

Great Rivalries in History: Mozart and Salieri

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Many years ago, in a suburb far, far away, I began the rewarding endeavor of learning to play the alto saxophone. I was young and impressionable, studying the instrument between fifth grade and my senior year of high school, and ultimately favored two musical tidbits to take with me into college: *Pomp and Circumstance* is an unnecessarily long piece of boredom and Salieri killed Mozart. The first of these, of course, is refreshed in my memory every spring as young high school students in America set forth on the wonderful journey called life. The second, for the most part, has never been called into question.

Once in a blue moon, my band teacher, despite her active routine of running and healthy addiction to Ovaltine, would fall ill, leaving the band class in disarray at the hands of an unmusical substitute teacher. In these coveted moments, a cart would be wheeled from the percussion closet and presented before us with two options: *A Christmas Story*¹ and *Amadeus*. While the former may have taught me the importance of BB gun safety, it was the latter that introduced me to what I presumed was an accurate depiction of both Antonio Salieri and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. But let's not get too far ahead of ourselves. Peter Shaffer can not be the only reason that the public has shunned Salieri as the conniving homicidal maniac who not only poisoned Mozart, but finished his Requiem Mass as well. The romanticizing of the late Classical dynamic duo's interactions is, in great part, the fault of the public memory's desire to have a rivalry and, above all else, a great story. The notion of an impoverished genius being murdered by his wealthier but less esteemed rival in a moment of jealousy and competition is almost too good to pass up, and is so cliché that it could be the main point of a box office hit.²

Not surprisingly, the interactions of Antonio Salieri and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart have been retained in the historical reception of both of their careers; however, there seems to be little

¹ A classic film!

² And indeed was, in both the play and movie forms of *Amadeus*.

primary evidence that supports the notion that Salieri poisoned Mozart, much less detested him to the popularly assumed level. Further exploring the rivalry between these composers, as well as noting the possible causes of Mozart's death, promotes a better understanding of the dramatization of the interactions of Salieri and Mozart. Upon review, the two composers held a certain level of respect for each other despite competing for the attention of the Viennese culture. Nonetheless, the public's interest for a good rivalry drew and expanded upon the notion that Salieri and Mozart were archrivals to the bitter end, and greatly distorted the public memory of both composers.

Perhaps the greatest image of Mozart, besides that of the young student meticulously doodling notes at a piano, is that of posthumous Mozart, being dumped into a mass grave on a rainy day to his Requiem, K. 626, in D minor.³ This was quite common for middle class citizens in late 18th century Vienna, but that's beside the point for Peter Shaffer, whose main attention is to draw at the hearts of the viewers, who assume that a mass grave is no place for Mozart to spend his deteriorating days. After all, there are many other bodies in the mass grave with Mozart; yet, over two centuries later the public views Mozart as a Classical period genius unfit for a common man's burial. Immediately the viewers are set up with angry questions of who put Mozart in such a situation and deprived him of a great last moment, all of which have been answered steadily throughout *Amadeus* (Hint: It was Salieri).

"Lord, make me a great composer," Salieri prays, "Let me celebrate Your glory through music and be celebrated myself. Make me famous through the world, dear God."⁴ This prayer, coupled with Salieri's confession of the murder of Mozart, is enough evidence for the audience to presume that the composer is a bit on the crazy side. In reality, no such commentary has ever

³ *Amadeus*, DVD. Directed by Milos Forman, Play and Screenplay by Peter Shaffer, 1984, Orion Pictures Corporation.

⁴ Ibid.

been documented, rather much to the contrary has. “There seems little question but that [Salieri] was a formidable professional opponent of Mozart,” one scholar notes, “although they seem to have been able to sustain correct and even superficially friendly social relationships.”⁵

Peculiarly, despite any professional animosity that may have existed, their personal animosity did not go so far as preventing Salieri from joining the burial processions of Mozart and remaining close with the family.⁶ The public memory of Salieri as the jealous competitor seems rooted in some truth, but incredibly exaggerated given the facts.

Nonetheless, there must be some truth in all romanticized stories, and it is unsafe to assume that Peter Shaffer is at fault for the dramatization of the Salieri and Mozart rivalry. In 1830, nearly forty years after Mozart’s death, Alexander Pushkin penned what appears to be the first diagram of the interactions of Salieri and Mozart. “I am envious, deeply, bitterly. – O God!” Salieri cries out, “But crown the temples of a low buffoon and idle fool? O Mozart, Mozart, Mozart!”⁷ The old adage may say to keep your friends close and your enemies closer, but this hardly seems to be set in reality. The dramatization and jealousy, even the language itself, seem so unrealistic that they’ve been unmatched by anything this particular scholar has seen save perhaps the James Bond film *Goldeneye*,⁸ but this too was a dramatization and a far cry from reality. Pushkin probably found his criticism of Salieri to be rather easy and socially acceptable, as it came only five years after Antonio’s death. Needless to say, dramatization is

⁵ Borowitz, Albert I. “Salieri and the ‘Murder’ of Mozart.” *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 59, no. 2 (Apr. 1973), pg. 270.

⁶ Ibid. pg. 273.

⁷ Pushkin, Alexander, translated: Werth, Alexander. “Mozart and Salieri” (play). *The Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. 7, no. 21 (Mar. 1929), pg. 763.

⁸ Two points: Scholar may be a stretch for me, but really, I’m trying. Also, recall that Alec Trevelyan is a close friend and competitor of James Bond but then attempts to murder him out of jealousy. Though, in this analogy, it would require Mozart to be the winner. In terms of public memory, I feel he is. (“For England, James?” “No, For me”).

easily done to the lives of dead or fictional characters, and it becomes all more acceptable in the Romantic period which arose around the time of the first “Mozart and Salieri” play.

Even so, the biggest point of Peter Shaffer’s *Amadeus* is the poisoning of Mozart, which is hardly created by Shaffer’s imagination. A century and a half prior, Pushkin depicted the poisoning of Mozart in his play, most likely toying with the dramatization of a historically based story that was fresh in the public’s mind. The draw of poisoning Mozart made the play far more exciting than the simple notion that Mozart died of a kidney disease, as some have hypothesized.⁹ Still, the poisoning idea is rooted in some elements of truth, as Mozart claimed he was dying of a gradual poisoning during the last months of his life.¹⁰ It is more likely, however, that the gradual degradation of his health was the fault of his kidneys, a gradual progression which would have seemed like poisoning to the medically uninformed. A series of documented childhood illnesses all point towards a persistent kidney disorder;¹¹ however, poor medical treatment and diagnosis in the 18th century in addition to the lack of a preserved body prevent the true cause of Mozart’s death from being known.

Unfortunately for historians, the most distorted realities arise from partial facts rather than whole or non-existent truths. Famed blues musician Robert Johnson suffered a similar fate, with a variety of rumors regarding his death: He sold his soul to the Devil to play guitar and his time was up, a jealous girlfriend poisoned him, he concocted a bizarre alcoholic drink that took his life, and so on. Musicians, thanks to the dramatic emphasis of theater in the post-enlightenment Romantic period, require a certain catch in the public memory that authenticates their music. For Johnson, his arrhythmic guitar style and death could only be credited to

⁹ Ibid 5, pg. 270.

¹⁰ Davies, Peter J., “Mozart’s Illnesses and Death – 2. The Last Year and the Fatal Illness.” *The Musical Times*, vol. 125, no. 1700 (Oct. 1984), pg. 554.

¹¹ Davies, Peter J., “Mozart’s Illnesses and Death – 1, The Illnesses, 1756 – 90.” *The Musical Times*, vol. 125, no. 1698 (Aug. 1984), pg. 438.

supernatural forces, while Mozart's death, at the most opportune time of his Requiem Mass, could not have been a natural occurrence, at least in the public's mindset. Appropriately, Pushkin was the first to label Mozart's death as superhuman, relating the composer to God multiple times in *Mozart and Salieri* and, in typical God-like fashion, sacrificing him at the hands of the jealous competitor.¹² The poisoning of Mozart was an ideal side-fact; that the composer had presumed this to be the cause of his deteriorating health allowed Pushkin to set an iconic story to Mozart's life. What larger than life musical super-genius, on par with God, as Pushkin implies, would die of kidney failure? Regardless of facts, the fortification of the poisoning theory was born and bred through the theater, as Pushkin's play was translated many times over, even adapted upon by Peter Shaffer in *Amadeus*. Oddly, on his deathbed, five years before Pushkin's play was complete, Salieri declared his innocence of any crime.¹³ The public didn't seem to care enough, as the codification of the poisoning theory was off and running by the time Pushkin's play was adapted in 1898.¹⁴ In public memory, it is far more interesting to say that Robert Johnson died a supernatural death and that Mozart was murdered by his archrival. Admittedly, it does make the story far more presentable on the 19th century stage; the court composer, Salieri, jealous of the far superior works of the peasant, Mozart, removes the composer at a young age to seek fame and fortune.

Ultimately, the reality of the story is too simple, perhaps even too normal for the adoring public to accept it as an authentic piece of Mozart history. Authentication of musicians through dramatic reflection is a fundamentally humanistic quality; a way in which we as humans devise how to turn a composer with elevated works into an icon. Even so, the two methods which normal people become icons are through folklore or socially popular works, the latter which

¹² I feel a Jesus reference coming!

¹³ Ibid 10, pg. 559.

¹⁴ Ibid.

classifies Mozart's case. Pushkin's *Mozart and Salieri* and Shaffer's *Amadeus* authenticate Mozart's altered history as a popular story, believable to the untrained viewer. In the popular imagination, true icons don't die from kidney failure; they die incredibly tragic and iconic deaths at the hands of archrivals or by mysterious circumstances. Even though all evidence supports the notion that Salieri played no part in Mozart's declining health, the public mindset requires an ulterior motive that would result in the great composer's untimely death.

Consequently, new questions arise from the presumption that Salieri poisoned Mozart: Who completed the Requiem Mass, why was there no autopsy regarding Mozart's death, and who, most of all, was the dark figure at the door that seemingly haunted Mozart with his request for a requiem? For mythological fanatics, the answers are all too simple and perhaps disappointing; however, the slow progression by which they were uncovered may take great part in the distortion of the Salieri and Mozart interactions. An early edition of *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* plays with the mystery of the piece, ignoring the identity of the mysterious patron, playing into the theory that Mozart was gradually poisoned, and even implying that Süssmayr, the student typically accredited with the completion of Mozart's requiem, did not have the talent nor the knowledge to have done such a work alone.¹⁵ Such documentation from a supposedly scholastic source, coupled with Pushkin's play three decades prior, firmly placed the myth on a much more intriguing level. Far more intriguing, of course, because the mysterious man was in fact sent by Count Franz Walsegg-Stuppach in an effort to claim Mozart's work as his own,¹⁶ the cause of Mozart's death (without an autopsy) was written off as "miliary fever"¹⁷ due to lack of medical knowledge, and, while the true answer may never

¹⁵ Pole, William. "The Story of Mozart's Requiem." *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, vol. 14, no. 314 (Apr. 1, 1869), pg. 39-41.

¹⁶ Ibid 10

¹⁷ Ibid 5, pg. 266

be known, there is no reason to doubt that Süssmayr completed the Requiem Mass. The facts are heavily lined up against the fiction, yet the myth continues. Sometimes, it seems, the myth is far too exciting for the truth to surpass.¹⁸

In conclusion, the interactions of Salieri and Mozart were greatly dramatized in the early Romantic period to create an iconic image around Mozart and the late Classical composer's tumultuous life. The edification of the poisoning theory has come through a variety of mediums, from Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* to Alexander Pushkin's *Mozart and Salieri*, and while rooted in some comments Mozart made towards the end of his life, contain no factual basis. As long as there are young and impressionable minds enjoying *Pomp and Circumstance* and the occasional band teacher sick day there will always be the romanticized story of Mozart, the underappreciated, iconic genius, and Salieri, the jealous court composer, determined to achieve fame and fortune at all costs. The relationship of Salieri and Mozart was professionally competitive, but otherwise demonstrated no evidence of the animosity that has come to embody the public memory of their interactions. In an effort to authenticate the iconic nature of Mozart, the public history has disregarded the evidence and produced a more socially exciting demonstration of the past, with a good character and his evil counterpart. And somewhere, in some far and distant suburb, the rivalry lives on for a high school band class, which will go on to believe that Salieri killed Mozart.

¹⁸ After all, a select few believe that Elvis Presley was abducted by aliens despite all reasonable evidence. Some myths are just better left to their believers, I guess.