. But both these women, the one a victim and the other a culprit of historical absenteeism, had a strong influence on the lives and natures of their own children, Mozart's parents; and thus they left their mark on the early awareness of their grandchildren.

There was music on both sides of Mozart's family, but more perhaps in the maternal genes. His grandmother Eva Rosina's father and her first husband were both Salzburg church musicians. Her second husband, Nikolaus Pertl, was also musical, with a career path initially not dissimilar to that of his future son-in-law. Pertl attended the Benedictine University in Salzburg, sang bass in the choir of St Peter's Abbey and taught at the monastery school. But his main study was law, which after graduation brought him jobs in Salzburg, Vienna and Graz. He was forty-five when he married Mozart's grandmother in 1712. He then held the fairly senior post of District Superintendent (or Pflege) in St Andrae, but in 1715 suffered a near-fatal illness, which left him greatly debilitated. The

Pertls moved to the quieter waters of the Abersee, and the small village of St Gilgen, where Nikolaus he held a similar but lesser-paid position. As his health continued to decline, he increasingly found himself having to borrow money, especially after the birth of his two daughters, Maria Rosina Gertrud in 1719, and Maria Anna in 1720. When he died in March 1724, his debts amounted to more than four times his annual salary. His effects were confiscated, and Eva Rosina, with her two little girls, returned to Salzburg to live on a meagre charity pension. Four years later, in 1728, her elder daughter died. Eva Rosina and Maria Anna, survivors of this all-too-common cycle of family tragedy, were thrown ever closer together.

The future mother of Mozart thus had a somewhat difficult start in life. Torn from the peaceful lakeside beauty of St Gilgen at the age of four, bereft of her father and soon also to lose her sister, she was bewilderingly transplanted into the city-state of Salzburg – prosperous, independent of its neighbours Bavaria and Austria, and gleamingly modern. Ruled since the thirteenth century by a series of Prince-Archbishops, Salzburg reaped great revenue from its far-flung territories with their salt mines, livestock farming and forestry. Over the centuries it had also grown as a cultural and intellectual centre. The Benedictine University was founded in 1623, and, also in the seventeenth century, under a series of rulers whose imaginations were fired by the Italian Baroque, the city's architecture was transformed. The first major works of Fischer von Erlach, who later brought similar innovation to Imperial Vienna, were four of Salzburg's finest churches. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the city had nearly 16,000 inhabitants. Its ecclesiastical royal Court was the centre of important social and cultural events. Its merchants had distant trading connections, which gave them immense wealth individually. There was a wide range of public institutions and social services: schools, museums, libraries, hospitals and almshouses. Salzburg looked after its poor as well as its wealthy. In the 1720s it was just this supportive security that the widow Eva Rosina and her small child needed.

Little is known of Maria Anna's upbringing, except that she was not especially healthy. She probably had no formal education. Perhaps she and her mother supplemented their charity pension by making lace – an industry which thrived along the shores of the Abersee. In the one adult portrait of Maria Anna, she is depicted holding a piece of lace in a rather proprietorial manner, which suggests that she had made it herself. But she was clearly a bright, observant and intelligent child. Through caring for her mother, which she continued to do until Eva Rosina's death in 1755, she developed a strong sense of resourcefulness, compassion and duty. These qualities were to sustain her through her eventual marriage to a charismatic but difficult man.

Sometime in her early twenties, Maria Anna met a young Court violinist. Leopold Mozart had been born and raised in Augsburg. His father, Johann Georg Mozart, was a well-to-do bookbinder; his mother, Anna Maria Sulzer (Johann Georg's second wife, married within a few weeks of the death of his first), the daughter of a weaver. Leopold was the eldest of nine children. He had received an excellent education in Augsburg's Jesuit schools, and after the death of his father in 1736, when Leopold was seventeen, it was the Jesuits who had effectively taken care of him. His mother had seemed almost to relinquish responsibility for her eldest son, concentrating instead on her younger children, and this was probably the origin of an ever-widening rift between them. As the years progressed, mutual mistrust festered and grew. Anna Maria may have disapproved of Leopold's erratic choices of career. First he forsook the family firm (her younger sons would continue the bookbinding business); next he abandoned the Jesuit path, for he left Augsburg in 1737 and entered the Benedictine University in Salzburg, where he studied law; and then, after only a year there, he was dismissed, with the chilling indictment of having been 'unworthy of the name of student',[1] and began to pursue his abiding passion, music (he was a talented violinist, organist and composer). This was too much for his mother. Finally dismissing him as some sort of family black sheep, she effectively cut him off, never allowing him to receive his

family inheritance. Both Leopold and his mother were cunning, blinkered, stubborn, and ultimately unforgiving – maybe this was what lay at the heart of their antagonism: they were simply too alike.

How and when Leopold and Maria Anna met is not known, but, much as they came to love each other, times were difficult and they had to wait for several years before they actually married. The hot-headed student of Leopold's youth was growing up into a man whose caution with money was extreme. After a brief period as a violinist in the service of Count Johann Baptist Thurm-Valassina und Taxis, he became fourth violinist at Court in 1743. But his salary was minimal, and, without his share of the family money, he had to supplement it by taking on extra pupils. Maria Anna, virtually penniless, could bring nothing to their union, apart from her beloved mother: wherever she went, Eva Rosina would come too. And in addition to the family's own insecurities, there was the War of Austrian Succession (1740–48), between Bavaria and the young Maria Theresa's Habsburg Empire, which unsettled the whole region. But Leopold's financial state did gradually take on a firmer footing, and at last he reckoned it was safe to enter 'the order of the patched trousers'.[2] Leopold Mozart and Maria Anna Pertl were married in Salzburg's Cathedral on 21 November 1747. He was twenty-eight, she just over a year younger.

A month after their wedding, Leopold applied to retain his Augsburg citizenship, wanting perhaps to keep his options open as to where he and his new wife (and indeed his mother-in-law) might live. In a petition full of staggeringly brazen untruths, he claimed that his father was still alive, and had sponsored him through University; that his wife was the daughter of a prosperous family; and that he himself, having been a distinguished scholar, was now a valet at Court. Whether this was self-deluding fantasy or wilful lying, Leopold failed to appreciate the stupidity of such reckless hyperbole (surely all these facts could have been checked?). But his petition was in fact successful; and it was by no means the last occasion on which he would bend the truth to embroider his own status.

After their marriage, Leopold and Maria Anna rented a small third-floor apartment on Getreidegasse from one of Salzburg's prosperous merchants, Johann Lorenz Hagenauer, and moved in, together of course with Eva Rosina. The Hagenauers were to become lifelong friends of the Mozarts. Johann Lorenz assisted Leopold with financial matters, providing a network of contacts through many different cities and countries whereby Leopold on his travels could send and receive monies; and he was also the recipient of dozens of letters from Leopold describing these experiences. The Mozarts were to live in the Getreidegasse apartment for the next twenty-six years, and it was there that Maria Anna went through her series of virtually annual pregnancies, beginning immediately after her marriage.

Between July 1748 and January 1756 Maria Anna bore Leopold seven children, five of whom died in extreme infancy. The first three were born within two years, from August 1748 to July 1750, and they all died in the same period (at respectively five and a half months, six days, and eleven weeks). So in the summer of 1750 Maria Anna went to take the cure for four days at Bad Gastein. The Mozarts could ill afford it, but she needed it, and it did her good. Her next child was born within a year. Maria Anna Walburga Ignatia, always known as Nannerl, was born on 31 July 1751, and would live into her seventy-ninth year. But there was more loss to come. Two more children were born, and died, in 1752 and 1754. And in 1755 Eva Rosina died, at the age of seventy-four. She was buried in the cemetery of St Sebastian, the first occupant of what would become a chaotically constituted family grave. At the beginning of the following year, on 27 January 1756, Maria Anna gave birth, with dangerous difficulty, to her seventh and last child: Johann Chrysostomus Wolfgang Theophilus. (This last name would appear in other synonymous forms in the course of Mozart's life, as Gottlieb and, most especially, as Amadeus.)

Leopold was becoming impatient with the domestic turbulence of Maria Anna's childbearing. In the mid-1750s he had decided to publish a treatise on the fundamental principles of violin-playing,

based on his by now considerable, and evidently extremely successful, teaching experiences. His *Versuch einer Grundlichen Violinschule*, a meticulous if somewhat uncompromising book, with its scholarly preface and authoritarian tone, was eventually printed in Augsburg by Johann Jacob Lotter. Writing to Lotter on 12 February 1756, just two weeks after Wolfgang was born, Leopold confided: 'I can assure you I have so much to do that I sometimes do not know where my head is . . . And you know as well as I do, when the wife is in childbed, there is always someone turning up to rob you of time. Things like that cost you time and money.'[3] But for all Leopold's apparent irritability at the arrival of his latest child, his priorities were to change very quickly. He and Maria Anna soon realized that their children were extremely gifted.

Years later, it was Nannerl herself who became the chief source of information on their early childhood. She was approached after Wolfgang's death by the German scholar Friedrich Schlichtegroll, who regularly published volumes of obituaries. For his *Nekrolog auf der Jahr 1791* he sent a questionnaire to Nannerl, asking her for information on her brother's early life, and she replied eagerly and in great detail. (She had over 400 family letters in her possession, as well as her own diaries, for she had been a great chronicler of daily events.) Encouraged by her compliance, Schlichtegroll then sent her a list of supplementary questions, at which point Nannerl enlisted the help of an old family friend, the Court trumpeter and poet Johann Andreas Schachtner. From the reminiscences and anecdotes of both Nannerl and Schachtner, the story of a remarkable family life unfolds.

Like their mother, neither Nannerl nor Wolfgang received any formal education at all. They were schooled entirely at home, at the brilliant hands of their painstaking father. With imagination and resourcefulness, he taught them to read and write, to do arithmetic, and learn some basic history and geography. Both children had good handwriting, read widely, drew well and were extremely articulate. And then, of course, there was music. The children would have absorbed it from the cradle, for Leopold's fellow Court

musicians were constantly in and out of the Getreidegasse apartment, rehearsing, playing, teaching. And when Nannerl was seven she too began piano lessons with her father. Soon the creative Leopold compiled a music book ('Pour le clavecin') for her, touchingly inscribed, '*Ce livre appartient à Marie Anna Mozart, 1759*'. It contained several short pieces, by himself and other contemporary composers, arranged in order of difficulty. Apparently little Wolfgang, aged only four, also began to play these pieces, and, as Nannerl recalled, 'the boy at once showed his God-given and extraordinary talent'.[4] Her music book is studded with annotations by their astonished father: 'This piece was learned by Wolfgangerl on 24 January 1761, three days before his fifth birthday, between nine and nine-thirty in the evening.' And, as Nannerl continued in her memoir, Wolfgang 'made such progress that at the age of five he was already composing little pieces, which he played to his father who wrote them down'.

Schachtner similarly recalled Wolfgang's early genius. He recounted an occasion for instance when he and Leopold returned from church duties to discover the four-year-old boy writing some music which he claimed to be a piano concerto. When the amused father took the ink-smudged, childishly written manuscript from his son, 'he stared long at the sheet, and then tears, tears of joy and wonder, fell from his eyes'.[5] He also recalled the child's phenomenal sense of pitch ('Herr Schachtner, your violin is tuned half a quarter-tone lower than mine, if you left it tuned as it was when I last played it') and, most fascinatingly, his fear of Schachtner's own instrument, the trumpet. 'Merely to hold a trumpet in front of him was like aiming a loaded pistol at his heart. Papa wanted to cure him of this childish fear and once told me to blow [my trumpet] at him despite his reluctance, but, my God! I should not have been persuaded to do it. Wolfgangerl scarcely heard the blaring sound, than he grew pale and began to collapse, and if I had continued, he would surely have had a fit.' In due course the child clearly overcame this phobia; but his own adult writing for the instrument often reflects this early terror.