

 IN THEIR OWN WORDS

An Eyewitness Account of His Son's Activities as a Composer and Performer in Vienna: Leopold Mozart, Letters to Daughter Anna Maria Mozart (February and March, 1785)

One of the reasons Mozart is such a fascinating character in the history of music—indeed in the history of all Western creators—is that we know so much about him. In his day Mozart the prodigy was thought to be an important person, and people paid attention to him and wrote down their impressions of what they saw and heard. In addition, father Leopold Mozart realized that he had charge of an extraordinary musical talent who would some day leave a strong mark on the history of music. Accordingly, he was careful to preserve the artifacts of his son—family letters and compositions. Mozart, too, did not undervalue his own talent and accordingly took care to organize the effects of his professional life. Today, much of this “Mozart legacy” is tended to with love and meticulous care at the Mozarteum in Salzburg, Austria, the composer's native town.

The correspondence of the family Mozart—from father to son, father to sister, father to mother, son to father, son to sister, et alia—constitutes a treasure trove of nearly 800 letters. While one cannot say that this constitutes the entirety of what once existed, it nonetheless represents perhaps as much as 85 percent. In the epistles that Wolfgang Amadeus wrote to his father, he often pours out his heart and soul about the trials and tribulations he experiences as a professional musician. Sometimes he discusses matters of compositional or creative process—how to craft an effective aria, for example. Leopold Mozart's letters, in turn, offer a welter of information about musical life in the late eighteenth century and specifically about the musical activities of his son.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart moved to Vienna for good in the spring of 1781, thereby straining the relationship with his father, who was reluctant to see the son go off on his own and explore the more or less unknown profession of “freelance” musician. Leopold visited Mozart and his new wife, Constanze, in Vienna only once, that sojourn coming during the late winter of 1785. Fortunately for the aging father, who would die two years later, Mozart was then approaching the high-water mark in his career in Vienna. The pace of his musical activities—attending concerts, composing, and performing—was a torrid one, with which Leopold could barely keep up. As it happened, Leopold visited during the Lenten season, at which time the theater doors were closed to actors but open to musicians (music was thought to be neither a profane activity nor an unnecessary indulgence). Mozart had arranged during these six weeks to mount a series of subscription concerts at the local casino. It was up to him to compose much of the music, hire the orchestra, rent the hall, and sell the tickets from his apartment near the cathedral of St. Stephen in the center of Vienna. During his visit, Leopold had the reluctant pleasure of seeing that his son, contrary to the father's own prediction, was having great success in the free-market musical economy of the capital city.

Writing to his daughter Nannerl near Salzburg before he sets off for Vienna, Leopold first reports that Mozart's newly completed set of six quartets, the famous Haydn Quartets, were about to be given a private hearing. Ultimately they were heard in groups of three in Mozart's own apartment in Vienna.

Leopold Mozart to Nannerl Mozart (Wolfgang's sister)

Salzburg, 22 January 1785

Just this moment I received ten lines from your brother, in which he writes that his first subscription concert will take place on the 11th of February and every Friday thereafter, and that in the third week of Lent he will certainly have a box at this concert for Heinrich and that he and I should come quickly; that on Saturday his quartets were performed before his dear friend Haydn and other good friends, and that he sold them to [publisher] Artaria for 100 ducats [as much as Mozart received for one of his principal operas in Vienna]. At the end he adds: "Now I have to get back to work on my piano concerto [in D minor K. 466], which I have only just begun. Adieu."

Shortly thereafter, Leopold set out by coach for Vienna, apparently with a manservant to attend him. This next letter is particularly important, not only because of the detailed information regarding Mozart's obvious success as a composer-performer in Vienna, but also because it contains the famous observation made by Joseph Haydn about Mozart's ability as a composer.

Vienna, 16 February 1785

On Friday [past] about one o'clock we arrived at No. 846 Schullerstrasse [behind St. Stephen's cathedral], where your brother has excellent quarters on the second floor with all the necessary furniture—you may conclude this from the fact that he pays 480 florins annual rent [or gulden, more money than Leopold made in a year in Salzburg]. This same Friday evening about six o'clock we went to the first of his subscription concerts where were assembled a great number of persons of the nobility. For the six concerts each person pays a gold souverain or three ducats [13.5 gulden]. It is held at the Mehlgrube [the casino in the New Market plaza, presently converted into the Ambassador Hotel], and he pays only a half souverain to rent the hall. The concert was superb, the orchestra outstanding. In addition to the symphonies a singer from the theater sang two arias, then came a "newly composed keyboard concerto by Mozart [K. 466 in D Minor]," which the copyist was still copying when we arrived; and your brother didn't have time to play through the rondeau [the last of the three movements] because he had to supervise the copyist. That I met many acquaintances who came to greet me, you can well imagine, and I was introduced to several other people.

On Saturday evening Herr Joseph Haydn and the two Barons Tindi came to visit us [in Mozart's apartment], and the three quartets, rather the three new ones [the last three of the six Haydn Quartets, K. 458, 464, and 465] were performed; these are a little bit lighter in style, but nonetheless excellently composed. Herr Haydn said to me: "I say to you before God and as an honest man, that your son is the greatest composer known to me by name or by reputation, he has taste and beyond that the greatest knowledge of compositional science."

On Sunday evening we went to the theater [the Burgtheater near the emperor's residence] where we heard a benefit concert for the Italian soprano [Luisa] Laschi who is heading back to Italy. She sang two arias, and there was a violoncello concerto, and a tenor and a bass each sang an aria, and your brother played that splendid concerto [probably K. 456] that he had written for [Maria Theresia] Paradis for Paris. I was seated only two stalls away from the very beautiful Princess Wurtemberg and had the pleasure of clearly hearing all the exchanges of the instruments, which brought tears to my eyes. When your brother left the stage, Emperor [Joseph II] tipped his hat and extended the compliment of crying out "Bravo Mozart." And when he came on to play, there was a great deal of applause.

Yesterday we didn't go to the theater, for there is a concert [in a private home?] every day. [Leopold then discusses the cold he caught coming to Vienna and what he is taking for it.] But this evening there is another concert in the theater at which your brother is again playing a concerto. . . . Little Karl [Mozart's oldest surviving son] is the

spitting image of your brother. He seems very healthy, but as with all children, he is teething. But he is generally charming and very friendly and laughs when someone is talking. . . .

Yesterday the 15th there was yet again another concert in the theater [Burgtheater] for a young woman who sang charmingly. Your brother again played his great new concerto in D minor [K. 466] magnificently. Today we are attending a private concert in the home of the Salzburg agent von Ployer [his daughter, Barbara, was one of Mozart's prize pupils; see Chapter 47].

Your brother, sister-in-law, [Heinrich] Marchand, and I kiss you a million times, and I remain eternally your faithful father.

[Leopold] Mozart

This last letter suggests the variety of Mozart's musical activity at this time in Vienna. Mozart is trying to make money by publishing his music, and a group of three recently engraved sonatas is mentioned here. In addition, he is in the process of generating a keyboard score of his opera *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (1782), having already engaged in an arrangement of it for woodwinds. Finally, we get a sense of the intensity of Mozart's lifestyle; his household is a constant whirl of activity from morning to late night, which seems to exhaust his sixty-six-year-old father. Notice, finally, that when Mozart plays a concert, both his piano and his pedal piano have to be moved so that he can play his own instrument at the host venue.

Vienna, 12 March 1785

Your brother [recently] made 559 gulden at his concert, which was unexpected, because he is simultaneously giving his six subscription concerts at the Mehlgrube [casino], which have more than 150 patrons, each of whom pays one souverain [13.5 gulden; bringing gross revenue for the series of more than 2,000 gulden]. In addition to that, he has often been playing in the theater at other concerts.

As for the keyboard arrangement of *Entführung aus dem Serail*, it can be said that a certain [Christoph] Torricella [printer in Vienna] is setting it. Your arrangement by Torricella is by your brother, but it is still not yet ready. He may have completed only the first act. I'll ask about it. Torricella has also engraved three sonatas, of which one is for violin [K. 333, 284, and 454]. Enough. I shall purchase everything that is issued. . . .

We never arrive back home before one A.M., and I never get up before nine. We have lunch at two or half-past two. What lousy weather! Every day there are concerts, more and more students, music, and copying. Where can I escape? If only the concerts would end. It is impossible to describe the hustle and bustle. Your brother's pianoforte has been moved at least twelve times from his house to the theater or to someone else's house. He has had a large pedal piano made, which goes under the body of the piano and is about two feet longer and extremely powerful. And each Friday this has been carried to the Mehlgrube [casino] and also to the respective residences Count Zichy and to Prince Kaunitz. . . .

With a million kisses from my heart I am eternally your faithful father.

[Leopold] Mozart

Source: Translated from the original German in *Mozart: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen*, ed. Wilhelm A. Bauer and Otto Erich Deutsch (Kassel, 1963), Vol. III.