Leopold Mozart, Piano Teacher?

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Abstract

This paper seeks to answer the question: How is it possible that the only piano teacher of the most brilliant keyboard virtuoso of the late 18th century, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, was a violinist? Firstly, we have to consider that this teacher, his father Leopold Mozart, was a much more complex and cultivated musician than is usually accepted. Profoundly attached to the ideas of the Enlightenment, he was able to give his son a solid education and prepare him for the requirements of the musical life of the period. It was a time when composition and performance were not separated, hence the training of a musician was very complex, quite different from standard practice nowadays, and had a special emphasis on accurate and expressive sight-reading, and on improvisation. The keyboard instrument was a necessary tool for every professional musician. Music was learned by playing piano, and piano playing was learned by studying music. Should such an approach be a desirable alternative to contemporary musical education, based mainly on reproduction and competition?

Keywords: Leopold Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, musical education, composition, piano playing

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was the most famous keyboard virtuoso of his time, being a brilliant player of the cembalo, clavichord, fortepiano, and particularly of the organ, but despite this there is no evidence, in any document we know, of him having studied piano with any teacher other than his father Leopold. Wolfgang used to play violin and viola very well, as would be expected considering that his father was both the most important violin pedagogue of the

time and the author of the most famous treatise on violin playing of the 18th century, but Wolfgang was a good singer as well; during the Mozart family's stay in London, in 1764-65, he took singing lessons with the famous castrato Giovanni Manzuoli, who later became one of his friends. During his journeys across Europe, he was in contact with great personalities such as Padre Martini, Johann Christian Bach, Johann Schobert, and Joseph Haydn, but while they exerted an influence on his development as a composer, they did not give him piano lessons. In this paper I will try to answer the question: why was the piano teacher of the most important keyboard virtuoso of the period a violinist? This situation is not unique in the history of music, of course. Chopin's piano teacher was also a violinist, and he encouraged a young Chopin to study the *Well-Tempered Clavier* and Mozart's *Piano Sonatas*, which proved to be a very good pedagogical method.

Early beginnings and strong principles

The Mozart family possessed their own keyboard instruments: a clavichord - an instrument in widespread use at the time, commonly used by composers as a tool in the creative process - and a harpsichord.[1] Probably Wolfgang's first experiences with these instruments were a sort of game for him, but we can imagine that the father noticed very quickly the remarkable talent of his son. We learn from Friedrich von Schlichtegroll, Wolfgang's first biographer, about the beginning of his musical education under his father:

> In his fourth year his father began, almost playfully, to teach him some minuets and other pieces on the piano, a matter that proved to be easy and pleasant to both the teacher and the student. He needed half an hour to learn a minuet, one hour for a longer piece, and then played it most elegantly and kept the tempo quite exactly. From then on, he progressed so rapidly that in his fifth year, he wrote little

[1] Siegbert Rampe, *Mozarts Claviermusik. Klangwelt und Aufführung praxis*, Bärenreiter, Kassel, 1995, p.46

pieces and played them for his father who would write them down on paper.[2]

In the following years Leopold dedicated his energy to teach and promote his children, especially his son. He even neglected his own career, which could perhaps have been even more brilliant considering his remarkable skills and erudition. Since he was not just a decent vice-Kapellmeister in a small provincial town, indeed he graduated the Jesuit School in Augsburg and studied Logic and Jurisprudence for a year at the University of Salzburg, all his life he was profoundly interested in philosophy and morality, being familiar with the ideas of the most important thinkers of the Enlightenment, Johann Christoff Gotsched and Christian Fürchtegot Gellert, and his children were raised in that spirit. He admired particularly Gellert's ideas regarding arts and aesthetics, and also had good knowledge of the most important contemporary treatises on music and those published previously. His vision and methods of education were in line with the Enlightenment, but adapted to the requirements – or challenges, to use a modern term – of musical life in the late 18th century.

Let's have a look at those challenges which a musician had to face, and the skills he had to acquire. In 1785, Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart describes what constitutes musical *genius* (at the time the term had a quite different meaning than in the Romantic era) as follows:

1. Enthusiasm for the beauty and greatness of music
2. A particular sensitivity for everything music expresses, meaning beauty and nobleness
3. A keen sense of hearing, able to enjoy harmony, but also to reject every false note
4. A natural sense of rhythm and measure

[2] Friedrich von Schlichtegroll, *apud* Free Information Brochure, Mozart. Stations of his Life as Reflected in his Piano Music, Wiener Urtext Edition, https://fdocuments.in/document/mozart-stations-of-his-life.html, 04.10.2019.

5. A unique love and bias for the art of sounds, above any other pleasure of life[3]

We can see that the list includes innate qualities like a sense of hearing and rhythm, but also gives weight to moral and spiritual qualities, usually acquired through education.

The training of a musician was very complex and quite different from standard practice nowadays. The musician had to play various instruments, to sight-read very well, and to improvise. One had to know how to realise a figured bass, know how to embellish a melodic line, and to be familiar with the most sophisticated contrapuntal techniques, so it was imperative to master a keyboard instrument. A special emphasis was put on accurate and expressive sight-reading, and improvisation.

From the period's treatises, we also learn about the qualities which resulted in a performance being highly appreciated by the audience:

1. Accuracy and clarity
2. Completeness, meaning to comply with the performance practices, with the composer's instructions, to choose the proper articulation and ornamentation
3. Fluency and lightness, avoiding any heaviness
4. Various dynamics, constantly being captivating and delightful
5. Expressiveness, every affect being properly communicated[4]

These were also Leopold's ideals; he stated them in his famous treatise, published in the same year Wolfgang was born, and he raised his son in accordance with them. We can identify them in many letters Wolfgang sent to his father, for example in 1777, when he was just 21 years old, he writes about two of his young pupils (the daughters of two celebrities, Andreas Stein, the famous piano maker,

[3] *Cf*. Siegbert Rampe, *op. cit*. p. 86.
[4] *Cf.* Siegbert Rampe, *op. cit.* p. 87.

and Christian Canabich, the Kapellmeister of the Mannheim orchestra):

> I began to teach [the sonata] to Madlle. Rose [Canabich] three days ago, and she has learned the Allegro. The Andante will give us most trouble, for it is full of expression, and must be played with accuracy and taste, the fortes and pianos given just as they are marked. She is very clever, and learns with facility. Her right hand is very good, but the left is unhappily quite ruined. I must say that I do really feel very sorry for her, when I see her labouring away till she is actually panting for breath; and this not from natural awkwardness on her part, but because, being so accustomed to this method, she cannot play in any other way, never having been shown the right one. I said, both to her mother and herself, that if I were her regular master, I would lock up all her music, cover the keys of the piano with a handkerchief, and make her exercise her right and left hand, at first quite slowly in nothing but passages and shakes etc., until her hands were thoroughly trained; and after that I should feel confident of making her a genuine pianist. They both acknowledged that I was right. It is a sad pity; for she has so much genius, reads very tolerably, has great natural aptitude, and plays with great feeling.[5]

About Andreas Stein's daughter he writes:

> She is eight years old, and learns everything by heart. She may one day be clever, for she has genius, but on this system, she will never improve, nor will she ever acquire much velocity of finger, for her present method is sure to make her hand heavy. She will never master what is the most difficult and necessary, and in fact the principal, thing in music, namely, time; because from her infancy she has never been in the habit of playing in correct time. Herr Stein and I discussed this

[5] Mozart, *Scrisori,* București: Editura Muzicală a Uniunii Compozitorilor, 1968, p. 35. English version: *The Letters of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5307/5307-h/5307-h.htm#link2H_4_0002

point together for at least two hours. I have, however, to some degree converted him; he asks my advice now on every subject.[6]

These are statements pertaining to a surprisingly mature musician, whose principles regarding all the aspects of music making and piano pedagogy were already very clear. In order to acquire such a professional positiveness at such a young age it is not enough to be exceptionally gifted, one must also have a solid education. There is an obvious similarity between Wolfgang's ideas and the principles stated in the treatises: to follow the composer's indications, to keep the right tempo, and to play with expression and lightness. We can imagine that Wolfgang inherited all these ideas from Leopold, and in time they became his own aesthetic criteria regarding musical performance.

The journeys

Obviously, Leopold was able to give his son a solid musical education, but at the same time he was aware that that wasn't enough. The genius of his son needed more. It needed contacts with the greatest musicians and spirits of his time, and it needed a close study of the most important musical works being performed in the great European cultural centres. And that couldn't be achieved without travelling across Europe, and spending time in those centres. Therefore, in 1763, Leopold embarks on a journey, accompanied by his wife and two children, which will last until 1766, and will include cities like München, Ludwigsburg, Schwetzingen, Frankfurt, Köln, Aachen, Brussels, Paris and London, returning through Gent, Antwerp and The Hague. In the course of that long trip, the young boy composed about 30 pieces, and was presented in different aristocratic salons as an outstanding musical phenomenon. In that European tour Wolfgang had the chance to meet Johann Christian Bach in London, who strongly influenced the shaping of his style, and whom he kept a warm affection for throughout his life.

The next trip was to Italy. This time, the child was accompanied only by his father. The most important event of that journey was the meeting with the great Padre Martini, which took place in 1770 in

[6] *ibidem,* p. 31.

Bologna. Considered as one of the most prominent musicians and pedagogues of his time (he had more than 100 students, among them J.C. Bach, Josef Mysliveček, Modeste Grétry and Abbe Vogler), Padre Martini was famous for his erudition but also for the strictness of his instruction. Despite Wolfgang's young age, he was only 14 years old, he wasn't afraid of these severe teaching methods, and quickly mastered the strict rules of vocal polyphony. Italy was also the homeland of opera, the ideal place for learning all about the most beloved musical genre of the time, and it was during this trip that the boy received the aforementioned singing lessons with Manzuoli.

The outstanding skills of the young boy, demonstrated at a musical event in January 1770, are mentioned in a report published in *Gazzetta di Mantova*. The author describes the multiple tasks Wolfgang had to perform in front of the audience: he played concertos and sonatas on the harpsichord (with improvised variations), sang an improvised aria on words he had never seen before, accompanied a whole symphony having just been given the part of the first violin, and he also composed and performed a fugue on a given theme on the spot, in front of an astonished audience.[7]

The picture the chronicle paints of what constituted a virtuoso in the 18th century differs very much from what we now understand by that term. Obviously, such a complete education requires a different kind of instruction, fundamentally oriented around teaching composition in a practical way, by playing the piano. There wasn't a specialised method of teaching piano in its own right, separate from the study of composition, sight reading, or improvisation; instead, music was learned by playing piano, and piano playing was learned by studying music.[8] And there wasn't a gap between theory and performance, either. Only amateurs, especially ladies, were learning just to play piano, without studying composition.

[7] *cf.* Katalin Komlos "Mozart the performer", in Simon P. Keefe (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Mozart*, 2003, Cambridge University Press, p. 218.
[8] The word *piano* is referring here to any kind of keyboard instrument.

Leopold Mozart's piano sonatas

Just before the family's first European tour, Leopold published three piano sonatas in Galant style, of moderate technical difficulty. There is a strong probability that these pieces were composed as teaching material for his children, in order to develop both their artistic sensitivity and technical skills. It is known that at that time the piano sonatas were mostly composed either for teaching goals or for domestic entertainment; Scarlatti entitled them *essercizi*, Haydn named them *divertimento* or *partita*. Following this logic, it's reasonable to assume that Leopold wrote the sonatas for his children, to simultaneously teach composition and piano. The keys of these sonatas, F major, B-flat major, and C major, would go on to be Wolfgang's favourite keys in his piano sonatas (three in F major, four in C major, and three in B-flat major), and he adopts Leopold's three-movement structure as well. In Leopold's sonatas, the first movement is an *Allegro* in sonata form, the second is an *Andante* in the subdominant key, and the third is again an *Allegro*, with the exception of the third sonata, which ends with a *Minuetto*. The movements are short, and have a simple tonal structure, with a modulation to the dominant, the relative minor, or to the parallel minor, to bring in an element of contrast. The texture is mostly homophonic, a melodic voice with a simple harmonic accompaniment. We find all these stylistic elements in Wolfgang's early piano works, even in his first set of six sonatas published in Munich in 1775, especially the first five.

Mozart and the new keyboard instrument, the fortepiano

Beginning with Sonata No. 6, K. 284, the texture of Wolfgang's piano music becomes denser and more symphonic, showing the influence of the famous Mannheim orchestra. This shift was also encouraged by the development of a new instrument, the fortepiano, which gradually replaced the harpsichord. Mozart very quickly became familiar with the new instrument, shaping his technique to allow him to emphasise its expressive potential. In October 1777 he writes from Augsburg to his father:

> I must now tell you about the Stein pianos. Before seeing these, Spath's pianos were my favourites; but I must own that I give the preference to those of Stein, for they damp much better than those in Ratisbon. If I strike hard, whether I let my fingers rest on the notes or lift them, the tone dies away at the same instant that it is heard. Strike the keys as I choose, the tone always remains even, never either jarring or failing to sound. It is true that a piano of this kind is not to be had for less than three hundred florins, but the pains and skill which Stein bestows on them cannot be sufficiently repaid. His instruments have a feature of their own; they are supplied with a peculiar escapement. Not one in a hundred makers attends to this; but, without it, it is impossible that a piano should not buzz and jar. His hammers fall as soon as they touch the strings, whether the keys be held down by the fingers or not.[9]

The very precise and detailed remarks of the young musician are quite impressive; we notice how well he understands the mechanism of the instrument, and the expressive qualities that result from its recent technical improvements. This profound knowledge of the instrument is illustrated also by the perfection of his piano compositions, which again emphasise the strong connection in Mozart's work between the art of composition and the mastery of piano playing, the result of the complex musical education he received.

Conclusions

Wolfgang's brilliant career as a keyboard virtuoso would definitely not have been possible without the solid and rigorous musical education he received from his father, who was actually his only piano teacher. There is a huge amount of literature on the way Leopold raised his child, with some authors seeing him only as an ambitious man, a tyrant of sorts, who forced his son to travel in horrible circumstances, sacrificing his childhood for reasons of vanity and financial gain, and eventually causing his early death. This dark vision is contradicted by the child himself. In Wolfgang's letters, written during his early tours, we cannot find any sign of sadness or

[9] Mozart, *op.cit.*, p. 29-30.

frustration. On the contrary, he seems to be always in a good mood, full of joy, laughing and joking about almost everything. From the letters of the Mozart family, we find only warm relationships between those involved: parents and children, brother and sister. Importantly, Wolfgang never blames his father. On the contrary, even in the letters he wrote as an adult, he was constantly expressing his love and deep gratitude for Leopold. When he grew up, they had some conflicts, as is usual between father and son, when Leopold disagreed with his son's decisions and choices, and it is possible that Wolfgang sometimes felt the pressure of his father's need to control every aspect of his life; Leopold was permanently concerned, almost obsessed, with the future of his son, and was constantly afraid that he might waste his talent, or not be appreciated as he deserved to be. But Leopold was, from the very beginning, convinced that his son was an outstanding musical phenomenon, and being a profoundly religious man, he considered him as a gift from God; that obliged him to take on his shoulders the huge responsibility of raising a genius. And he rose to the challenge in a brilliant way.

Thinking about Leopold Mozart the teacher, there are some questions which come to mind: What is there to learn from Leopold's holistic teaching method, from that ideal balance between composing and performing? Should it be implemented in music schools and academies in the present day? How effective would such instruction be for today's musician, living in a world dominated by competition and obsessed with technical perfection? These questions are difficult to answer, but it seems to me that the historically informed performance movement, could take a new approach to musical education, and that approach could be the *old* one. This could possibly generate interpretations of Baroque and Classical music that would be even more compelling. And why not contemporary music too?

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