Miraculous Mozart

by John Check

A review of Mozart: The Reign of Love, by Jan Swafford

The story of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart begins with the “miracle of January 24, 1761.” This is Jan Swafford’s apt phrase, found in his new biography, Mozart: The Reign of Love, for what
happened one night in Salzburg when a four-year-old boy sat down at the harpsichord in his parents’ house and began to play. His sister Nannerl, age nine, had been practicing a scherzo, and he was taken with its lively rhythms. When she finished, he wanted to give it a try. Their father, Leopold, a composer, violinist, and music pedagogue, was astounded by what happened next: the boy immediately caught the gist of the piece. Within half an hour, despite being unable to read music and having had no previous harpsichord instruction, he had learned it by heart.

Swafford, a composer and veteran biographer, capably guides classical music enthusiasts through Mozart’s life from its miraculous first act to its denouement. Mozart was born in Salzburg in 1756. The achievements of his early years defy comprehension. At five he composed his first piece, a minuet, and more quickly followed. These earliest works were transcribed into notation (and lightly edited) by Leopold, but, Swafford emphasizes, the elder Mozart did little more than tidy up loose ends, ensuring that what was characteristic in his son’s art was preserved intact. Leopold led Wolfgang through a series of composition exercises, after which the boy’s “wild imagination” took over, filling in gaps and making the most unusual of connections.

In 1762, Leopold took Wolfgang and Nannerl to Vienna. So polished was her playing, so impressive were his pieces and improvisations, that they caused a sensation. A lucrative sensation: the money Leopold received during this relatively short visit exceeded his yearly salary as a musician in the court orchestra of the archbishop of Salzburg, the openhanded Sigismund von Schrattenbach. This doesn’t begin to take into account the gifts showered on the children. The next ten years were dominated by tours, the longest of which, lasting some three and a half years and including visits to the music capitals of Europe—Paris, London, Amsterdam, and others—came to be known as the “grand tour.” The engineer of these vast productions was Leopold. As he wrote of a later tour of Italy, he planned for it as a general plans for a military campaign, going so far as to refer to his son as “my little soldier.”

Whether at home in Salzburg or, more often than not, on the road, Mozart composed at a furious rate. Before the age of ten, he wrote his earliest symphonies, most of them tidy three-movement affairs, and orchestral serenades. His first Mass dates from his teens. More ambitiously, he began to compose operas, the genre for which he would in time set the bar. As commissions began to come his way, he worked to refine his craft. “At sixteen,” according to Swafford, “Mozart was already one of the finest of melodists, but more important, he was already creating art capable of making life sweeter, more poignant, more intense.” Within a year, Mozart wrote what Swafford considers his first “unforgettable” symphony, Symphony No. 25 in G minor. He was now a mature composer.

From 1773 to 1781, Mozart was centered mainly in Salzburg. A prodigy no longer, he turned to the writing of concertos, often placing himself in the starring role. He taught, tailoring his instruction to the strengths of his pupils. He fell in love with the beautiful soprano Aloysia Weber, only later to marry her sister Constanze. All the same, he chafed at the relative confines of Salzburg. No irritant was greater than his employer, the new archbishop, Hieronymus Colleredo. Colloredo was a proud progressive who treated those beneath him with contempt. Bristling at being considered a
servant, Mozart sought to extricate himself from the archbishop’s grasp, searching in vain for employment elsewhere. Now that the course of his career was no longer being dictated by his father, Mozart, writes Swafford, “proceeded to bungle nearly every opportunity that presented itself.” He showed up established composers, complained when asked to perform on inadequate instruments, and couldn’t quite conceal his disgust at the poor taste of potential patrons. Things came to a head in 1781. Colloredo was so sick of Mozart’s scheming and insolence that he had him booted out the door. Out the door, Swafford adds, and “into his glory.”

Mozart’s glory came during the ten years of 1781–91, when he called Vienna home. Among its fruits are his last half-dozen symphonies. The final three of these, his very best, were composed in about six weeks. Paying homage to Haydn, the father of the string quartet, Mozart published the six “Haydn” quartets in 1785. Swafford quotes the dedication, in which Mozart warmly reveals how much the elder composer’s “approbation” meant to him. The seventeen piano concertos of the Vienna period, Swafford writes, were “more substantial, bigger in sound . . . more nearly symphonic than any before.” Two of these, the K. 449 and the K. 453, are dedicated to his piano student, the virtuosa Barbara Ployer.

And then there are the operas, especially the three with librettos by Lorenzo Da Ponte, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Così fan tutte*, and *Don Giovanni*. The treatment of these works is a highlight of the book. Take *Figaro*. Swafford traces its development from the 1778 play by Beaumarchais that mocked the excesses and abuses of the aristocracy. Mozart assigned Da Ponte the task of fashioning a libretto from the play. Da Ponte, it becomes clear, was rather an operatic figure himself. Jewish by birth, a convert to Catholicism, an ardent student of languages, a onetime priest who gave in—completely in—to the pleasures of the flesh, Da Ponte reduced the number of characters and simplified the plot, endowing the story with a briskness and naturalness that suited Mozart’s purpose to a T. Swafford notes the contributions of the soprano Nancy Storace, whom he calls “the soul of the first production,” and the tenor Michael Kelly, who talked the composer into accepting his stuttering delivery in the sextet from the third act. This opera gave Mozart enormous satisfaction. Not long after the 1786 premiere in Vienna, he wrote a friend about the production in Prague. “[H]ere they talk about nothing but *Figaro*. Nothing is played, sung or whistled but *Figaro*. Nothing is drawing like *Figaro*. Nothing, nothing but *Figaro*.” “*Figaro*,” adds Swafford, “is as close to perfect as Mozart ever came, which is to say as close as opera ever came.”

The author of biographies of Beethoven, Brahms, and Charles Ives, Swafford is a fluent writer with a sharp eye for detail. As he states in the introduction to the present book, “I am primarily a composer, and I write biographies of composers from that point of view.” The amount of musical analysis the book contains is substantial—for non-specialists, perhaps too substantial. While examples set out in notation are absent, the more readers know about the technical side of music, the better.

Mozart’s life came to an end with a miraculous last act. The Magic Flute, the clarinet concerto, “Ave Verum Corpus,” the beginnings of the Requiem—these were among the immortal works of 1791. Mozart died early that December. He was thirty-five years old.
“The gods, nature, whatever it was that made Mozart,” writes Swafford, “had indifferently created a miracle, and indifferently let it be erased long before its time”; “[T]he gods do not care.” He is wrong. The gods do care: who else could have given us the music of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart?

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