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WOLFGANG AMADÉ MOZART

LETZTER BRIEF AN LEOPOLD MOZART

4. APRIL 1787

Faksimile der originalen Handschrift
mit einer Einführung von Ulrich Leisinger

Konzerte
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Museen

IMPRESSUM

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PREFACE

“As death (strictly considered) is the true ultimate destination of our life, I have therefore, over the past few years, made myself so familiar with this true, best friend of man that its image not only no longer holds anything terrifying for me, but also a great deal that calms and comforts! And I thank my God that he has granted me the good fortune to create the opportunity (you understand me) to come to know it as the key to our true blessedness.”

These famous words stem from a letter that Wolfgang Amadé Mozart wrote to his father Leopold on 4 April 1787. They were made public for the first time in the spring of 1829 when the *Biographie W. A. Mozart's* by Georg Nikolaus Nissen appeared in print, three years after Nissen, the second husband of Constanze Mozart, had died in Salzburg following a stroke. Nissen was an avid collector of materials relating to Mozart. Large parts of the biography are a compilation of contemporary reports on the composer's life and works. Their origins were often not stated explicitly in the book and this, early on, led to accusations of plagiarism. The most precious and at that time still unexploited source of information was the correspondence of the Mozart family, which had been in the possession of Mozart's sister Maria Anna since 1787. Soon after they settled in Salzburg in August 1824, the Nissens built up a trustful relationship with her. Before, Maria Anna and Constanze had only exchanged a handful of greetings in letters and had met one single time in the summer of 1783, when Mozart finally presented his beloved wife to his sister and father, who had consented to their marriage in August 1782 only with great hesitation.

Maria Anna von Berchtold zu Sonnenburg presented all letters by Leopold and Wolfgang to her sister-in-law.

During her lifetime, Constanze entrusted most of them to her sons from her marriage with Wolfgang, Carl Thomas (1784–1858) and Franz Xaver Wolfgang (1791–1844), who bequeathed them later to the Dommusikverein and Mozarteum founded in 1841, the immediate predecessor of the Internationale Stiftung Mozarteum. Since 1858, Salzburg has been the permanent home of the largest repository of letters of the Mozart family, which are one of the most vivid civic sources concerning the musical and cultural history of Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century. But not all letters once in the hands of Mozart's sister and widow have come to Salzburg. Constanze and later her sons felt free to present some originals to contemporaries who showed particular interest in Mozart. These pieces were chosen carefully from the funds and, from the Mozarteum's point, sadly included some of the most charming pieces such as the few letters that Mozart wrote to Constanze and to his cousin Maria Anna Thekla, the “Bäse,” in Augsburg.

Among the pieces that were separated at some point was also Mozart's last surviving letter to his father of 4 April 1787. In his collection *Mozarts Briefe. Nach den Originalen herausgegeben* (Leipzig, 1865) Ludwig Nohl claimed that the letter was in the possession of Josephine Baroni-Cavalcabò, who actually did not live to see the publication. The information is nevertheless trustworthy and suggests that Baroni-Cavalcabò, sole heiress of Franz Xaver Mozart, must have regarded this letter as her private property. She did not send it to Salzburg to fulfill her deceased lover's legacy; perhaps it had been a present she had received during his lifetime. In the 1840s or 1850s, Josef Hauer, a medical doctor and Mozart enthusiast in Oed, Lower Austria, was able to prepare an accurate handwritten

copy, which is now located in the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin.

It is generally known among Mozart aficionados that the letters exchanged between father and son from 1777 to 1782 reflect serious differences of opinions. These have led to psychological interpretations, most prominently in the biographies written by Wolfgang Hildesheimer in 1977 and Maynard Solomon in 1995. The most powerful, since largely subconscious expression of this cliché was equating Leopold Mozart and the Commendatore from *Don Giovanni* in Miloš Forman's brilliant adaptation of Peter Shaffer's play *Amadeus*.

From a distance of several decades it appears, however, that these interpretations overshoot their objectives, largely ignoring that Leopold was always Wolfgang's principal influence. Leopold had not only trained and guided him in his youth, but accompanied the entire development and career with lively interest, amazement, and – sometimes – bewilderment. The relationship between father and son was extraordinarily close in Wolfgang's youth and the firm ties were alluded to by both parties even in the serious crisis of 1778 when Wolfgang delayed his departure from Mannheim to Paris as long as possible. On 12 February 1778, Leopold complained about Wolfgang's hesitation to move on to Paris to fulfill the goals of the trip, either to secure a permanent post abroad or to earn money to support the family:

“Great and merciful God, for me those moments of contentment are past in which you, as a child and in boyhood, did not go to bed without standing on the chair and singing to me the *oragnia figatafa* [a bedtime song on fantasy words that

Mozart had invented at an early age], kissing me frequently – and right on the point of my nose – and saying to me that when I became old, you would keep me safe from all air in a capsule with a glass front so that you would always have me with you and keep me in honour.”

In his response of 7 March 1778, Wolfgang confirmed, somewhat belatedly, that he consented in following his father's advice:

“Papa comes next after God: as a child, that was my motto or axiom, and I still stand by it even now.”

The letters that Wolfgang wrote to Salzburg both in the summer of 1778 after the sudden death of his mother and in the early phase of the settlement in Vienna in 1781 in which he justified himself at length can be seen as born out of bad conscience combined with the hope of reconciliation. But despite all disputes (and a noteworthy amount of stubbornness on both sides) father and son never broke up, unlike Leopold Mozart and his mother Anna Maria Sulzer who even entered into lawsuits.

Like many of Mozart's letters to his father from the Vienna years the one of 4 April 1787 starts with an apology, this time with the regret that the mother of Nancy Storace, Mozart's first Susanna, had missed the opportunity to deliver a letter on her travel from Vienna to London where Nancy had just been engaged at the King's Theatre. Wolfgang found this particularly annoying since already his previous letter from Prague, where he had conducted *Le nozze di Figaro* and where he received the commission to write *Don Giovanni*, had already been lost in the post. Then follows some

musical gossip: During the Lent season several mutual acquaintances and friends had visited Vienna; these included the German-born oboist and composer Johann Christian Fischer. The Mozarts had met him in the Netherlands in 1765–66, but Mozart distanced himself from his positive childhood remembrances stating that Fischer did not just play in an old-fashioned manner, but that he lacked a good tone as well as musical taste.

Abruptly, Mozart switched into a serious mood, telling his father that he had been informed by a third party – we don’t know by whom – that Leopold had fallen seriously ill despite his regular assertions to the contrary. In the letters of his final years, Leopold rarely, if ever complained about health issues, but mainly about loneliness and the winter cold in the apartment in the *Tanzmeisterhaus* that was far too big for one single person and the grandchild he raised, Leopold Alois Pantaleon, the first-born child of his daughter Maria Anna.

To modern ears, Mozart’s words of comfort sound somewhat formulaic and one therefore wonders about possible sources of inspiration. But a keyword search of the central images leads to the surprising result that Mozart’s thoughts are as original as they are deep. Neither can obvious models be identified for his position that “death [...] is the true ultimate destination of our life” nor for the idea that death is “the key to our blessedness.”

It has been surmised that Mozart’s thoughts were shaped by the mindset of Freemasonry to which Wolfgang was strongly committed; Mozart even introduced his father to their rites during his visit in Vienna in 1785. This assumption is triggered by aspects of friendship

and philanthropy that we associate with Mozart’s mention that death was the “true, best friend of man.” One could also interpret the somewhat obscure sign that Mozart, quite unusually, places right after the abbreviation *manu propria* as two overlapping triangles. This symbol is, for example, found in Leopold Mozart’s “Masonic” letter to Pasquale Artaria of 8 July 1785 and in Wolfgang’s entry into the album of fellow Mason Johann Georg Kronauer, written on 30 March 1787, that is not even a week before the letter to his father. According to the musicologist Manfred Hermann Schmid the symbol was explained by Joseph Franz Count Thun in 1784 “in a statement concerning the reform of the lodges as ‘the Masonic hieroglyphic triangle,’ where the triangle pointing upwards has the quality of *activity*, the one pointing downwards the quality of *passivity*.” Yet it would, nevertheless, be overly hasty to reduce this letter to an expression of Masonic ideals. Freemasonry as a covenant of friendship (rather than a religion) is grounded in the present and, therefore, the idea of death as the true ultimate destination of human life could perhaps pass as an individual interpretation but does not reflect a Masonic ideal.

Other writers believed that Moses Mendelssohn’s *Phädon oder über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele* was Mozart’s primary source because, in his small personal library he kept, at the time of his death, a copy of this influential enlightened adaptation of Platon’s dialogue. Indeed, the second of the three dialogues in Mendelssohn’s book contains reflections by Simmias, a disciple of Socrates, that show some similarity of thought:

“My ideas of the deity, of virtue, of the worth of man, and of the relation in which he stands to

God, do not permit me to entertain any farther doubts of my destiny. The reliance on a future life solves all those difficulties, and brings those truths, of which we are convinced in a manifold manner, again into harmony.”

But in the end, this accordance does not go beyond the literary parallels for Mozart’s claim that death was the “true, best friend of man” in Edward Young’s then highly acclaimed *Night Thoughts* (Night the Seventh), first published in the 1740s and soon translated into German:

“O Death! Come to my bosom, thou best gift of heav’n! Best friend of man!”

Also, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s essay *Wie die Alten den Tod gebildet* (How the Ancients Represented Death) develops similar thoughts as Mozart who asserted that for him the image of death held nothing terrifying, but a great deal that calms and comforts:

“The condition of being dead has nothing terrible, and in so far as dying is merely the passage to being dead, dying can have nothing terrible. [...] But is it then the dying, is it Death, which has caused the terror? Nothing less; Death is the desired end of all these horrors [...].”

Even if Mozart as a man of letters may have been inspired by certain literary models he formed them into deep and personal thoughts:

“I never lay myself down to sleep without recollecting that perhaps (young though I may be) I may no longer exist the next day – and surely

none of all those who know me will be able to say that I am sullen or sad in my comportment – and for this blessedness I thank my creator every day and wish the same to all my fellow men. –”

We do not know how Leopold responded to Wolfgang’s attempt of consolation. In his last letter to his daughter written on 10 and 11 May 1787, less than three weeks short of his death on 28 May, he stated: “I am no worse, praise God, and am placing my hope on more constant weather so that I can get out into the fresh air.” In his still remarkably firm handwriting he mentioned that he was currently short of money due to expensive medical bills and described briefly some symptoms of his illness (possibly gastric cancer), among them great weakness and a pulsation below his stomach. Except for greetings to some mutual friends the last words he wrote to his daughter and son-in-law were: “I kiss you both wholeheartedly, greet the children and am, as long as I may yet live, your sincere father Mozart m[anu] p[ropria].”

Wolfgang confirmed to his “dearest sister” on the second of June 1787 that he had received the message of Leopold’s death: “You can easily imagine how painful the sad news of the sudden demise of our dearest father was to me, as the loss is the same both of us.”

In his 1977 biographical essay, Wolfgang Hildesheimer dealt at length with Mozart’s letter of 4 April 1787, raising serious doubts about its authenticity and asserting that, even if authentic, it amounted to little more than a paraphrase of *Phädon*. Fortunately, the question of authenticity is now settled by the re-appearance of the original, but hitherto not even photographs of the letter were available for scholars. The

author found it strange that Mozart left no further remarks on this crucial event while he wrote, just a few days later, a tragicomic poem on his deceased pet starling. He therefore searched for a hidden musical response to his father's death – and found it in *Ein musikalischer Spass* (*A Musical Joke*), the first work that Mozart, after receiving the dispatch of his father's death, entered into the catalogue of his musical compositions. Hildesheimer suggested that Wolfgang ridiculed incompetent composers in this piece and asked “whether the inspiration for a musical joke after his father's death was a coincidence or not.” And he also had an answer to this question: “It does seem certain that the death of Leopold Mozart, for years such a dominant figure in his son's life, must have released some unconscious response, and it also seems probable that it was a feeling of liberation.”

This interpretation, which Hildesheimer himself classified as “almost macabre,” falls short of reality though, particularly if Mozart indeed had previously reacted – as scholars believe for convincing reasons – to the loss of his mother in July 1778 and the death of Clemens August Count Hatzfeld in early 1787 with the Sonata in A minor, K. 310, and the Rondo in the same key, K. 511, respectively. Our advanced knowledge of Mozart's handwriting and use of paper types makes it clear that at least the first movement of *A Musical Joke* had been composed and probably also been performed in 1785 or 1786! In his obsessive construct of a long-lasting father-son conflict Hildesheimer failed to look just one line farther in the *Verzeichnüß aller meiner Werke*, to the song *Abendempfindung an Laura*, K. 523, a sensitive, if not sentimental premonition of death. That Mozart was occupied with this poem already weeks before 24 June 1787 when he entered the finished

composition in his thematic catalogue can be derived from his little poem on the pet starling, where a line from *Abendempfindung* (“Schenk auch du ein Tränchen mir”/“Shed, you also, a little tear for me”) was paraphrased. It thus appears that Mozart honoured the memory of his father by one of his most deeply felt vocal compositions rather than by the silly violin cadenza in the slow movement, the cacophonous horns in the Minuet, let alone the cruel disaccords in the last measures of the finale of *A Musical Joke*, the true origins and intentions of which remain a mystery.

Likewise mysterious are most of the owners of the precious letter during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Viennese lawyer Franz Ritter von Heintl (1796–1881) had possession of the letter in 1877; it was later acquired by the Musikhistorisches Museum of Wilhelm Heyer in Cologne. The Museum's collection was dispersed in four auctions held in Berlin between 1926 and 1928, after which the whereabouts of the letter became unknown. A custom-made cloth-covered box leads us to assume that the manuscript passed through the hands of Albi Rosenthal (1914–2004), the most renowned dealer of music-related autographs in the twentieth century. The letter finally found a new home with Maurice Bernard Sendak (1928–2012) in the US. Sendak is best known for his fanciful illustrated children's books, but, from 1980 on, he also worked as an imaginative stage and costume designer.

Given that Sendak called Mozart one of his “Gods,” along with literary figures such as Heinrich von Kleist and Herman Melville, it comes as no surprise that the composer received special attention. Sendak went as far as to say: “I know that if there's a purpose for life, it was for me to hear Mozart.” He strongly admired

Kleist for his sense of destruction: “All of Kleist’s works is there as imbalance in Nature, but in Mozart, there is the most quintessential perfect balance.”

Sendak was a passionate collector, but he collected not for collecting’s sake, but because the objects “give me back something ... like talismans.” Over time he acquired no less than three letters of the Mozart family, one letter from the first tour to Italy concerning the cast of *Mitridate* (BD 200), a letter from Wolfgang to Constanze written in Prague on the trip to Berlin in April 1789 (BD 1091) and, most importantly, Mozart’s letter to his father of 4 April 1787 (BD 1044). Since Sendak enjoyed collecting and buying at auctions so much, he had considered to have his estate sold at an auction as well. In the end, Sendak bequeathed the Mozart letters with many rare books and literary items to The Rosenbach Museum & Library in Philadelphia. The Rosenbach finalized the sale of the letters to the Mozarteum Foundation, after determining that both its own collection and the public were better served by this sale. All three letters arrived in Salzburg in January 2020 to be reunited with the Mozart family letters from which they had been separated more than 175 years ago. Compared with this long span of time, the Covid-19 pandemic has only meant a small additional delay in presenting this fabulous and extremely touching acquisition to the public.

Ulrich Leisinger

WOLFGANG AMADÉ MOZART TO LEOPOLD MOZART IN SALZBURG

Vienna, 4 April 1787

Mon tres cher Père! – –

It is very irksome to me that, due to the foolishness of Storace, my letter did not reach your hands; – among the things in the letter was that I hoped you had received my last letter – but since you make no mention at all of what I wrote (it was the 2nd letter from Prague), I do not know what I should think; – it is quite possible that some servant at Count Thun's may have seen fit to put the postage money in his pocket; – I would of course rather have paid double postage money than discover my letter was in the wrong hands. – This Lent Ramm and 2 Fischers were here – the bass and the oboist from London. – If the latter did not play better during the time that we knew him in Holland than he does now, he certainly does not deserve the *renommée* that he has. – This, however, just between the two of us. – at that time I was at an age in which I was not capable of making a judgement – I am only able to remember that he pleased me exceptionally, as he did everyone; – one will find this quite obvious if one assumes that taste has changed extraordinarily – he will be playing according to an old school. – but No! – he plays, in a word, like a miserable pupil – young Andrè, who learnt with Fiala, plays a thousand times better – and then his concertos ! – of his own composition – each ritornello lasts quarter of an hour – then the Hero appears – lifts one leaden foot after the other – and then thumps them down on the earth again in alternation – his tone comes completely through the nose – and his tenutos are a tremulant on the organ. Is this the picture you would have called to mind? – and yet it is nothing but the truth – but a truth which I am telling only you. –

Page 2

I have just this moment heard news that leaves me very downcast – all the more so since I was able to suppose from your last letter that you are, praise God, in very good health; – but now I hear that you are truly ill! – It is surely not necessary to tell you with how much longing I look forward to comforting news direct from yourself; – and this is also my firm hope – although I have made it my habit always to picture to myself the worst in all things – As death (strictly considered) is the true ultimate destination of our life, I have therefore, over the past few years, made myself so familiar with this true, best friend of man that its image not only no longer holds anything terrifying for me, but also a great deal that calms and comforts! – And I thank my God that he has granted me the good fortune to create the opportunity (you understand me) to come to know it as the key to our true blessedness. – I never lay myself down to sleep without recollecting that perhaps (young though I may be) I may no longer exist the next day – and surely none of all those who know me will be able to say that I am sullen or sad in my comportment – and for this blessedness I thank my creator every day and wish the

same to all my fellow men. – in the letter (which Storace packed away) I had already made a statement to you on this point (on the occasion of the sad demise of my dearest, best friend, Count von Hatzfeld) – he was just 31 years old, like me – I do not feel sorry for him – but quite certainly and heartily feel sorry for myself and for all who knew him as well as I did. – I hope and wish that you may be in better health as I write this; but if, contrary to all expectations,

Page 3

you are no better, I ask you by not to conceal it from me, but to write, or have someone write, to me with the truth so that I can be in your arms as soon as is humanly possible; I swear this to you by all that – is holy to us. – Yet I hope to receive from you soon a letter full of consolation, and in this pleasant hope I am joined by my wife and Carl in kissing your hands 1000 times, and I am eternally,

Vienna, 4 April 1787.

your most obedient son
W. A. Mozart m[anu] p[ropria] ☒

Page 4

À
Monsieur
Monsieur Leopold de Mozart
Maître de La Chapelle de
S. A. R.
à
Salzbourg :

NACHWEISE UND LITERATUR

Briefe der Familie Mozart

Mozarts Briefe. Nach den Originalen herausgegeben von Ludwig Nohl, Salzburg 1865

Deutsch/Englisch: *Mozart Briefe und Dokumente – Online-Edition*, herausgegeben von der Internationalen Stiftung Mozarteum, Salzburg (<https://dme.mozarteum.at/briefe-dokumente/>, 15. Juni 2020)

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Edward Young

Dr. Eduard Young's Klagen, oder Nachtgedanken über Leben, Tod, und Unsterblichkeit. In neun Nächten. Aus dem Englischen ins Deutsche übersetzt [...] und mit dem nach der letzten englischen Ausgabe abgedruckten Originale herausgegeben, von J. A. Ebert, Bd. 3, Braunschweig 1763