

WHERE TRAGEDY MEETS OPTIMISM

Mozart's Sublime 'Requiem' & The Kennedy Assassination

by David Shavin

About six weeks before Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart died, his wife, Constanza, related that he had confided to her, as they were on a walk, that he had been poisoned.¹ In those remaining weeks, Mozart fought to complete his sublime "Requiem." On the "afternoon before his death, he had the score brought to his bed,

and himself, sang the alto part. . . . They got as far as the first bars of the 'Lacrimosa' when Mozart, with the feeling that it would never be finished, burst into a violent fit of weeping, and laid the score aside."²

What is one to make of Mozart's reported claim of poisoning? It is possible that the 35-year-old was delu-

1. Karl Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus's son, later claimed that his father had been poisoned in the same manner as had been Ganganelli—that is, Clement XIV, the Pope who, in 1773, had banned the Jesuits.

2. Otto Jahn, *Life of Mozart*; p. 356. Jahn attributed this story to Benedikt Schack, who sang in the quartet with Mozart. He was Mozart's "Tamino" in the "Magic Flute."



Mozart's Killer?

This detail from a larger painting by Ignaz Unterberger (1789) was in the private collection of the Austrian Tinti estate. Mozart's original quartet partners for his groundbreaking "Haydn" Quartets included Haydn himself, along with the von Tinti brothers, fellow lodge members. In the complete painting, there are 35 men, most with swords, none pointed at anybody—except for the sword at Mozart's back (at the far right). The man whose sword points at Mozart was a police infiltrator, one Leopold Aloys Hoffman, probably employed by the head of the secret police, Count Anton Perglen. In 1792, Hoffman composed a pamphlet attacking the "Magic Flute." The von Tintis, in commissioning the painting, evidently wished to leave an account for posterity.

sional, and that he simply fell prey to renal failure, or to infectious disease. However, before jumping to such self-consoling platitudes, this article will examine two main questions:

- What would have been the basis for Mozart to even think that he might be a target for assassination? That is, what was his own estimation of his role in history?

- If it were shown that Mozart was, in an important sense, the most substantial leader of the fight to bring the American Revolution into Europe, from 1781-91; and, also, if Mozart were aware that he was targeted for elimination; then what kind of a “swan song” would he compose?

A ‘Requiem’ for JFK

Nov. 22, 2013 is the 50th anniversary of the murder of President John F. Kennedy. Still, today, his assassination is the subject of much unease and anxiety. In 1969, New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison conducted the only jury trial of an individual linked to the conspiracy of the assassination. Later, based on discussions between Garrison and filmmaker Oliver Stone, the movie “JFK” presented a dramatic summation to the jury in the trial of Clay Shaw, in which the character Garrison invokes Shakespeare’s “Hamlet,” in which a foul deed had carried away the sovereign, the perpetrators seized power, and the “Hamlets”—the American people—were confronted with an ugly reality, and with the need to become much bigger people, so that they might do justice to their fallen leader.

The world, too, has suffered from the hijacking of its “Beacon of Hope and Temple of Liberty,” and its transmogrification into an ugly empire, less respected around the world, than feared and hated. Further, the psychological scar, the deep wound to the nation’s psyche, from having to swallow (or even to cynically ignore) lies such as the famous “magic bullet”—one that twists and turns, and pauses in mid-air—such a wound left to do its damage, is not easily repaired.

It may be that Mozart’s “Requiem,” his singular appreciation of the theological concept of God’s grace, and his scientifically honed grasp of the Classical principles of the workings of the human psyche, are uniquely situated to begin that healing process.



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Mozart (center) attends a performance of his opera “Die Entführung aus dem Serail” (“The Abduction from the Seraglio”) in Berlin in 1789: a provocative musical creation, and a polemic against the war against the Turks.

Mozart: Leader of the American Revolution in Europe

After the “world turned upside-down” on Lord Cornwallis and the British at Yorktown, in October 1781, the issue on the table for courts throughout Europe was whether imperial methods would prevail in perpetuity, or whether their lands would do better by developing the potentials of their populations. In 1781, in Vienna, where the Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II ruled the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a series of reforms were attempted, centered on the freeing of the serfs. These included investments in broader education, public hospitals, mining, metallurgy, a national theater, and much wider circulation of newspapers and books. The entrenched feudalists preferred not so much to argue against the Emperor’s program, but rather, simply, to take the “America” issue, posed by these reforms, off the table—by initiating a new “religious”

war, a senseless “clash of civilizations,” whereby Russia and Austria would defend Christendom against the (Muslim) Turks.

On the occasion of the 1782 visit to his court by the Russian Grand Duke Paul, Joseph II chose Mozart, new to Vienna, to compose an opera. Joseph assigned his close advisor, Valentin Gunther, to work with the composer. Mozart proceeded to turn Vienna upside-down, by dramatically changing the ending of a play, “The Abduction from the Seraglio,” by Christoph Friedrich Bretzner, which has Belmonte, the Christian captive, escaping from the “evil” Muslim Pasha by means of a last-second discovery that he was in fact the long-lost son of the Pasha.

Compare this to Mozart’s version for his opera by the same name. The Pasha is speaking:

What a blessed day! To have the son of my worst enemy in my power! Listen, wretch! It is because of your father, that barbarian, that I had to leave my country. His implacable greed robbed me of my beloved, whom I treasured more than life itself. . . . In a word, he ruined my whole happiness. And now I have this man’s only son in my power. Tell me, if he were in my position, what would he do?

The audience twists and turns for a few minutes, as they realize their commitment to vengeance may well bring about an undesired end. Then, the Pasha’s verdict:

I despised your father far too much ever to follow in his footsteps. Take your freedom, take Constanza, tell your father that you were in my power, that I released you so that you might tell him that it is a far greater pleasure to repay injustices suffered by good deeds than to compensate evil by more evil.

Needless to say, presenting Pasha, the Muslim, as the true “Christian” in the drama, was so controversial, that riots erupted in the theater, and shocked all of Vienna; but it was a success on several levels. It forced the population to consider what their Christianity was, and what was universal about it. The derailing of the war drive against the Turks was an unexpected and welcome surprise (not unlike the recent derailing of Obama’s unwavering commitment to bomb Syria.)

Mozart’s cultural intervention won a few more years

for Joseph II to carry out his reforms; however, the victory had come at a price. Less than three weeks before the opera’s opening, Mozart’s collaborator and the Emperor’s ally, Gunther, was arrested, and falsely charged with being a “Prussian spy.” The details as to how the head of the Secret Police, Count Anton Pergen, ran the operation, would not be uncovered until after Joseph II’s death. (As Pergen had simply invented the spy that Gunther had supposedly met with, the allegation that he was a “Prussian spy” turned out to really mean, a collaborator of Prussia’s Moses Mendelssohn in Joseph’s Austrian reforms.)³ However, as a result of the muddying of the waters, the Emperor never again enjoyed such a direct working relationship with Mozart.

Politically Strategic Operas

Mozart’s precise reading of the political-strategic situation, and his boldly composed cultural interventions would be repeated with his “Marriage of Figaro” (1786), and “Don Giovanni” (1787). Those stories are documented elsewhere.⁴ The summary version is that, by 1785-86, the entrenched oligarchy, forced to assent to the freeing of the serfs, certainly has not been won over to the idea of developing the talents of their former servants. However, Joseph’s reforms cannot work without at least some members of the nobility being open to such possibilities. Mozart staged their reactionary political habits as a sexual farce: “Figaro” involves a Count who has, liberally, given up the feudal “right of the first night” (to deflower any bride of his land on her wedding night). But in Mozart’s masterpiece, the Count spends the entire opera attempting to deflower just such a bride.⁵

The humor and grace of “Figaro” might have worked in Joseph’s war against his feudalists. However, by that year (1786), it appears that the “Venetian” operations of Casanova against Joseph II (and of Cagliostro against Joseph’s sister, Marie Antoinette)⁶ were

3. See David Shavin “Moses Mendelssohn: Soul of Germany; Or, Why Anti-Semites Hate Germany,” *EIR*, March 9, 2007.

4. See David Shavin, “[Mozart’s Entschlossenheit](#), or Don Giovanni vs. Venetian Ca-Ca,” Schiller Institute, December 2010.

5. Lorenzo Da Ponte and Mozart properly understood Beaumarchais’ play, which worked a similar way, earlier, in France. In 1775-78, Beaumarchais was a “covert” operator for the French court, supplying weapons for the American Revolution. But it wasn’t clear where the court’s heart was: whether it was simply being opportunistic in getting back at the British, or whether there was some principled commitment to progress. Rather than wait for fate to decide, Beaumarchais employed the stage to help outflank the reactionaries.

6. See footnote 4.

getting the upper hand. Also, Austria's "savings-and-loans" were bankrupted, usury had become dominant, executions had become public spectacles, and the power of Count Pergen and his Secret Police was raised above that of all of Joseph's other ministers. It appeared to be the beginning of the end of Joseph II.

Mozart had to make the decision of whether to move to England, and to support himself and his family (Mozart and Constanze had six children, only two of whom survived infancy) as a performer of music, or to stay and fight—which meant tackling the decadent, Venetian-style blackmail operations against him. His "Don Giovanni" not only exposes the decadence of Casanova (e.g., his penchant for nine-year-old girls, as in Mozart's treatment of "La Piccina," the little girl), in the famous "Catalogue" aria, but it also properly entraps the audience in its own pathetic "enabling" of great evil. Done properly, it is not a "pleasant" opera.

In 1787-88, with the Constitutional Convention and the debates over the Federalist Papers, the United States "upped the ante" by establishing a nation with greater potential power than the existing (corporatist) East India companies—in which the American conception of the "general welfare" trumped individual greed. But in France, America's ally LaFayette temporized (1789-91), judging that the population was not ready for an American Revolution. By the time of the attempted flight of the French King in June 1791, LaFayette had been outflanked. Ever since, our bequest from the French—the contrived banalities of a political "left vs. right," along with the bloodletting of the Jacobin Terror—have plagued Western civilization.

In Vienna, by 1788, Joseph II had fallen into the "Turkish War" trap that he had avoided six years earlier, a war in which disease destroyed him and his army. In 1790, Joseph died, and his brother Leopold succeeded him as Emperor. Leopold made a promising start by investigating the way Pergen had manipulated his brother. He opened the files on the 1782 arrests of Gunther and



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In "Die Zauberflöte" ("The Magic Flute"), Mozart's explicitly republican opera, staged in 1791, provoked a vicious backlash from the oligarchy. Right, Emanuel Schikaneder as the first Papageno; the playbill for the opening performance, Sept. 30, 1791.



the "Prussian spies." By the Spring of 1791, he had fired Pergen, and exonerated his victims.⁷ Indeed, that Summer, Mozart's "La Clemenza de Tito" (The Clemency of Titus)—composed for Leopold's 1791 coronation ceremony in Prague—may have attempted, by highlighting the role of clemency, to seize upon this political opening.

Mozart's Political Offensive: Beauty Leads to Truth

What should have happened in France, but didn't, Mozart attempted in Vienna. He took the fight to the population. The "Magic Flute," his first German-language opera since the 1782 "Abduction," exploded onto the public scene late in September 1791, and challenged his audiences with a bold, republican proposition: Put simply, if they were capable of falling in love, they were capable of governing.

Few commentators have stopped to ask why

7. Amongst other operations, e.g., Pergen had attempted to set up Mozart's Masonic lodge, by sending a phony letter from "French Jacobins," calling on the lodge to rise up and join the revolution against the Emperor. The lodge turned the provocative letter over to Pergen for investigation.

Zarastro,⁸ the ruler, decides that it will no longer function to have his well-intentioned brotherhood, under his leadership, rule the land. Perhaps, up until then, civilization had stumbled along with an “inner elite” governing, but Zarastro is firm that this cannot be the model for the future. Rather, leadership must be exerted by a man and a woman, conjointly. But this was not merely a polemic on behalf of equality for women. Rather, the intense and mutual aesthetic education, in coming to terms with, and mastering, the deepest physical and spiritual passions, holds the promise of a leadership in which the underlying relationship of beauty and truth prevails.

In the “Magic Flute,” the critical issue for the republican movement, that of the aesthetical and epistemological education of man, is captured in the dynamics of the interplay between beauty and truth. Every human is given the capacity, through his instinct for love, and his yearning for beauty, to search for truth. Importantly, Mozart knows this is true from his personal struggle to come to understand his own youthful genius, through working out his fascination with the mind of Bach.⁹ Mozart explicitly references *how* he knows that the “magic” of the flute, the power of Classical music, works: Just before their ultimate trial, where Tamino and Pamina finally are able to join forces, the singing of the two guards before the fiery Hell is set to a marvelous, and self-revealing, C-minor fugue derived from his Bach studies.

That October, the population of Vienna was entranced by the “Magic Flute.” There were more than four performances per week, all month long, all before packed houses.¹⁰ Beautiful, gripping music, burlesque humor, great poignant moments, and courageous optimism were all a part—but the population heard something about themselves they had not realized before.

The oligarchical reaction was swift and vicious. Within days, decisions were made to prepare for an empire without the Emperor Leopold, and without Mo-

zart’s republican masterworks. In mid-October—about the same time that a decision would have been made to poison Mozart—the tutor for Crown Prince Franz was dismissed. That tutor, Johann Baptist von Schloissnig, like Mozart, a protégé of Baron Gottfried van Swieten, was accused of teaching Jacobin revolutionary ideas, and of supporting the invasion of Austria by the French Jacobins. Swieten himself was dismissed from his ministerial post on the very day of Mozart’s death, Dec. 5, 1791. Emperor Leopold, otherwise in good health, died before that Winter ended. And with Leopold dead, Count von Pergen was formally brought back into the government.

What the Present Owes the Past for the Future

Was Mozart merely paranoid—or was there a basis for him to assume that he might be targeted and removed? And, further, did he make a conscious decision at that point, to condense his remaining mortality into this gift of the “Requiem”—this investigation into the dialogue between man and his Creator, as to how eternal rest and eternal light are attained? And, hence, what is the nature of such an act of grace? What was on the mind of the Creator in making man in His image?

There is something sublime about Mozart’s decision to face death the way he did. Most of the time, we do not know ahead of time, which day will be our last one. However, the power that we have to change and shape the universe for all time to come, is rooted in our capacity to deliberately shape our identity around our unique talent, and in our capacity to be truthful to that mission. And if our Creator, in his grace, provided beauty as our guide along that sometimes harsh road to truth, then today—in part, due to Mozart’s unique intervention—we may proceed with a uniquely informed optimism.

Afterthought

It is known that Mozart expressed deep regret over having to leave his wife and family before his time—and, on our part, we may certainly regret all the beautiful creations never heard from that precious soul, taken from us too early. However, he, with his “Requiem,” chose to follow beauty along that hard road to truth, so that we may, today, be properly armed to end the reign of his enemies.

Mozart deserves that, as does Kennedy ... and as does the Temple of Liberty and Beacon of Hope for the world.

8. “Zarastro” was modeled upon Ignaz von Born, the “Benjamin Franklin” of Vienna. He headed up the lodge that Mozart preferred to work with. Mozart composed a work commemorating the public honor bestowed upon Born by Joseph II, in 1785, for his work in metallurgy.

9. Mozart’s “Bach” project stemmed from his early years in Vienna, at regular Sunday meetings of the Education Minister, Baron van Swieten.

10. By Nov. 6, the 24th performance of the “Magic Flute,” the aristocratic, and consistently banal diarist, Zinzendorf noted: “The music and designs are pretty. The rest an incredible farce. Huge audience.” (But, for such jaded characters, the American Revolution was an incredible farce with a huge audience.)