

## **W. A. MOZART - 250th BIRTH ANNIVERSARY**

by George Constantourakis

### **EARLY CHILDHOOD YEARS**

Mozart (Jan. 27, 1756 - Dec. 5, 1791) was born in the city of Salzburg, which today is part of Austria. Mozart's musical ability became apparent when he was about three years old. His father Leopold was one of Europe's leading musical teachers, whose influential textbook "Essay on the fundamentals of violin playing" was published in 1756, the year of Mozart's birth. Mozart received intensive musical training from his father, including instruction in clavier, violin, and organ (see: *Figure 1*).

### **YEARS OF TRAVEL**

During his formative years, Mozart completed several journeys throughout Europe, beginning with an exhibition in 1762 at the Court of the Elector of Bavaria in Munich, then in the same year at the Imperial Court in Vienna. A long concert tour spanning three and a half years followed, taking him with his father to the courts of Munich, Mannheim, Paris, London, The Hague, and back home via Zürich. They again went to Vienna in late 1767 and remained there until Dec. 1768. After one year in Salzburg, three trips to Italy followed: from Dec. 1769 to March 1773. He was accepted as a member of the famous *Accademia Filarmonica*. A highlight of the Italian journey, now a legendary tale, occurred when he heard Allegri's *Miserere* once in performance in the Sistine Chapel then wrote it out in its entirety from memory. During his trips, Mozart met a great number of musicians and acquainted himself with the works of other great composers. A particularly important influence was Johann Christian Bach, who befriended Mozart in London in 1764–65. Even non-musicians caught Mozart's attention. He was so taken by the sound created by Benjamin Franklin's glass harmonica that he composed several pieces of music for it.

### **MOZART IN VIENNA**

In 1781 Mozart visited Vienna. He chose to settle and develop his career in Vienna after its aristocracy began to take an interest in him. On Aug. 4, 1782, against his father's wishes, he married Constanze Weber. The year 1782 was an auspicious one for Mozart's career; his opera "The Abduction from the Seraglio" was a great success and he began a series of concerts at which he premiered his own piano concertos as conductor and soloist. During 1782–83, Mozart became closely acquainted with the work of J.S. Bach and George Frideric Handel. Mozart's study of these works led first to a number of works imitating Baroque style and later had a powerful influence on his own personal musical language, for example the fugal passages in "The Magic Flute" and the *Symphony No. 41*. In 1783, Wolfgang and Constanze visited Leopold in Salzburg, the visit sparked the composition of one of Mozart's great liturgical pieces, the *Mass in C Minor*, which was premiered in Salzburg, and is presently one of his best known works. Wolfgang featured Constanze as the lead female solo voice at the premiere of the work, hoping to endear her to his father's affection. Constanze was renowned for her exquisite singing voice (see: *Figure 2*). In his early Vienna years, Mozart met Joseph Haydn and the two composers became friends. When Haydn visited Vienna, they sometimes played in an impromptu string quartet. Mozart's six quartets dedicated to Haydn date from 1782–85. Haydn was soon in awe of Mozart, and when he first heard the last three of Mozart's series he told Leopold, "Before God

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### Clockwise from Left:

(Figure 1) YOUNG MOZART WITH HIS FATHER AND SISTER by Carmontelle.

Issue: 4. V. 1981. For: 225th Birth Anniversary. Cancel: First Day, Monaco, special illustration.

(Figure 2) THE MOZART FAMILY by J. N. della Croce 1780/81, Mozart Museum, Salzburg. Issue: 7. X. 1991. For: Death Bicentenary. Cancel: First Day, Rome, special illustration and mention: "2 CENTENARIO MORTE DI W.A. MOZART"

(Figure 3) W.A. MOZART'S COMPOSING "DON JUAN", see Postcard background.

Issue: 27. I. 1956. For: 200th Anniversary of Birth. Cancel: 6. VII. 1956, Berlin, reg.

(Figure 4) MOZART'S "DON GIOVANNI" sketch from the "Beautes de l' Opera" of 1844. Issue: 12. II. 1999. For: 400th Anniversary of Operas in San Marino. Cancel: First Day, San Marino, special illustr. and mention: "QUATRO SECOLI DI OPERA".



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and as an honest man I tell you that your son is the greatest composer known to me either in person or by name. He has taste, and what is more, the most profound knowledge of composition." During 1782-1785, Mozart put on a series of concerts in which he appeared as soloist in his piano concertos, widely considered among his greatest works. After 1785 Mozart performed far less and wrote only a few concertos. Mozart's life was fraught with financial difficulty and illness. Often, he received no payment for his work, and what sums he did receive were quickly consumed by his extravagant lifestyle. Mozart spent 1786 in Vienna in an apartment the "Mozarthauss" behind St Stephen's Cathedral; it was here that he composed *Le nozze di Figaro*. He followed this in 1787 with one of his greatest works, *Don Giovanni*(see: Figures 3, 4).

### **DON GIOVANNI**

*Don Giovanni* was premiered in Prague on Oct. 29, 1787. It is widely regarded as one of the greatest pieces of music ever composed, and of the many operas based on the legend of Don Juan, Mozart's is thought to be beyond compare. The opera was billed as *dramma giocoso* or "playful drama," belonging to a genre neither completely comic nor completely tragic. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote a large essay in his book *Either/Or* in which he defends the claim that Mozart's *Don Giovanni* is the greatest work of art ever made. The finale in which Don Giovanni refuses to repent has been a captivating philosophical and artistic topic for many writers including George Bernard Shaw, who in *Man and Superman*, parodied the opera; with explicit mention of the Mozart score for the finale scene between the Commendatore and Don Giovanni. In this finale scene the statue of the Commendatore exhorts the careless villain to repent of his wicked lifestyle, but Giovanni adamantly refuses (see stamp: Figure 4). The statue sinks into the earth and drags Giovanni with him. Hellfire surrounds Don Giovanni as he is carried below. A screen adaptation of the opera was made under the title *Don Giovanni* in 1979, and was directed by Joseph Losey.

### **MOZART IN PRAGUE**

Mozart had a special relationship with Prague and the people of Prague(see: Figure 5). The audience here celebrated their *Figaro* with the much deserved reverence he was missing in his hometown Vienna. His quote "*My Praguers understand me*" became very famous in the Bohemian lands. In Prague, *Don Giovanni* premiered on Oct. 29, 1787 at the Theatre of the Estates (see: Figure 6). In the later years of his life, Prague provided Mozart many financial resources from commissions. German poet Eduard Mörike's well-known novella "*Mozart on the way to Prague*" is a fantasy about the composer's trip to that city in order to present *Don Giovanni*

### **FINAL ILLNESS AND DEATH**

Mozart's final illness and death are difficult topics of scholarship. Scholars disagree about the course of decline in Mozart's health—particularly at what point Mozart became aware of his impending death and whether this awareness influenced his final works. The romantic view holds that Mozart declined gradually and that his outlook and compositions paralleled this decline. In opposition to this, some contemporary scholarship points out correspondence from Mozart's final year indicating that he was in good cheer, as well as evidence that Mozart's death was sudden and a shock to his family and friends. The actual cause of Mozart's death is also a matter of conjecture.

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### Clockwise from Left:

(Figure 5) W.A. MOZART portrait by N. Piontkovsky.

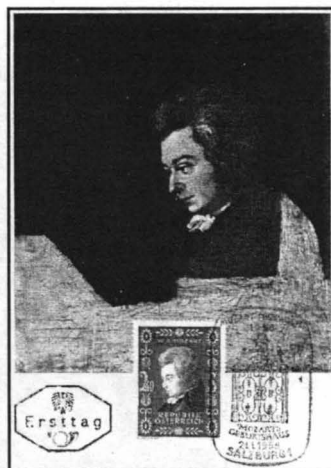
Issue: 12. V. 1956. For: 200th Anniversary of Birth. Cancel: First Day, Prague, special mention: "INTERNATIONAL MUSIC FESTIVAL - PRAGUE."

(Figure 6) THEATER OF THE ESTATES, PRAGUE - MOZART'S OPERA "DON GIOVANNI" had its premiere here on Oct. 29, 1787. Issue: 12. V. 1956. For: 200th Birth Anniversary. Cancel: First Day, Prague, special mention: "INTERNATIONAL MUSIC FESTIVAL - PRAGUE."

(Figure 7) W.A. MOZART by Joseph Lange at the Mozart Museum, Salzburg.

Issue: 21. I. 1956. For: Birth Bicentennary. Cancel: First Day, , Salzburg, special illustration and mention: "MOZART FESTWOCHE - MOZART'S GEBURTSHAUS - SALZBURG"

(Figure 8) W.A. MOZART portrait by W. Tischbein. Issue: 17. X. 1956. For: Great Personalities of the World. Cancel: 1. II. 1961, Moscow, regular.



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His death record listed "severe military fever", a description that does not suffice to identify the cause as it would be diagnosed in modern medicine. Dozens of theories have been proposed, including trichinosis, mercury poisoning, and rheumatic fever. Mozart died on Dec. 5, 1791 in Vienna, while he was working on his final composition, the *Requiem* (left: *Figure 9*, the stamp was issued for Mozart's 200th Anniversary of Death). A younger composer, and Mozart's only pupil at the time F. X. Süssmayer, was engaged by Constanze to complete the *Requiem*.

Many myths began soon after Mozart died, but few have any basis in fact. An example is the story that Mozart composed his *Requiem* with the belief it was for himself. Sorting out fabrications from real events is a vexing and continuous task for Mozart scholars. Dramatists and screenwriters, free from responsibilities of scholarship, have found excellent material among these legends. An especially popular case is the supposed rivalry between Mozart and Antonio Salieri (right: *Figure 10*), and in some versions, the tale that it was poison received from Salieri that caused Mozart's death; this is the subject of Aleksandr Pushkin's play *Mozart and Salieri*, Rimsky-Korsakov's opera *Mozart and Salieri*, and Peter Shaffer's play *Amadeus*. The last of these has been made into a feature-length film of the same name, which won eight Oscars.

### **STYLE**

Mozart (see: *Figures 7, & 8*) is among the most significant and enduringly popular composers of European classical music. His enormous output includes works that are widely acknowledged as pinnacles of symphonic, chamber, piano, operatic, and choral music. In Mozart's music, the central traits of the classical style can all be identified. Clarity, balance, transparency, and uncomplicated harmonic language are his hallmark, although in his later works he explored chromatic harmony to a degree rare at the time. Mozart is commonly named as having a gift for pure, simple, and memorable melody, and to many listeners this is his most definitive characteristic.

(*Figure 9, left*) MOZART WITH HIS FATHER AND SISTER portrait by Carmontelle.

Issue: 22. III. 1991. For: Death Bicentenary. Cancel: First Day, Salzburg, special illustration and mention: "W. A. MOZART - MOZART'S GEBURTSHAUS - 1756-1791".

(*Figure 10, right*) ANTONIO SALIERI (1750 - 1825) Composer.

Issue: 30. IX. 2000. For: 250th Birth Anniversary. Cancel: First Day, Legnano VR, special illustration & mention: "250 ANNIVERSARIO NASCITA ANTONIO SALIERI".

