



CRITIC AT LARGE

# You don't rock me, Amadeus

It's not something you're supposed to admit in polite company, but *David Flusfeder* doesn't like Mozart. It's time to explode the myth

In June, at Sadler's Wells, Mozart's unfinished opera *Zaide* was given a run-out. The composer abandoned the work in his mid-twenties; the manuscript was found after his death by his widow, Constanze, and even though the opera is missing its overture, third act and spoken text, it has been making frequent appearances recently (with the missing parts speculatively added). The critic Edward Seckerson, writing of the London production, said it contains "one glorious aria . . . and an assortment of other numbers which might be considered mediocre by Mozart's standards but which would more than cut the mustard by anybody else's". Within this judgement, another, implicit one is

contained: Mozart is so great, so towering a talent, that even the works he abandoned occupy the highest points of the culture.

"Mozart's music is so beautiful as to entice angels down to earth," wrote Kleist. "In Bach, Beethoven and Wagner, we admire principally the depth and energy of the human mind; in Mozart, the divine instinct," said Grieg. "The most tremendous genius raised Mozart above all masters, in all centuries and in all the arts," said Wagner. Composers, writers and musicologists compete to find the aptest, most gushing, most spiritual, most totalising formulation for what seems a self-evident truth: Mozart was great, and his work somehow justifies us all.

And, as if it were the relic of a saint, Mozart's music makes miracles. This is from an online vegan blog: "Listening to Mozart can reduce the number of seizures in person [sic] afflicted with a rare form of epilepsy called Lennox-Gastaut syndrome. Mozart's K448 piano sonata improve [sic] learning and mathematical skills, and increases spatial IQ by eight to nine points." This is the so-called Mozart Effect or, rather, "The Mozart Effect®", which bases its grand entrepreneurial claims on some largely discredited research conducted 20 years ago.

Mozart should not be held to account for the peculiarities of his enthusiasts. The composer's position is secure, unquestionable. As Simon P Keefe writes in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Mozart*, "Judgements of greatness . . . seem somehow superfluous where Mozart is concerned. Respected and admired in all quarters, his music defines greatness, rather than being circumscribed by it."

Not in all quarters, actually: Noël Coward, after attending a Mozart production at Glyndebourne, observed that it was like "piddling on flannel". The pianist Glenn Gould who, it was said, recorded all the piano sonatas just to show how bad they were, declared: "Mozart was a bad composer who died too late rather than too early."

And, I confess, I don't like Mozart either. I'm not musically trained, but I listen to music a lot. And if anything by Mozart should come on the radio, I'll recognise its author instantly by the physical effects the music produces in me – a queasiness in the gut, a distasteful irritation of the mind. My Mozart effect is a mild physical revulsion, as if I were being insistently and maliciously prodded.

I seldom talk about it. If I do, I'm likely to be disparaged or pitied. Occasionally, I'll be patronised, like a child who has said something remarkably, almost charmingly, wrong-headed. "Oh. How interesting. I've never heard anyone say that before." People generally don't talk about Mozart, except to agree how wonderful he is. In the company of an older, wiser and more accomplished man, I once admitted to my dislike for the composer. We had been getting on fine until that point, but the temperature in the room suddenly dropped. "To appreciate Mozart," he said, "is to reach human maturity." And, with that pronouncement, our friendship was over.

In Salzburg, the composer's birthplace, confectioners make the *Mozartkugel*, a marzipan ball surrounded by layers of praline and dark chocolate. This was a late-19th-century sweet, but the Mozart industry started soon after he died in 1791 at the age of 35. One of the first biographies was commissioned by Mozart's publishers to increase interest in his life and therefore sell more copies of his scores. Another was written by the second husband of the composer's widow, who depended on her

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first husband's work for an income. These books presented him as a kind of eternal child, who composed his 600-plus works with the same miraculous facility he first demonstrated as a boy virtuoso of the keyboard.

Each era invents its own Mozart. Before Beethoven appeared, he was seen as a Romantic. Not until the late 1830s did he become the universal "classical" genius. The painter Delacroix spoke for his times when he admired Mozart for his sublime unity; Beethoven's music, he said, was "a long cry of pain". A couple of generations later, Tchaikovsky wrote: "Maybe it is precisely because, as a man of my times, I am broken and morally sick that I like to seek peace and consolation in Mozart's music, most of which is an expression of life's joys as experienced by a healthy, wholesome nature, not corrupted by introspection."

Nietzsche, too, put forward Mozart as a force for health, weighing Wagner's heaviness against the Austrian composer's "southern" airiness and finding it wanting. After the First World War, Mozart became a messenger from a happier past, a symbol of greatness, used to shore up against ruins. Our Mozart is still a late-20th-century one, given body in Peter Shaffer's play *Amadeus* and its film adaptation by Milos Forman: the scatological, giggling fool, someone whose character wasn't up to his genius. But it isn't the myths to which I especially object, it's

the music. And recently I have made a discovery: my closest friends have a reaction similar to mine. One of them is a former pianist and media composer, Robert Lockhart, to whom I turned for a musicological explanation.

Lockhart showed me a typically Mozartian figure on the keyboard. It consisted of an Alberti bass, which is a repetition of broken chords played by the left hand, followed by an appoggiatura, a sort of musical sigh, played with the right. "You get it? It's a trick. A technical device to simulate emotion." Another Mozart trick was using double octaves, when both hands play the same melody, two octaves apart, to (supposedly) emotional effect.

"Highly symmetrical, predictable structures," Lockhart said of Mozart's usually praised "architecture". "They appeal to people who like their lives to be highly ordered. The sheer squareness of the structure rarely allows the material to grow organically." I wondered if there was a problem with using images from the natural world to describe music, but there was no stopping Lockhart: "Mozart very rarely surprises. There's no fear, no organic flow, no heart. His melodies are harmonically rooted; there's no freedom or independent melodic life. Something in his music exudes self-satisfaction: symmetry, everything is in place."

Lockhart excepted the operas from criticism because he hasn't paid much attention to them.

The composer on his deathbed, by Mihály Munkácsy, and (opposite) a Mozart sweet shop in Salzburg

And he exempted the slow movement of the *Piano Concerto in A major*, K488. I listened to it and quite liked it. And then I listened to an earlier concerto and the queasiness returned.

When I was a student, I believed in a sort of post-structuralist materialism. The text was, as Roland Barthes said, a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture. Its author was not to be considered, hardly to be mentioned. Once, in a seminar discussion, a less sophisticated fellow student quoted the musicologist Deryck Cooke: "The listener . . . makes direct contact with the mind of a great artist . . . mind meets mind, as far as is possible." How we scorned this primitive approach to the reception of art. But now I seem to be coming around to it.

What don't I like about Mozart's music? It's not just its unthinkingly unquestioned place at the summit of "our" culture; it's not the *Kugeln* of the Mozart industry; and it can't be just the symmetries of his musical structures, or the sound of a skilful composer performing the tricks of his trade. What I don't like about Mozart's music is Mozart. ●

*David Flusfeder's latest novel is "A Film by Spencer Ludwig" (Fourth Estate, £11.99) [newstatesman.com/culture](http://newstatesman.com/culture)*