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On the 230th anniversary of Wolfgang Amadé Mozart's death on 5 December

This coming Sunday marks the 230th anniversary of Wolfgang Amadé Mozart's death, which brought the composition of his final work, the moving Requiem K626, to an abrupt end. He died in his apartment in the Rauhensteingasse in Vienna at 12.55 am on 5 December 1791, at the age of only 35. The coroner recorded the cause of death as "hitziges Frieselfieber" [severe miliary fever], a common diagnosis at the time, for want of a better. Mozart fell ill on 20 November 1791, and his condition continued to deteriorate for fifteen days. His symptoms are recorded as an acute feverish condition with inflamed, swollen joints, severe headache and aching limbs, sweating and vomiting. From today's medical perspective, Mozart's illness was most probably a severe case of rheumatic fever. One side effect is often myocardial inflammation, which may lead to heart failure. Apart from probable cardiac damage, in the autumn of 1791 Mozart suffered from a weakened immune system and exhaustion. Between July and November, he composed five substantial works, including the operas *La clemenza di Tito* and *The Magic Flute*, and the *Requiem*, which remained unfinished. Thus he drove himself to the physical and mental limit, and his lifestyle did the rest – hardly any exercise, copious drinking bouts, little sleep and excessive work, mainly during night hours. On top of all that were the constant money worries. Had Mozart had even a small chance of survival, it would have been thwarted by the therapies practised at the time. The dying patient was given emetics, his feverish, already exhausted body was further weakened by cold compresses and frequent blood-letting – within a short time more than two litres of blood were taken. Until two hours before his death, Mozart was fully conscious and lucid. He died from acute cardiovascular failure, in the presence of his wife Constanze, his sister-in-law Sophie and his doctor.

Mozart's legendary final work: the Requiem K626

Mozart's death is closely linked with his final work, the *Requiem*. The story behind the world-famous work is worthy of a Gothic novel. A young, highly successful composer dies at the age of 35, while engaged in writing a requiem. More still – a mysterious grey messenger appears, bringing him an anonymous commission. Constanze certainly had a hand in embroidering the story, describing how the work started and with what zeal her husband was working on it. One day, she said, in order to distract him she took him to the Prater park, where Wolfgang told her, weeping, that he was convinced he was writing this requiem for himself. A macabre premonition indeed!

What lies behind the story of the grey messenger? It begins in Stuppach castle in Lower Austria, where the young Countess Maria Anna von Walsegg had died on 14 February 1791, at the age of only 21. Her husband, Count Franz de Paula Anton Walsegg, was a great music-lover – and an even greater eccentric. He liked to pass himself off as a composer, and commissioned works from the most highly reputed masters in Vienna – works of which he then held performances in his castle, but under his own name. In the summer of 1791 he sent his steward to commission a requiem from Mozart, who actually had no time to carry out this



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commission. The première of *The Magic Flute* was imminent, and he had in addition the honourable if strenuous task of writing in a very short time an Italian opera, *La clemenza di Tito*, for the coronation of King Leopold II as King of Bohemia, and of conducting it in Prague. So Mozart demanded an exorbitant fee, in the hope of scaring off the client – but only a few days later, the messenger brought him half the fee as advance payment. Now he could not avoid accepting the commission for the *Requiem*, but he was unable to concentrate seriously on it until after the première of *The Magic Flute* on 30 September 1791. Constanze said that he worked day and night. Within only a few weeks, the score had grown to almost 100 pages. Accustomed to composing quickly, Mozart had started by writing down only the main parts, leaving the instrumentation for later.

The exertions of the previous months took their toll, however. Overworked and exhausted, he died of the "severe miliary fever" on 5 December 1791 after a brief illness. The *Requiem* remained unfinished. But Mozart's macabre premonition was fulfilled. At his funeral ceremony on 10 December 1791 in St Michael's Church, his friends performed the *Requiem* – though only the two movements which had been completed: *Requiem aeternam* and *Kyrie*.

The Salzburg Mozarteum Foundation illustrates the story behind the legendary *Requiem* in an explanatory video to mark the 230th anniversary of Wolfgang Amadé Mozart's death.

This video is available for media coverage here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu3_Zs2lRr4&t=2s

We would ask you to make appropriate mention of the Salzburg Mozarteum Foundation in any publication or broadcast.

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