Biography of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Composer (1756-1791)

Many modern day critics, scholars, and composers have revered Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart as the greatest composer of all time; he has been regarded as the composer of composers. Born on January 27, 1756, in Salzburg (in present-day Austria), his family called him “Wolfgang” or more affectionately, “Wolfgang.” As a grown man he would sign himself “Wolfgang Amadé Mozart” or just “Mozart.”

Not much is known of Mozart’s very early life. His father, Leopold Mozart, was one of Europe’s leading violin teachers. Leopold tutored Maria Anna (his daughter and Mozart’s sister) who the family called Nannerl. When she reached the age of seven, Leopold began to instruct her on the clavier (a musical instrument with a keyboard), and he soon discovered that she had a gift for music. He continued her studies, challenging her with a series of exercises that he wrote in her notebook. Fortunately, Mozart’s curiosity was piqued by this. As Nannerl later recalled, the three-year-old Wolfgang, “often spent much time at the clavier, picking out thirds, which he was always striking, and his pleasure showed that it sounded good.”

Recognizing his children’s special abilities, Leopold began to devote extra effort to their education, emphasizing musical instruction. When Leopold realized that his son could play the piano at such an early age, he quit his job entirely to ensure that Mozart would have the best musical education possible. As their teacher, Leopold became a loving, if exacting, taskmaster. Some time later, he would describe to a correspondent how from a very early age Nannerl and Wolfgang had learned to wear the “iron shirt” of discipline.

Mozart’s father had financial interests in his son’s fame and young Wolfgang was soon touring as a child prodigy all over Europe. From age six he was exhibited to the most famous courts of Europe, learned musicians, and the public. This groundwork ensured that Mozart would be well known by the time he began creating his own musical compositions.

Wolfgang’s achievements came in rapid succession. For example, at age three he learned a minuet and trio within a half hour, and he mastered his first musical composition within only thirty minutes as well. By the age of four, he was perfecting ballads for neighbors and friends. By the age of 11 he had written his first true opera, Apollo et Hyacinthus (Apollo and Hyacinth), and at 14 his opera Mitridate, rè di Ponto (Mithridates, King of Pontus) was performed in Milan.

Upon returning to Salzburg after a long sojourn abroad in 1773, Mozart was employed as a court composer by the ruler of Salzburg. His low salary in that position and the limited demand for operas (which he longed to compose) led him to resign in 1777 and begin traveling again, accompanied by his mother this time. He sought positions in Augsburg, Mannheim, Paris and Munich, but had no luck. The low point of the trip came in Paris, when Mozart’s mother Anna Maria took ill and died in 1778. In 1779 he returned home to Salzburg and took up a better position as a court organist and concertmaster.

In 1781 Mozart travelled to Vienna at the behest of his employer, the Archbishop Colloredo, Prince of Salzburg. He was offended by his reception there, and as a result had a falling out with the Archbishop. Mozart decided to stay in Vienna and make his living as a freelance performer and composer. This was a highly unusual step for a musician to take at the time. At the beginning it paid off. His fame and fortune grew by leaps and bounds after the great success of his opera, Die Entführung aus dem Serail (The Abduction from the Seraglio), which premiered on July 16, 1782 at the Burgtheater in Vienna. That same year Mozart was married to Constanze Weber, a singer. The couple had six children together, but only two survived past infancy.
Despite the favorable reception for *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, Mozart spent most of the next four years composing concertos, mainly for piano. This was a period of financial success, and the Mozarts spent lavishly. In 1784, Mozart became a Freemason, a decision that would greatly affect his later opera, *The Magic Flute*. In 1785, he began his fruitful collaboration with librettist Lorenzo da Ponte, successfully premiering *La Nozze de Figaro (The Marriage of Figaro)* in 1786. They then collaborated on *Don Giovanni (Don Juan)* which premiered in Prague in 1787 to acclaim. Unfortunately Mozart's father did not live to witness that success; he died in Salzburg on May 28, 1787.

At this time Mozart’s financial situation grew dire, and the family was forced to move to humbler lodgings. Mozart began to borrow money and to travel in an attempt to drum up funds. His compositional output slowed, although the last of the da Ponte collaborations, *Cosi fan tutte (Women Are Like That)* premiered in 1790.

The final year of Mozart’s life proved to be a time of great productivity: the family’s financial situation began to improve and he composed one of his most admired works, *Die Zauberflöte (The Magic Flute)*. This opera was greatly influenced by Mozart’s interest in the Baroque masters (Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frideric Handel). His study of their scores inspired Mozart’s Baroque style, and had a powerful influence on his own personal musical language in fugal passages of *The Magic Flute*. Additionally, *The Magic Flute* was a culmination of a period of increasing involvement with his close friend and theatrical entrepreneur, Emanuel Schikaneder. As the librettist of *The Magic Flute*, Schikaneder worked closely with Mozart (on occasion offering advice, which the composer typically adhered to).

His last great opera opened in Vienna on the evening of September 30, 1791. He conducted the first two performances while ill, but his condition did not become serious until November. He died after the opera's 67th performance, on December 5, 1791. He was buried in an unmarked grave according to Viennese tradition and was survived by his wife Constanze and their two sons.

Much speculation has surrounded the circumstances of Mozart’s death, and in spite of the many theories, none have been proven. It has been said that Mozart was poisoned, that he worked himself to death, or even that he died of alcoholism. However, the most widely accepted theory is that he died of kidney failure due to infection, which was compounded by rheumatic fever. The practice of bloodletting is believed to have further weakened him. It has also been recorded that a streptococcal epidemic invaded Vienna at the time, killing a number of people; this cannot be ruled out.

Memorial services and concerts upon his death were well-attended, but Mozart’s reputation truly soared after his death. He was the most prolific, influential and enduring composer of the Classical era. In total, he composed over six hundred works, many acknowledged as pinnacles of symphonic, concertante, chamber, piano, operatic, and choral music. The Enlightenment period is said to have affected his composition as much as music he had heard in England and Paris as a young artist. Up until this period, composers were often just highly-skilled servants to the church or royal courts, but Mozart’s exposure to the ideals of independence and equality caused him to desire to sever his obligation to that hierarchy. For example, *The Marriage of Figaro*, epitomized the new ways of thinking by giving servants a central role. Previously, servants were comic figures to be laughed at, but Mozart presented them as equally worthy of serious attention as any noble aristocrat. His influence on later musicians is immeasurable; to this day, studying his scores is an essential part of the training of any classical musician.

Sources: biographyshelf.com, mozartproject.org, balletmet.org, dictionary.com, incurable-insomniac.blogspot.com, wikipedia.com