

# Mozart: In Search of the Roots of Genius

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It is the kind of joke Mozart would have appreciated. Like the wit in some of his operas, it is unexpected, mischievous, deflating, childish, even a bit humiliating: it can be found on the outskirts of Salzburg, Austria, at Hellbrunn, an elaborate Baroque palace built by Salzburg's archbishop Markus Sittikus in the early 17th century. In an intimate outdoor amphitheater where statues celebrate the glories of Rome, there is a rectangular marble table around which ten immovable stools are mounted. The table contains a spring-fed well, used to cool wine during outdoor banquets. Sittikus would sit facing his guests in all of their summer finery, his formal gardens and ponds stretching out before him. Then he would give a signal. And lo, out of every seat but his own would come a jet of cold spring water. No sooner would his guests leap up in surprise than another series of fountains would erupt from hidden openings in the floor's surface, creating arches of spray.

One reason I thought of Mozart while watching these *Wasserspiele* (trick fountains), of course, was because I had come to Salzburg, the town where the composer was born, January 27, 1756, and Vienna, the city where he died a scant 35 years later, likely of complications from rheumatic fever, to survey the terrain before this year's celebrations of the composer's 250th birthday. The city of Vienna is spending some 30 million euros on musical commissions, concerts and academic symposiums, along with a festival of new works overseen by theatrical director Peter Sellars; a new six-floor museum there has been shaped out of the building in which Mozart lived for just over two years. Salzburg, which boasts the two apartments Mozart called home before he settled in Vienna at age 25, possesses two museums devoted to Mozart, along with

his childhood violin, his clavichord, a lock of his hair and paintings of the composer and his family. The avant-gardish theater director Robert Wilson has also been brought in to impose his vision on Mozart's childhood apartment; all of Mozart's operas will be performed at this summer's Salzburg Festival; even a "Mozart Cycling Path" links points of interest, with signposts of Mozart's silhouetted head marking the route.

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If he did visit as a child, he would also have seen Hellbrunn's newest novelty, a mechanical theater in which 200 automated wooden figures populate an Austrian town square, accompanied by music from a hidden, hydraulically operated organ. It was an animated music box run by water, a marvel that would have caught the attention of Mozart's father, who composed music for the mechanical organ in the fortress that looms over Salzburg—music still heard here.

Of all the Mozartean landmarks I saw in Salzburg and Vienna, Hellbrunn most profoundly captures something essential about his spirit. This is worth understanding, because over the past 200 years, Mozart has continued to elude our grasp. He began his career as a wunderkind—a literal wonder child over whom the courts of Europe fawned—and ended it in debt and dismal circumstances, but he is one of the touchstones of the Western classical tradition. In the popular imagination, he is the eternal man-child, whose music is so energized with healing powers that it is thought to increase infant intelligence (the so-called Mozart effect). Even to cognoscenti, the composer of the *Jupiter* Symphony and the creator of *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* seems to inhabit an otherworldly

musical realm. And that makes it all the more remarkable to follow in his all-too-earthly footsteps, to trudge up the narrow staircase in Mozart's *Geburtshaus* (birth house) in Salzburg and look out at the building's congested courtyard or to walk the short distance his coffin was carried in Vienna from his deathbed to the church where friends, family and admirers paid their last respects before his body was unceremoniously dumped in an unmarked grave, the fate of most of Vienna's untitled populace.

The heavenly music and the mundane man: Can they be reconciled? This was the problem famously posed in Peter Shaffer's play (and movie) *Amadeus* (to be performed on a floating stage on Salzburg's river this summer): How does genius and beauty arise out of vulgarity, pettiness, ordinary life? Walking in Salzburg, one is brought up short trying to imagine what any of this might have to do with the painful beauties of the music. The ornate churches and regal halls of Salzburg must have shaped Mozart's aesthetic, their grand ambitions combined with meticulous attention to detail, their elaborate rhetoric combined with cultivated refinement. But these settings overwhelm in ways Mozart's music does not, dwarfing the viewer with self-conscious magnificence.

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At Hellbrunn, though, the spirit of jest reigns supreme. And that is crucial to understanding Mozart. We know so much about Mozart's early life—more than about almost any other composer's—because as he grew to maturity, he spent much of his time in coaches with his father, traveling between major European courts where he and (at first) his sister, Nannerl, four years his elder, displayed their accomplishments. Letters had to be written home. By the time he was 20, Mozart had spent half his life on the road. The letters home—Wolfgang's own or his appendices to his father Leopold's sober accounts of travels and monies earned and medals awarded—are more spirited, playful and revealing than the

music he wrote under his father's guidance.

At 16, he wrote a letter to his sister with alternate lines upside down. "Oidda," he would write in reverse Italian, or even sign his name in the same code: "gnagflow Trazom." Just after his 22nd birthday, he wrote a letter to his mother full of jests about muck and gas and effluvia. Another letter Mozart wrote to his sister is so full of diversions that translator Emily Anderson tried to mirror its playfulness: "I can't write anything sensible today, as I am rails off the quite. Papa be annoyed not must. I that just like today feel. I help it cannot. Warefell. I gish you nood wight. Sound sleeply. Next time I'll sensible more writely."

But there was a larger point to these jests. Sitting in that small coach riding over often primitive roads that could leave Wolfgang picturesquely complaining about his sore bottom, a large-scale social drama was taking place: the old system of court patronage was being loyally challenged by the father and playfully provoked by the son. Leopold, employed by Salzburg's archbishop and given generous leaves of absence to display his son's genius, was a stern master, determined to school Mozart and Nannerl not only in music but also in the ways of the world. Though employed by the court, he chafed at its expectations and scorned his "always fawning" colleagues. His intention was to earn more money and find a better court position for himself, using his children as bait. "Wolfgang's good fortune and success," he wrote to his wife, "will be our sweetest revenge."

Wolfgang, who, at first, worshiped his father ("next to God comes Papa," he wrote), loved dressing in courtly clothing, but he also treated it all as a form of play, as a variation, perhaps, on his musical trickery, when he amazed listeners at his ability to reproduce music heard once or displayed his ability to recall quarter-tone variations of pitch. Leopold's correspondence recounts that the 6-year-old Wolfgang jumped into the lap of Maria Theresa, empress of the Holy Roman Empire,

“caught her around the neck, and vigorously kissed her”; after such familiarity, what kind of awe could the adult have for ruling power? “These are the people who can help you,” Leopold would instruct him. But Wolfgang, in letters home, would write playfully about bodily functions, make multilingual puns (he called the sea near Italy the Merdeterranean), and sketch risqué doodles. To Leopold, Wolfgang kept slighting matters that had to be taken seriously. “Your whole intention seems to be to ruin me,” Leopold once wrote, “simply in order to go on building your castles in the air.”

But Mozart’s playfulness would not be quashed. It was a flexing of intellectual muscles as well as a provocation. He wrote a scatological acrostic on the word “papa.” And his jests could be cruel. “I can never resist making a fool of someone,” he confessed. When he lived in Vienna, Mozart wrote horn concertos for a Salzburg musician, Joseph Leutgeb, but at a price: Mozart tossed his scores around the room and required Leutgeb to assemble them on all fours. On the autograph of one such concerto, Mozart calls the horn player an “ass, ox and simpleton.” Mozart’s wit was not always ethereal.

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Of Salzburg’s musical scene, he complained: “One hears nothing; there is no theater, no opera.” In a letter to his father in 1781, he wrote that “when I play or when any of my compositions are performed, it is just as if the audience were all tables and chairs.” Salzburg, he declared, is “no place for my talent.”

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But in Mozart’s accounts, Salzburg is more like a realm ruled by the dark empress in *The Magic Flute*, the Queen of the Night. During his time, it may have been a provincial locale with all the limitations at which a genius would bristle, but it also boasted a university and a vibrant musical tradition that included Heinrich Biber in the 17th century and Michael Haydn (Franz Joseph Haydn’s

younger brother) in Mozart’s day. Salzburg was notoriously conservative—in the 1730s 20,000 Protestants were exiled from the Catholic town; and in 1762 a witch was burned there—but as Robert W. Gutman points out in his recent biography of Mozart, Leopold and others were devotees of the Enlightenment (his estate contained two microscopes and a telescope). The power of the court was also mitigated by the growing power of commerce. Mozart’s patrons were not well-born noblemen, but wealthy burghers such as Johann Hagenauer, a banker and wholesale grocer who owned the house in which Mozart was born. From the Mozarts, one sees only Salzburg’s provinciality and venality; from the history, one also sees cultural attainments and a highly educated mercantile class.

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[...] [C]onflict shaped Mozart’s life. And his rebellion came at the precise moment that the old social models were also weakening. When Mozart, along with his father, was contracted to serve Archbishop Colloredo’s court after years of acclaim for his prodigious abilities, he bristled at his duties. “I never know how I stand,” he wrote his father in 1778. “I am to be everything—and yet—sometimes nothing!” He was, in other words, an employee.

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“If you will not serve me properly,” the archbishop once told him, “clear out.” When Mozart traveled with the archbishop’s staff to Vienna in 1781, he provoked a quarrel with Colloredo that led to a shouting match. “Even if I had to go begging,” Mozart wrote to his father after he was kicked—perhaps literally—out of service, “I would never again serve such a lord.”

So there he was: at the age of 25, Mozart had cut himself off from the only musical world he had known and was left alone in Vienna to make his way as a freelancer—putting together concerts, soliciting commissions, teaching piano, staging operas—preferring uncertainties of liberty to obligations of indentureship. It

was, in its mundane fashion, something of a cultural revolution. After Mozart, composers were no longer court composers. Mozart was, like Leporello in *Don Giovanni*, justly wary of the demands of any kind of service, and like Figaro, intent on undermining the perquisites of nobility. Vienna, at any rate, is where Mozart shaped this new kind of existence. He called it “a glorious place—and for my métier, the best in the world.”

The room in which Mozart likely slept during his most productive and prosperous years in Vienna (1784–87) still has its original wall coloration: *trompe l'oeil* plasterwork that makes the walls of this bourgeois room seem palatial in character if not in dimension. The plaster is subtly colored to look like marble, with minute veins and variations. On the ceiling’s plaster medallions, putti fly, streaming gilded vines in their wake. At the ceiling’s center, a goddess rests upon clouds, holding a garland. Mozart did not ask that the room be decorated in this fashion; the previous owner of the building was Alberto Comesina, one of the most famous stucco artists of the 18th century. But Mozart must have found the room congenial, recalling the palaces in which he performed as a child. He may have been a rebel against the old order, but he appreciated its pleasures. A block from the old city’s center, this nearly 2,000-square-foot apartment declared its occupant a success. It is also the only Mozart Vienna residence that still stands, which is why it is now at the center of the new Mozart House Museum.

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This is why it is so intriguing to gaze out from Mozart’s marbled room on the second floor and look straight down on narrow Blutgasse. The composer lived above...Blood Alley. There is no agreement about how Blutgasse got its name: Was it the site of medieval executions or the butchering of animals? At any rate, could Mozart not have been aware of the irony? Here is the apartment where he played billiards, enjoyed evenings of music making and acclaim, but one look outside could bring him

back to earth. Mozart’s triumphs often have that kind of doubleness, as when, at the peak of his success, he invited his father to visit.

In February 1785, Leopold, vastly skeptical about his son’s prospects, came to visit him in Vienna for the first and only time. Leopold was all too ready to express disapproval of his son’s marriage in 1782 to Constanze Weber, the daughter of a former landlady. Could a skeptical father have met a more triumphant demonstration? The apartment was in tumult as Mozart was supervising the copying of a piano concerto he had written for a concert the evening of the day that Leopold arrived (the father called the work “superb”). The following day Joseph Haydn, the era’s master of composition, visited the apartment to hear Mozart’s most recent three string quartets. According to Leopold, Haydn told him: “Before God and as an honest man, I tell you that your son is the greatest composer known to me either in person or by name.” The next evening, during another concerto played by his son, Leopold said, “Tears of sheer delight came to my eyes”; he also witnessed the Emperor of Austria salute his son. The concerts, dinners and flow of money, both in and out of Wolfgang’s coffers, dizzied Leopold.

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In early 1787, perhaps, before moving out of this very apartment, and before his father’s death, Mozart began to write a kind of a farce he called *Der Salzburger Lump in Wien*—“The Scamp from Salzburg in Vienna”—in which his barbed rebelliousness came into play. Its main character is Herr Stachelschwein—Mr. Porcupine—who rejoices over the inheritance he will get upon his father’s death. As it turned out, Mozart was less fortunate. Leopold left nearly everything to his daughter. Mozart even had to struggle to get his scores back from his father’s estate.

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Not even genius can escape human frailties. Vienna, the scene of Mozart’s greatest

triumphs, is also the scene of his greatest trials.

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Biographer Solomon describes a Viennese carnival in 1786 in which Mozart, dressed in robes like an Oriental philosopher, distributed a broadsheet titled “Excerpts from the Fragments of Zoroaster” containing eight riddles and 14 proverbs. The riddles were darkly personal, filled with imagery of imprisonment, mutilation and betrayal. One starts: “We are many sisters; it is painful for us to unite as well as to separate. We live in a palace, yet we could rather call it a prison.” (Answer: teeth.) For the “scamp from Salzburg in Vienna,” the riddles were attempts to tease harmony out of a world of paradox. Mozart jubilantly played with language as a youth; in his maturity, he became increasingly more clever and dark.

During these years, Mozart also, in collaboration with librettist Lorenzo da Ponte—himself a master of masquerade, born a Jew, educated as a priest, a restless lover and an avid trickster—wrote his greatest operas. In their collaborations—*Figaro*, *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte*—the accepted order of things is undermined by trickery, by seduction, by savvy manipulation; in each opera too, there are scenes of masquerade and confusion. And in varied ways, the listener is lured into differing reactions to a revolution in sensibility: we cheer it in *Figaro*, we fear it in *Don Giovanni*, we worry over its power in *Così*. It is as if the very nature of humanity were being tested in these operatic laboratories, exposing it to the diverse forces of the Enlightenment.

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Which brings us back to Hellbrunn. Mozart once fantasized about creating a secret society in Vienna, one even more exclusive than the Masonic lodge he had joined; he was going to call it the Grotto. Could he have had the mythological grottoes of Hellbrunn in mind? Their creator, Sittikus, had also been a music lover. Hellbrunn may have hosted the first

performances of opera north of the Alps, including Monteverdi’s *Orfeo*, which might have left its influence on the Orpheus grotto, with its tale of the musician who tries to lead his love out of Hades. In fact, the natural springs that feed Hellbrunn’s fountains were thought to connect literally to the underworld. That realm’s German god is named Hel; Brunn means well or fountain; hence, Hellbrunn. These were fountains linked to Hell and streaming into our world—watery versions of Mozart’s ghostly Commendatore, who drags Don Giovanni back down with him, in retribution. But Hellbrunn is not a celebration of Hell. After all, an archbishop built these fountains. Instead, many of its mythological statues and fountains deal with the crossing of realms, the negotiation of boundaries, the combination of opposites. The netherworld is not abolished or denied; it is, instead, acknowledged, incorporated, and thus, transcended—something that may have been Mozart’s dream as well.

Over the door in one room of Hellbrunn there is a painted Latin motto, *numen vel dissita iungit* (“a divine power unites even opposites”). But for Mozart it is not water that

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Search. The Genius of Mozart. 2004, Art and Artists - 180 min 20 Comments. 8.11. Ratings: 8.11/10 from 19 users. An enlightening and enveloping reconstruction of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's (1756--1791) life. Masterfully written and directed, every aspect of the film has been given thorough thought in order to ensure an accurate historical reconstruction.Â But there was another facet to Mozart - the adult thinker aware of the bigger picture, passionately attached to the progressive values of the Enlightenment - impressively well-read, a speaker of most European languages (even a little English), an Austrian Catholic, a Freemason and above all a composer at the height of his formidable powers, determined to succeed in the most difficult. The Genius of Mozart: With Jack Tarlton, Ed Pearce, Andrew Price, Kenneth Cranham. The story begins with the composer's father Leopold with whom Mozart conducted a passionate and tortured correspondence. It is Leopold who knows Mozart's secrets. And there is another voice: that of the music itself. Music is the key to unlocking the emotions of Mozart, starting in this film with the great piano works. Without this key, how can we ever understand the emotions that gave birth to some of the most beautiful sounds the world has ever heard? Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (27 January 1756 - 5 December 1791), baptised as Johannes Chrysostomus Wolfgangus Theophilus Mozart, was a prolific and influential composer of the Classical period. Born in Salzburg, in the Holy Roman Empire, Mozart showed prodigious ability from his earliest childhood. Already competent on keyboard and violin, he composed from the age of five and performed before European royalty. At 17, Mozart was engaged as a musician at the Salzburg court but grew restless and travelled in... Of all the Mozartean landmarks I saw in Salzburg and Vienna, Hellbrunn most profoundly captures something essential about his spirit.Â And though the city's Hohensalzburg Fortress is far from Mozartean in character, the ways the city combines Italianate ornament in its Baroque facades makes Salzburg seem more playful than imposing; warmth is mixed with eruptions of fantastical grandeur. The spirit of Italy shaped Salzburg's brand of the German Baroque. Italian architects designed Hellbrunn and the Salzburg Cathedral; Italian opera singers and musicians commanded higher salaries than German counterparts (a source of complaint even in Mozart's time). Mozart's training was considered incomplete until he had toured Italy and written Italian opera.