

Foundations of an Operatic Genius: Mozart's Youthful Influences

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Mozart: Foundations of an Operatic Genius

Johannes Chrysostomus Wolfgangus Theophilus Mozart, better known as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, or simply Mozart, is widely regarded as one of the greatest composers of all time. If not considered the greatest, he is certainly one of the most well-known. He is particularly celebrated for his opera. In the following paragraphs, this paper explores details of the life of Mozart in order to understand what influence the aspects (whether family, patronage, politics, or peers) of his early life had on his music. These influences would begin to prepare him and set him on a path to eventually write his most famous operas such as *Don Giovanni*, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, and *Die Zauberflöte*.

Mozart was born on January 17th, 1756 in the city of Salzburg, Germany.¹ Mozart was the youngest of the seven children of Leopold and his wife Anna Maria. However, tragically, five of their children tragically died in infancy. Only Mozart and his sister Maria Anna survived beyond childhood. Mozart was trained in music from a very early age. In fact, he was only 4 years old when his father began to teach him to play pieces of music on the clavier. His first compositions of music came in the year 1761 when he was only five years of age. This same year, the young Mozart found himself with a small role in a Latin play titled *Sigismundis Hungariae Rex*, which was quite possibly his first experience with the stage and may have been the earliest influence in Mozart's life to begin leading him to compose his operas such as *Don Giovanni*.² Mozart's love of performing for audiences on the stage (both musically and dramatically) seems to have stayed with the young composer from his early childhood and

¹ Barrington, "Account of a very Remarkable Young Musician.", 54.

² Rice, "Mozart on the Stage", 179.

throughout his life into adulthood. This is evidenced in a letter Mozart wrote to his father in which he recounted an experience he had during Carnival in 1784 when he was 27 years old, “On Carnival Monday, our company of masqueraders went to the ballroom, where we performed a pantomime... Both the plot and the music...were mine...”. The overall tone of his letter is one of excitement and thrill.³

The young Mozart was, without a doubt, a musical prodigy and genius and his father knew it. In the year 1764, when Mozart was about seven years old, Leopold took Mozart and Nannerl and (being financially supported in these travels by Archbishop Siegmund Christoph von Schtrattenbach⁴) went on tours to demonstrate Mozart’s skills in musical performance and composition. They travelled though Germany, to France, and to England as well as other countries. However, Mozart was not well received in Paris. Throughout these tours, Mozart was composing and performing his own pieces.⁵ Additionally, it was during these travels that Mozart was exposed to the opera. A letter written by Mozart’s father gives evidence to this claim. Leopold says at one point, “Five or six operas are being performed. The first was *Ezio*, the second *Berenice*,...the third *Adriano in Siria*, newly composed by [Johann Christian] Bach.” Each of the operas that Leopold mentions belongs to the Italian genre *opera seria* and Pietro Metastasio was the primary librettist of the operas the Mozarts were exposed to during their stay in London.⁶ Eventually, Mozart would compose an opera on one of Metastasio’s librettos. In fact, it was one of the last operas Mozart ever composed, *La Clemenza di Tito* in 1791.⁷

³ Rice, “Mozart on the Stage”, 180.

⁴ Keefe, *Mozart in Context*, 81.

⁵ Johnson, *Mozart*, 9-14.

⁶ Rice, “Mozart on the Stage”, 182.

⁷ Hunter, *Mozart's Operas: A Companion*, 71.

In a letter written by Daines Barrington, a lawyer from England at the time of Mozart's childhood, Barrington recounts that he was able to meet with and test the young Mozart when Mozart was only 8 years old. One of the tests he decided to give Mozart was one that tested his extemporary compositional skills. First, he asked him to improvise a Song of Love. Barrington says that young Mozart "immediately" began to play, improvising a recitative introduction to lead into the extemporary "symphony" that followed. Barrington then asked him to improvise a Song of Rage. Once again, young Mozart wasted no time and immediately began to compose this second song on the spot. Barrington states that these songs were done in the style of opera of the day and were "of the length that opera songs generally last." This firsthand account given by Barrington is a testament to and further evidence to the genius of young Mozart. At just 8 years old, Mozart's exposure to opera in London was sufficient for him to comprehend the mechanics and conventions of the songs of opera to the point that he could create operatic songs that were "above mediocrity"⁸.

In the autumn of 1766, the Mozarts returned to Salzburg. Soon after returning, the archbishop of Salzburg (for whom Leopold Mozart worked) wanted to test the genius of young Mozart as the archbishop was suspicious that perhaps Mozart's music was actually being written (or at the very least, fixed) by his father. So, the archbishop had Mozart separated from Leopold for a month. During this month, Mozart was provided with various tasks to complete in order to test the scope of his genius as a composer. Mozart had no trouble passing each one of the archbishop's tests. At only 11 years of age, Mozart was already a genuine and accomplished musician who could perform at the professional level.

⁸ Barrington, "Account of a very Remarkable Young Musician," 59-61.

Among the tests administered to young Mozart during that month of isolation was a “commission” of sorts from the archbishop for Mozart to compose the first part of a three-part oratorio titled *Die Schuldigkeit des ersten Gebotes* which translates to *The Obligation of the First and Greatest Commandment*. This seems to be Mozart’s first time composing music for a stage drama. While oratorio is certainly not the same thing as opera, the genres are so similar to each other that it seems accurate to say that this early experience contributed to his talent for writing operas later in his life. Taking a look at the score for *Die Schuldigkeit*, one can see definite similarities to opera. By looking at the following excerpt without any background knowledge regarding what this is, a trained musician would likely recognize this as a segment of a secco recitative. This recitative is titled “Die löblich' und gerechte Bitte” which translated to “The praiseworthy and just request,” and it is the first sung music in the oratorio. This is, in fact, a “dialogue in recitative” in which two characters (Christ’s Spirit and the embodiment of Compassion) converse with each other. The vocal line often remains on the same note for several syllables and is set to patterns that imitate those of speech. Below this the simple accompaniment is played on a harpsicord (see Example 1). Even though there does not seem to

Example 1: Mozart, “Die löblich' und gerechte Bitte,” mm. 24-28.⁹



be anything particularly “Mozartian” in this recitative, there is still something to be said about a child composer creating a recitative of such quality. Between the melodic movement and the

⁹ Mozart, W. A. *Die Schuldigkeit des ersten Gebotes*, K.35., 5.

careful movement of the bass, this recitative holds up to the quality one would have expected from a professional (such as Mozart’s father, Leopold). Immediately following this recitative is an aria titled “Mit Jammer muss ich schauen” which translates to “I have to look with sadness.” This aria shows that the young Mozart understood how to and was able to effectively execute the composition of a Da capo aria. Below are two excerpts from the aria. The first is taken from the A section (see Example 2) and the second is taken from the B section (see Example 3). At approximately 11 years of age, Mozart was able to write an aria accompanied by horns, violins, violas, and cellos. The A section is a bit more thoughtful in tone with its use of primarily whole notes, half notes, quarter notes, and eighth notes in the accompaniment with almost no syncopation at all. In the melody, it is interesting to note that the voice is frequently making leaps of more than a perfect fourth. However, in the B section of the aria, the accompaniment contains significantly more subdivision being made up of primarily eighth notes, sixteenth notes, and thirty-second notes. The voice also has less frequent leaps larger than a perfect fourth.

Example 2: Mozart, “Mit Jammer muss ich schauen,” mm. 48-55.¹⁰

Mit Jammer muss ich schauen un-zählig theu-re Seelen in mei-nes Feindes Klauen den Un-tergang er-

¹⁰ Mozart, *Die Schuldigkeit des ersten Gebotes*, K.35., 7.

Example 3: Mozart, “Mit Jammer muss ich schauen,” mm. 91-98.¹¹

The image shows a musical score for a vocal piece. It consists of five staves. The top staff is a vocal line with lyrics: "näch den tausend hin, reisst, reisst,nach den tausend hin, reisst nach den tau-send hin." The second staff is a piano accompaniment. The third staff is a bass line. The fourth staff is a tenor line. The fifth staff is a bass line. The score ends with the instruction "Da capo." The music is in a minor key and features a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth and thirty-second notes.

This oratorio follows the conventions of oratorio and opera of the time. It begins with an instrumental sinfonia (in place of an overture), followed by 7 recitative/aria sets followed by a recitative/trio set to end the first section of the oratorio. The above observed recitative and aria (Examples 1, 2, and 3), as well as the entirety of the oratorio, come as further evidence that Mozart was able to absorb so completely the styles and conventions of opera (and possibly oratorio) that he was exposed to during his travels with his father and sister in London. It would appear that those travels played an important role in the development of Mozart’s opera as he was not only exposed to the styles but actively learned from them and applied them to his own composition even at such a young age. However, as William Man notes, “[Mozart] was writing music in the traditional idioms which he had learned to accept as suitable for the sort of works he was asked to compose.”¹² While this work was not particularly groundbreaking or unique, this work was Mozart’s first dramatic musical work for the stage. While we do not see the pizzazz of Mozart’s later opera within this early work, we do see being laid the foundations for

¹¹ Mozart, *Die Schuldigkeit des ersten Gebotes*, K.35., 8.

¹² Mann, *The Operas of Mozart*, 11.

writing his own unique opera later in his life. Without *Die Schuldigkeit des ersten Gebotes*, we likely would not have *Le Nozze di Figaro*.

Mozart's first opera was written not much later than the portion of the oratorio discussed above. In fact, in 1768, the following year, when he was 12 years old, he was commissioned by the Emperor Joseph II to compose the music for an opera titled *La finta semplice*. The following images are short excerpts from two of Mozart's operas. The first is from this first opera of his, *La finta semplice*, and it is titled "Ritiriamoci, amici!" (see Example 4). The second is from one of his most popular operas, *Le nozze di Figaro* and it is titled "Hai gia vinta la causa," (see Example 5). Note how similar these two short excerpts of music appear to each other just at a glance. Before continuing, two things should be noted. First, the first excerpt is taken from a dialogue in recitative involving 4 different characters having a conversation. The second excerpt is taken from a monologue recitative in which Count Almaviva is voicing the things going on that are causing his outrage (which is then voiced in the aria following it. Second, The first excerpt is secco recitative with only one instrument providing accompaniment and the second excerpt is accompanied by oboes, bassoons, horns, violins, violas, cello, and

Example 4: Mozart, "Ritiriamoci, amici!", mm. 1-4.¹³



¹³ Mozart, *La finta semplice*, 16.

Example 5: Mozart, “Hai già vinta la causa,” mm. 21-24.¹⁴

bass. What is of note, however, is that if everything but the cello and bass was removed from the accompaniment of the *Figaro* recitative, these two recitatives would appear even more similar to each other than they already do at times. What is most notable when comparing these two recitatives is the similarity in the construction of the vocal movement. What should be noted is that in the *La finta* recitative, there are quite literally no breaks in between vocal phrases. The vocalists are simply trading off with one another from start to finish. However, in the *Figaro* recitative, there is only one vocalist and therefore there are moments of silence allowing the vocalist to breathe. What is being illustrated by these two excerpts is that even only a year after writing the oratorio discussed earlier in this paper, Mozart was beginning to find his own style and sound. Elements of this first opera written when he was only 12 years old are still visible in an opera he wrote when he was 22 years old.

Immediately following “Ritiriamoci, Amici!” in *La finta semplice* is an aria titled “Troppa briga a prender moglie.” Both excerpts below are taken from the score for this opera. “Troppa briga” is sung by a character named Simone who was previously wanting a wife but now states that he is “no longer interested in marriage.” As he makes this decision the tempo and meter of

¹⁴ Mozart, *Le nozze di Figaro*, 234-235.

the music shifts back and forth between common time at a slower tempo (see Example 6) and 2/4 at a faster *allegro* tempo (see Example 7).

Example 6: Mozart, “Troppa briga a prender moglie,” mm. 5-8.¹⁵

The musical score for Example 6 consists of five staves. The top two staves are for the piano accompaniment, with the right hand in treble clef and the left hand in bass clef. The bottom three staves are for the vocal line, with the vocal line in bass clef and two bass lines below it. The music is in common time (C). The tempo is slower. The score includes dynamic markings: *f* (forte) and *p* (piano). The lyrics are: bri - ga in ve - ri - tà, non è co - sa da sol - da - to che la

Example 7: Mozart, “Troppa briga a prender moglie,” mm. 20-27.¹⁶

The musical score for Example 7 consists of five staves. The top two staves are for the piano accompaniment, with the right hand in treble clef and the left hand in bass clef. The bottom three staves are for the vocal line, with the vocal line in bass clef and two bass lines below it. The music is in 2/4 time. The tempo is faster (*allegro*). The score includes dynamic markings: *f* (forte) and *p* (piano). The lyrics are: sol mazzo di carte, per un fiasco di buon vi - no, per due pi - pe di ta - bacco, ve le do tutte in un sacco, ve le

The young Mozart shows himself here to be able to musically characterize well the thought processes of a character in an opera even at just 12 years old. With the shifting emotions and resolve of the characters comes the shifting tempo and meter. Despite the level of expertise of the composition not being above contemporary composers of the time, it is still quite

¹⁵ Mozart, *La finta semplice*, 18.

¹⁶ Mozart, *La finta semplice*, 19.

impressive that a child was at a level of compositional skill comparable to adult composers of his day. While this first opera of Mozart's is not overwhelmingly uniquely Mozart, there are splashes of the Mozart to come within the score of this opera. For instance, William Mann notes that this alternation between meters and tempo in the aria discussed above is "a foretaste of Leporello and Figaro."¹⁷

Even though he was commissioned for *La finta semplice* in Vienna, the opera was not performed in Vienna due to backlash received. People were upset at the idea of a boy who was 12 years old being in the "composer's chair". They fought the opera each step of the way, even claiming at one point that the music must have been composed by someone else, perhaps Mozart's father even. This is, however, an untrue statement, proved in part by the fact that the actual notation for the score itself is in Mozart's own handwriting.¹⁸ Though it is worth noting that at this young age, Mozart's compositions would have been "proofread" by his father. This, however, makes the music no less the young Mozart's than it makes a novel less the author's work when an editor is involved. Unfortunately, Mozart's first ever full-length opera did not have its first performance in the city in which it was commissioned. However, it did, in fact have a first performance not too much later in Mozart's life. On May 1st, 1769, when Mozart was 13 years old, *La finta semplice* had its first performance back in Mozart's hometown of Salzburg, Germany in the archbishop's palace, receiving much approval from those who were present.¹⁹

The following year, in 1770, when Mozart was 14 years old, he was given his first official position. He was appointed to be the director of concerts by the archbishop. Further testament

¹⁷ Mann, *The Operas of Mozart*, 40.

¹⁸ Edgar, "Mozart's Early Efforts in Opera.", 47-48.

¹⁹ Hunter, *Mozart's Operas: A Companion*, 119.

to power of Mozart's mind came when Mozart accompanied his father to Italy where Mozart played before the Pope who knighted young Mozart a member of the Order of the Golden Spur.²⁰ During this same visit, Mozart was allowed to attend a rehearsal of Allegri's *Miserere*. Having been forbidden from receiving a copy of the score, the young master listened closely and carefully to every note of the music. After returning to where he and his father were staying while in Italy, Mozart wrote down every note of the *Miserere* with extreme accuracy.²¹ This event in Mozart's life explains, at least in part, why Mozart was able to have such success and show such rapid progress in the areas of music composition and performance. The young Mozart possessed a gift known today as "perfect pitch" which means he could recognize a pitch and reproduce it without any reference.²²

It is important to note that young Mozart continued to actively learn from, rather than simply enjoy, the music he was exposed to, such as Allegri's *Miserere*. Pictured below are two more excerpts of composition. However, Example 8 is not taken from the works of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Rather, Example 8 is a short snippet taken from the *Miserere* mentioned above which was composed by Gregorio Allegri in 1638.²³ These two pieces look rather different at a glance. This is because they are in fact rather different types of music from each other. Allegri's *Miserere* is a bit of sacred music sung in alternating 4- and 5-part textures with no accompaniment.

²⁰ "Mozart." *The Illustrated Magazine of Art*, 332.

²¹ "Mozart and the Pope.", 115.

²² Johnson, *Mozart*, 42.

²³ "Allegri's 'Miserere' .", 455.

Example 8: Allegri, *Miserere*, mm. 37-46.²⁴

The image displays a musical score for the Miserere, featuring four voices in two systems. Each system consists of four staves: two for the upper voices (Soprano and Alto) and two for the lower voices (Tenor and Bass). The lyrics are written below each staff. The first system contains the lyrics: "Ecce enim veritatem di-lex-is-ti:" repeated for all four voices. The second system contains the lyrics: "incerta et occulta sapientiae tuae manifestas-ti mi-hi." repeated for all four voices. The notation includes treble and bass clefs, a key signature of one flat (B-flat), and a common time signature (C). The music is characterized by its homophonic texture, with all voices moving in parallel motion.

Conversely, Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* is a secular opera and this excerpt is taken from the introductory piece titled "Zu Hülfe! Zu Hülfe!" (see Example 9). It is labeled by some a quartet, but this label is misleading. While there are in fact 4 voices heard within this piece, one of them is the voice of a man named Tamino who is only heard briefly at the beginning. It is the voices of the three ladies that occupy the majority of this piece of music. Rather than being unaccompanied like the *Miserere*, this piece has full accompaniment from the orchestra. The most noticeable similarity is that of the textures of the two excerpts. While one contains 4 voices and the other contains 3, these voices are handled in similar ways.

²⁴ Allegri, *Miserere*, 37.

Example 9: Mozart, “Zu Hülfe! Zu Hülfe!”, mm. 93-102²⁵

The image shows a musical score for three voices (Soprano, Alto, and Bass) from Mozart's opera 'Die Zauberflöte'. The score is in G major and 3/4 time. The lyrics are: 'theilen; viel leicht dass dieser schö - ne Mann die vor' - ge Ruh' ihr ge - ben kann, die vor' - ge Ruh' ihr theilen; viel leicht dass dieser schö - ne Mann die vor' - ge Ruh' ihr geben kann, die vor' - ge Ruh' ihr theilen; vielleicht dass dieserschöne Mann die vor' - ge Ruh' ihr ge - ben kann, die vor' - ge Ruh' ihr'. The top two voices have identical rhythms in the first measure, while the bass voice has a different rhythm. In the seventh measure, each voice has its own unique rhythm.

Overall, the texture seems close to being homophonic. All voices but one follow mostly the same rhythms. In Allegri's *Miserere*, it is what would today be called the alto voice that has the most varied rhythms. For example, the “quarter, quarter, quarter, eighth, eighth” section in the third measure of the first system in the above excerpt does not appear in any of the other voices. All of the other voices follow nearly identical rhythms to each other. In the section from Mozart's opera can be seen a very similar set up. From the first measure shown to the first beat of the eighth measure shown, the top two voices' rhythms are identical. There is only one exception to this statement. In the seventh measure shown, each voice has its own unique rhythm going into the cadence.

Just as it was interesting to note earlier in the discussion of *La finta semplice* that elements of Mozart's mature operatic style were present in his opera when he was only 12 years old, it is also interesting to see that the young Mozart seems to have been influenced at least at some level by his early exposure to this sacred music composed over 100 years before he was even born. This is true to the extent that similarities were discoverable between

²⁵ Mozart, *Die Zauberflöte*, 32.

Allegri's *Miserere* and bits of an opera that Mozart wrote when he was 34 years old in 1791, the year he died.

Overall, it would seem that there were several factors in the early years of Mozart's life that began to prepare him to become one of the greatest, if not the greatest, composers of opera in history. Between the early musical training that young Mozart received from his father and other professional musicians, as well as the types of music he was exposed to and taught himself from listening to and looking at the scores, in combination with a naturally genius mind and an outlet for that genius in the form of tours, challenges and tests from the archbishop and other sources, and early commissioned works (such as the six piano sonatas commissioned by the princess of Nassau-Weilberg during those early tours²⁶ and *La finta semplice*) as well as the resistance to his music he received because of his age and his interactions and experiences with the dramatic stage (both opera and non), it can be seen that there was a plethora of factors contributing to Mozart's future successes, especially in writing his operas. It also appears to be true that the young Mozart quite enjoyed being the center of attention. These early tastes of fame, adoration, and success were likely a boost to this young boy's confidence and encouraged him to grow even more skilled in the art of music composition which would eventually lead him to compose his most popular operas.

Mozart was so committed to and in love with his craft that he continued to compose music even as he lay on his death bed growing ever more ill in the year 1791. He quite literally composed until he could not compose anymore. Ironically, the piece he was working on when he died was a Requiem that he was commissioned to compose by Count von Walsegg. In the

²⁶ Johnson, *Mozart*, 14.

early morning of December 5th, 1791, Johannes Chrysostomus Wolfgangus Theophilus Mozart's short life came to an end.²⁷

Despite living such a relatively short life, Mozart had a substantial output of music. In Mozart's life of 35 short years, he produced more than 500 pieces of music, including: masses, cantatas, oratorios, operas, songs, ballet music, vocal pieces, symphonies, serenades, and more.²⁸ For each year of his life, he composed more than 14 works of music. While it is true that most of Mozart's music (and certainly all of his greatest music) was composed in the latter half of his life, these early years that have been discussed in the above paragraphs were absolutely paramount in preparing the composer to become who he is remembered to be today. Without *Die Schuldigkeit des ersten Gebotes*, we would likely not have *La finta semplice*. Without *La finta semplice*, we likely would not have *Le nozze di Figaro*. However, without the support of his father and the early musical training and exposure he had to opera in London, oratorio in Vienna, and sacred vocal music in Italy, we would very likely not have Mozart. Without these early influences, it is entirely possible that Mozart would never have developed his operatic style at all. It is entirely possible we would not remember the name Johannes Chrysostomus Wolfgangus Theophilus Mozart at all. However, the Mozart name lives on, and this is due in large part to the many vital influences in early years of Mozart's life.

²⁷ Borowitz, "Salieri and the 'Murder' of Mozart.", 264-266.

²⁸ Johnson, *Mozart*, 4.

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