

IT'S CRAZY, IT'S FUN, IT'S..

BRINGING OPERA TO NEW  
ZEALAND SCHOOLS SINCE 1990

# CLASS ACT OPERA

Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn Oo Pp Qq Rr Ss Tt Uu Vv Ww Xx Yy Zz

At eight in the evening of 27<sup>th</sup> January 1756 there arrived what many musicians regard as the greatest gift so far bestowed on mankind –

## *Johann Chrysostomus Wolfgang Theophilus Gottlieb Amadeus Mozart*

*Born 27<sup>th</sup> January 1756*

*Died 5<sup>th</sup> December 1791*

Johann (John) was a respected musician's name as well as his fathers and maternal grandfather. As for "Chrysostomus" could anybody vie with Mozart as a "golden mouth". Gottlieb" became the Greek "Theophilus" and the Latin "Amadeus" is "beloved by God" He went by "Wolfgang" all of his life. It was the name of his maternal grandfather and Wolfgangsee Lake was the district whence his mother came from.



Because of the mysterious perfection of his music and because the man's personality is so elusive, Mozart, of all opera composers is one of the most interesting. His life was a paradox, so rich in music yet so poor and bereft of material wealth and acclaim. There have been numerous plays films such as Amadeus and books written about Mozart. What was Mozart really like? Many would say that he is the composer of all composers, the creator of sublime music. Quote- "no matter how much one tries to rewrite or change Mozart's music, one could only make it worse, never better

Mozart was born on the 17th January 1756, the 7<sup>th</sup> child of Leopold and Anna-Maria Mozart. Of his 6 siblings only 1 sister survived infancy. Older by 4 ½ years his sister Maria-anna was really Wolfgang's contemporary in talent.

Mozart listened to his sister Maria Anna as she practiced the harpsichord, and at age four as he listened, his progress was phenomenal. He began to compose before he could write, wrote his first minuet at age six, and his first opera at age 11.

In 1762 to exploit this type of talent, the family set off firstly to Munich and then onto Vienna. In Vienna especially, the courts and the major houses opened their doors to Mozart. People were agog to see such a prodigy. Maria Theresa, the empress of Hungary- Austria granted the family of Mozart an audience at the palace in Schonbrunn and she allowed the boy to sit on her lap. Mozart flung his arms around her and planted a big sloppy kiss on her face.

In a letter about Mozart's sister dated 1763, an admirer writes of Mozart " her brother who will be seven in January is a phenomenon that one can scarcely believe one's ears and eyes. This child thinks nothing of performing the most difficult pieces with perfect accuracy, he writes and composes with marvelous faculty not needing to go to the harpsichord to find the chords. You will guess he has no difficulty in playing any piece you give him in a different key and in any time signature you specify. One example was when a woman asked him to accompany an Italian cavatina. She sang it to him and Mozart asked her to repeat it.

He accompanied her with two hands perfectly and then proceeded to accompany her ten more times each time with a totally different accompaniment. In fact he would have asked her to do it 20 times if she had not begged him to stop

The next four years was a time of constant touring for the Mozart family. Imagine the feelings of the seven to eleven year-old boy travelling around Europe into the most opulent of houses feted at the most lavish tables, charming ladies of the courts and impressing all with his talent.

Mozart was regularly ill during these years but he became a legend and this boy had musical experience and talent far beyond anything anyone had seen before.

The first Mozart opera to be performed, *Bastien and Bastienne* premiered on the first of October 1768 in a friendly intimate atmosphere complementary to its tale of mystic love. Mozart was 12.

Upon the success of *Bastien and Bastienne* Mozart was back in the good books. There is a lovely story regarding the *Miserere*, composed by Gregorian *allegri* in the sixteenth century, which was the exclusive property of the Sistine chapel. Copying it was forbidden. Many had tried in vain to write it down. Wolfgang heard it twice and wrote the entire nine-part work out perfectly on a piece of paper he had hidden in his hat.

By this stage Mozart had written 30 symphonies, five violin concertos, numerous concert arias, 13 string quartets, eight piano concertos, motets, operas and concertos for other instruments. In fact he was already up to K220 in his writings. Mozart was now 19. He spent the next years struggling, writing prolifically in between trying to find enough to eat and this became his common cry throughout the rest of his life.

Among the significant events in Mozart's life was the death of his mother and the meeting of the love of his life Aloysius Weber, a singer of great coloratura ability. She was the inspiration of many of his operas. She was the first Donna Anna in *don Giovanni*, the first Ilia in *Idomeneo* and he wrote numerous operatic and concert arias for her. It is said that the queen of the night was based on her as she ended up leaving Mozart and marrying someone else. The queen of the night is wicked and manipulative and has to sing the most fiendishly difficult arias. What did Mozart really have in mind?

Mozart began to write more to please himself rather than his audiences. He became more interested in the development of the plot as well as the music, a significant change from operas up until then.

Mozart married Aloysius's sister, Constanza about this time. Constanza was said to be scatty and flighty but was in fact a positive influence on him. Among her many contributions, Constanza made it her crusade to get all her husband's music published, most of which had not been published prior to his death.

Mozart had a tireless champion of his music, in Constanza. Her support of him was hindered largely due to her own health, weakened by six babies in six years, only two of whom survived more than a few hours. It is interesting to note that their two surviving sons never married, and therefore Mozart has no direct descendants.

he writes of her to his father " she is not ugly but not at all beautiful, her beauty consists entirely in two little dark eyes and a lovely figure. She's not witty but has enough common sense to be able to fulfill the duties as a wife and mother"

Mozart wrote his best operas during the last ten years of his life the great operas we remember today were all written when he was between the ages of 25 and 35. These include *Zaide*, *Idomeneo*, *Il Seraglio*, the marriage of Figaro, *don Giovanni*, *Così fan Tutte*, the magic flute and *la Clemenza di Tito*. They are fine examples of the styles of the day. Opera buffa, that is comic opera, opera seria, dramatic like *don Giovanni*, and singspiel, an opera that includes spoken dialogue.

What is it about Mozart's music that is so good? It is for his later operas and writings that he became not merely a brilliant composer but one who seems to stand on sacred ground. Chopin says that it is because Mozart never turns his back on his basic principles. Each voice in Mozart has its own line, which, while according perfectly with other voices, forms its own melody that is almost perfect in manner.

In other words Mozart has a faultless technique in writing his music. He uses counterpoint easily and builds layers up within the music. He knew every part and wrote his music out like it was a letter not checking that each part fitted with the next, he could hear it in his head. Even in the heaviest, and most dramatic piece there is still an element of lightness about his music.

Musicologists and composers use superlatives to describe Mozart's music and yet he struggled financially until the day he died.

Perhaps Mozart's elusiveness is one reason why he died a pauper. His music seems so simple in some ways and yet it is so difficult. But the other main reason behind his struggle is his inability and reluctance to fit into a mould that people made for him

Unfortunately for Mozart, fate dealt him many cruel blows, he was naïve, childlike, careless of the ways of etiquette, pomp and ceremony in which the courts were so steeped. The deadly cycle of debts continued, Constanza was always pregnant and they lost child after child in infancy and his father, Leopold, his mentor and his nemesis died suddenly, a profound shock to him. He was worn out and his star continued to wane as the fickle public lost interest.

Some good news arrived in the form of the libretto of the magic flute. This was significant to Mozart as it told the story of the Freemasons whose society he had joined some years before. It was an opportunity to write one more German opera but not for the court rather for the people.

During the last months of his life Mozart had to complete the magic flute as well as fulfilling a mysterious unsigned commission, for a requiem, and a new commission for another opera, his last Italian opera, *La clemenza di Tito* which was written in 18 days from start to finish.

Mozart traveled to Prague writing *La clemenza di Tito* on route. This premiered on the 6th of September 1791. He then hurried back and completed the magic flute which premiered triumphantly on the 30<sup>th</sup> September to a packed audience consisting of townspeople rather than ladies and gentlemen of the court. This was his last opera. He then composed the clarinet concerto K622. Note how much he wrote in his short life. With the help of his pupil Franz Xaver Süssmayr he tried in vain to complete the requiem. Later his pupil would finish it using Mozart's notes.

On the 4th of December 1791 his condition deteriorated and at one o'clock in the morning of the 5<sup>th</sup> of December at the age of 35 he died. He received the simplest of funerals with a few friends. Constanza was too ill to be present: the body was placed in a communal grave on the outskirts of town without even a cross.

Written by Susan Boland of **class act opera**