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# London Mozartiana: Wolfgang's disputed age & early performances of Allegri's *Miserere*

*I wish to thank Cliff Eisen for helpful criticism on this piece.*

IN MOZART'S LIFE TRAJECTORY, London stands as a social extreme as well as a geographical one. It was Europe's most populous, wealthy and liberal city, yet also the noisiest, most polluted and crime-infested. This contrast is well documented in Leopold's letters from 1764–65, where marvel gave way to disgust along with the family's dwindling hopes for financial gain. Britain's weak monarchy and stingy aristocratic patronage made commercial exposure the ultimate path to success. After all, it was through public concerts that Handel, the acknowledged model of Mozart, had amassed his fortune only a decade ago.

Early London publicity touted Wolfgang as 'the greatest Prodigy that Europe or that Human Nature has to boast of', and the 'most amazing Genius that has appeared in any Age' surpassing 'all Understanding or all Imagination'.<sup>1</sup> The hype paid off, as the Mozart benefit of 5 June delivered a 'shock of taking in one hundred guineas in three hours'.<sup>2</sup> This auspicious beginning was followed, however, by half-a-year of withdrawal from the public eye, owing to the dead season of summer, Leopold's severe illness, and the delayed opening of parliament, which 'dealt upon the whole a severe blow at all arts and sciences'.<sup>3</sup> By the time of Wolfgang's second benefit concert, in February 1765, London had probably forgotten the name Mozart. Leopold was determined to make up for lost ground ('Once I leave England, I shall never see guineas again. So we must make the most of our opportunity'<sup>4</sup>), hence the puzzlingly inaccurate report:

One Wolfgang Mozart, a German boy, of about eight years old, is arrived here, who can play upon various sorts of instruments of musick, in concert, or solo, and can compose musick surprizingly; so that he may be reckoned a wonder at his age.<sup>5</sup>

The Mozart benefit of 21 February was rather disappointing. Galled that they were 'not being treated more generously', Leopold put the blame on his declining a certain proposal after several sleepless nights.<sup>6</sup> Nothing is known about this scheme, but one suspects it involved the commercial exploitation of his nine-year-old son, probably in variety entertainments. In a last and desperate effort, he sought public attention with Wolfgang's printed keyboard sonatas dedicated to the Queen, a farewell benefit, and the novelty of keeping public hours:

Ladies and Gentlemen, who will honour him [i.e. Wolfgang] with their Company from Twelve to Three o'Clock in the Afternoon, any Day in the Week, except Tuesday and

1. Otto Erich Deutsch: *Mozart: a documentary biography*, trans. Eric Blom, Peter Branscombe & Jeremy Noble (Stanford, [1965]), pp.34–36.

2. Leopold Mozart to Lorenz Hagenauer, 8 June 1764: Emily Anderson, ed.: *The letters of Mozart and his family* (London, 1985), p.48.

3. Leopold Mozart to Lorenz Hagenauer, 8 February 1765: Anderson, ed.: *Letters*, p.54.

4. Leopold Mozart to Lorenz Hagenauer, 13 September 1764: Anderson, ed.: *Letters*, p.52.

5. *Lloyd's Evening Post* vol.16 no.1189, Wednesday 20–Friday 22 February 1765, p.183; also in *The London Evening-Post* no.5822, Thursday 21–Saturday 23 February 1765, p.[3]; repr. in Cliff Eisen, ed.: *New Mozart documents: a supplement to O.E. Deutsch's Documentary Biography* (Stanford, 1991), p.6.

6. Leopold Mozart to Lorenz Hagenauer, 19 March 1765: Anderson, ed.: *Letters*, p.56.

Friday, may, by taking each a Book of Sonatas, or a Ticket for his Concert, gratify their Curiosity, and not only hear this young Composer and Music Master and his Sister perform in private, but likewise try his surprising Musical Capacity by giving him any thing to play at Sight, or any Music without Basse, which he will write upon the Spot, without recurring to his Harpsichord.<sup>7</sup>

The commercial exposure of Wolfgang continued well past his farewell benefit on 13 May. The family lodgings were now open for three hours daily so that anyone sparing five shillings could have 'an opportunity of putting [Wolfgang's] Talents to a more particular Proof'.<sup>8</sup> The campaign reached a peak in July, with Leopold moving his venue to the Great Room at the Swan and Hoop, Cornhill, where 'all Lovers of Sciences' could test both children from noon to 3 pm daily for two-and-a-half shillings.<sup>9</sup>

### *Mozart's disputed age*

7. *The Public Advertiser* no.94679 [sic], Wednesday 20 March 1765, p.[1]; the entire advertisement is reprinted in Deutsch: *Mozart*, pp.43–44.

8. *The Public Advertiser* no.9594, Thursday 30 May 1765, p.[1].

9. *The Public Advertiser* no.9627, Tuesday 9 July 1765, p.[1].

10. Correctly listing the submission date in the main document, Deutsch inexplicably alters it to 28 September in his commentary a few pages later: Deutsch: *Mozart*, p.100.

11. 'VIII. Account of a very remarkable young Musician. In a Letter from the Honourable Daines Barrington, F.R.S. to Mathew Maty, M.D. Sec. R.S.', in *Philosophical Transactions* 60 (1770), pp.54–64; advertised in *The Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* no.13257, Tuesday 27 August 1771, p.[1].

12. London, 1781, pp.279–88.

13. no.5911, Saturday 31 August–Tuesday 3 September 1771, pp.[2–3].

It was during this period, and after attending their concerts, that Daines Barrington (1727/28–1800), a lawyer, natural scientist and Member of the Parliament, visited the family. His report offers an independent and thorough assessment of Mozart's creative powers. Entitled 'Account of a very remarkable young Musician', the paper was submitted to the Royal Society on 28 November 1769,<sup>10</sup> read before its members on 15 February 1770 and published in August 1771 in its *Philosophical Transactions*.<sup>11</sup> Usually quoted from the latter or its 1781 minimal revision in Barrington's *Miscellanies*,<sup>12</sup> it was actually first reprinted in *The General Evening Post* on 3 September 1771.<sup>13</sup>

If Barrington examined Mozart in June 1765, why did he wait four-and-a-half years to produce his report? 'Nullius in verba', the Royal Society's motto, offers the answer. As guardians of empirical science, the Society's members could 'take nobody's word for it'. To them, Mozart was a subject of inquiry not so much for his artistic talent as for its premature development. Barrington was convinced of both during his visit, but as a scientist and a member of the Society since 1767 he could not submit a paper without proof of Mozart's age. Having 'for a considerable time made the best inquiries [...] from some of the German musicians resident in London' [p.62], he finally sought legal evidence from Austria. The intervention of the Bavarian minister in London allowed him to receive a copy of Mozart's birth register directly from Salzburg, signed 3 January 1769. With this key document, duly reproduced as first footnote, Barrington was ready to communicate his paper. The mistaken birth date in the copy (17 instead of 27 January) is a minor detail compared with the author's exemplary patience and resolve.

There is more than scientific probity here. Mozart's age is the running theme and main concern in Barrington's paper:

Witness as I was myself of most of these extraordinary facts, I must own that I could not help suspecting his father imposed with regard to the real age of the boy, though he had only a most childish appearance, but likewise had all the actions of that stage in life [p.62].

Barrington's suspicion reflected contemporary scepticism about Leopold's exaggerated claims:

I found likewise that most of the London musicians were of the same opinion with regard to his age, not believing it possible that a child of so tender years could surpass most of the masters in that science [p.62].

The rumours were actually stronger, even nastier, than hitherto known, forcing Leopold to react in public (very likely through a proxy). The following letter was published on 10 May 1765 and is reprinted here for the first time:

*To the Printer of the Public Advertiser.*

SIR,

EMULATION among People endowed with particular Talents, while it is contained within the Bounds of Decency and Good-manners, is not less rational than advantageous to the Parties concerned; but when by Success of peculiar Merit it degenerates into Envy, there cannot be a more abhorred Principle.

I have been led into this Remark by the ungenerous Proceedings of some People, who have not been ashamed to attempt every thing to the Prejudice of one, whose Excellency in the Knowledge of his Art, is not more wonderful than the early Time of Life he has attained to it. I mean the little German Boy *Wolfgang Mozart*, whose great Abilities, both as a Performer on the Harpsichord and as a Composer, are now so well known to the Public, that the utmost Malice of his Defamers cannot deny them. Therefore what they cannot deduce from Matter of Fact, they labour to depreciate by positive Falsehood; and while they reluctantly allow the Merit of his Performance, they assert it is not the Performance of a Child – a Child Eight Years of Age, but of a Man – a Man reduced by some Defect of Nature to an Insignificancy of Person, which conceals from the careless Observer his more advanced Age. – That he is now in his fifteenth, his twentieth or his thirtieth Year, according as the Spirit of his Opponents think fit to place him.

It would be natural to imagine the Absurdity of these malevolent Remarks would carry with it such strong and evident Confutation, that nothing more need be said to enforce it: Those who have seen the Child and honoured him with their unprejudiced Attention, require no Arguments to clear away the Falsehood; but to prevent the Propagation of this Calumny, the Father, as an honest Man and in Vindication of his injured Offspring, thinks it his Duty to declare he can produce such ample Testimony of the Child's Nativity as would convince the most doubting, and at the same time acquit him if any Intention of exhibiting to the Public the Fallacies of an Impostor.

Yours, &c.

RECTO RECTIOR.<sup>14</sup>

As the pseudonym affirms, the author is on a mission to defend Wolfgang's youth and Leopold's honour from malicious gossip and disinformation. The author was certainly in contact with the distressed father, probably acting on his behalf. The letter helps us enrich or revise Mozart biography as follows:

14. *The Public Advertiser*  
no.9523, Friday 10 May 1765,  
p.[2].

The last months of the Mozarts in London were more stressful than previously understood. The date of Wolfgang's and Nannerl's final benefit was in the air for weeks and Leopold's aggressive publicity, including daily advertisements in the press, backfired. In London's ultra-competitive music market, any claim of superiority could easily trigger professional envy. Wolfgang's talent being undisputed, the attacks inevitably concentrated on his age. In hindsight, Leopold miscalculated the cultural extreme of London. An honest man and devout Catholic, he assumed his statements would be taken at face value. Not so in a thoroughly commercialised city exposed daily to miracle schemes and an army of swindlers.<sup>15</sup> One's word was simply not enough.

As the letter antedates Barrington's visit by roughly a month ('it was in June, 1765, that I was witness to what I have above related'<sup>16</sup>), one wonders if the two events are linked. Did Barrington react to the letter by personally verifying its claims? His report certainly rebuffs the accusations: 'It appears from this extract [i.e. birth register], that Mozart's father did not impose with regard to his age when he was in England' [p.62]. And his enthusiasm for Wolfgang is evident in the comparison with the young Handel: 'the scale most clearly preponderates on the side of Mozart' [p.64].

For all his scientific attitude and troubles to verify Mozart's age, Barrington is in the end driven by admiration. How else can we explain a glaring miscalculation in his paper? Despite proof that Wolfgang was born in January 1756 and the assurance that their encounter happened in June 1765, Barrington continuously refers to him as an eight-year-old boy.<sup>17</sup> The most likely explanation is that the report was written in 1765, when Leopold was bombarding the dailies with descriptions of his eight-year-old son (on 12 March 1765 Lady Clive wrote about Wolfgang as 'the boy aged 8').<sup>18</sup> When Barrington received the birth register in 1769, he probably pasted its transcription as a first footnote without correcting his subject's age in the main text. Remarkable as it is that Barrington would lapse into this error, it is even more embarrassing that the error itself escaped scrutiny from Royal Society fellows and musicologists.

### *Early performances of Allegri's Miserere*

While Barrington's paper was read before the Royal Society in London, on 15 February 1770, Leopold and his 14-year-old son were touring Europe's southern extreme, Italy. Wolfgang's feat of sight-reading a five-part duet back in 1765 was about to be exceeded by another achievement: memorising and transcribing Allegri's *Miserere* after only two listenings. The enthusiastic testimony of Leopold remains the only document on this event. As with his misstating of Wolfgang's age in London, there have been concerns about

15. See John Alexander Kelly: *England and the Englishman in German literature of the eighteenth century* (New York, 1921), pp.107–09.

16. Abert misdated Barrington's visit as June 1764: Hermann Abert: *W.A. Mozart*, trans. Stewart Spencer, ed. Cliff Eisen (New Haven, 2007), p.44.

17. Barrington could not have referred to June 1764, as one of the topics of his chat with Wolfgang was Manzuoli, who had arrived in London around September 1764 and had probably met the Mozarts in January 1765: see Ian Woodfield: 'New light on the Mozarts' London visit: a private concert with Manzuoli', in *Music & Letters* 76 (1995), pp.190–91 & 195.

18. Woodfield: 'New light', p.195. The number eight stuck, too, with Barrington's friend Charles Burney, who wrote in his account of William Crotch: 'at eight years of age I was frequently convinced of his [Mozart's] great knowledge in composition by his writings': *Account of an Infant Musician [...] Read at the Royal Society, Feb. 18, 1779* (London, 1779), p.24.

aspects of the story, particularly the claim that his was the first unauthorised copy of the work.<sup>19</sup> Today, we know of other copies predating Mozart's and made for various individuals in Continental Europe. A new set of documents establishes that the *Miserere* was both circulating and publicly performed in London decades before Mozart crossed the Channel in 1764.

The Earl of Egmont's diary, a valuable and trustworthy source on London's political and operatic scene during the 1730s, contains a remarkable entry for 27 February 1734/35:

After dinner I went to the Royal Society and then to the Thursday Vocal Academy at the Crown Tavern, where we had 19 voices, 12 violins and 5 basses. The famous *Miserere* of Allegri, forbid to be copied out or communicated to any under pain of excommunication, being reserved solely for the use of his chapel, was sung, being brought us by the Earl of Abercorn, whose brother contrived to obtain it.<sup>20</sup>

Abercorn had been a student of John Christopher Pepusch, the leading music antiquarian of the period, also a founder and director until his death of the Academy of Vocal (or Antient) Music.<sup>21</sup> Abercorn's name (styled as Lord Peasley/Peaisley) appears in the Academy's subscription lists for 1728–30.<sup>22</sup> His brother, the Hon. Robert Hamilton, had indeed arrived from Italy in mid-August 1734.<sup>23</sup> At exactly the same period, another British traveller in Italy, Richard Pocock, attended the famous service in the Vatican. His description, among a virtual encyclopedia of all things Italian, survives in a letter to his mother dated 1734. It is transcribed here for the first time:

Rome April 11/22 1734  
 [21<sup>st</sup>...] went to hear the / miserere sung at the popes chapel the Cardinals there. theres [sic] a candlestick w[ith] 15 candles lighted thus / [dots forming a wide Lamda] between every Psalm that is chanted one is put out till they are all out, but the middle one, then they / put out all the candles in the church, & carry away the middle one lighted then y<sup>e</sup> miserere is sung voices only / w<sup>ch</sup> seem to be several sorts of instruments as well as voices, reckond y<sup>e</sup> finest peice of musick in y<sup>e</sup> world & 'tis s<sup>d</sup> they / cannot divulge the notes under pain of excommunication: at the end of it they make a sort of clapping & y<sup>e</sup> midle [sic] candle / is brought in again I beleive it has some relation to y<sup>e</sup> agony in the Garden: heard y<sup>e</sup> same not so well at S. Apollinae [Apollinax], / & fine musick afterwards at S<sup>t</sup> James's of the Spaniards where the same or like was to be done over again. [...]<sup>24</sup>

Over the next years demand for the *Miserere*'s public performance in London seems to have increased. On 14 April 1743, Horace Walpole wrote to his friend Horace Mann:

We are next Tuesday to have the Miserere of Rome – it must be curious! The finest piece of vocal music in the world, to be performed by three good voices, and forty bad ones from Oxford, Canterbury, and the farces!<sup>25</sup>

August 1734, p.[2].

25. Horace Walpole to Horace Mann, 14 April 1743: WS Lewis, Warren Hunting Smith & George L.

Lam, ed.: *Horace Walpole's correspondence with Sir Horace Mann II* (New Haven & London, 1954), p.211.

24. British Library, Add. Ms. 19939, f.10r.

19. Abert: *Mozart*, p.135, n.59.

20. *Manuscripts of the Earl of Egmont: Diary of the First Earl of Egmont (Viscount Percival), Vol.II. 1734–1738* (London, 1923), p.155.

21. According to John Hawkins, Abercorn was thought to be involved in the publication of Pepusch's lessons as a treatise on harmony: *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music*, 5 vols (London, 1776), vol.5, pp.345–46. On the Academy, see John Hawkins: *An Account of the Institution and Progress of the Academy of Ancient Music* (London, 1770), p.4; and on Pepusch's central role, see Hawkins: *General History*, vol.5, pp.346–47; John Graham Williams: 'The life, work and influence of J.C. Pepusch', 3 vols (D.Phil. dissertation, University of York, 1975), vol.1, pp.31–49; and Donald Frederick Cook: 'The life and works of Johann Christoph Pepusch (1667–1752), with special reference to his dramatic works and cantatas', 2 vols (Ph.D. dissertation, University of London King's College, 1982), vol.1, pp.310–21.

22. British Library, Add. Ms. 11732, ff.7r, 9r and 11r. See also Hawkins: *Account*, p.5.

23. 'Yesterday the Hon. Mr. Robert Hamilton, third Son to the Earl of Abercorn, being newly arriv'd from Italy, was introduc'd to the King and Queen by the Earls of Dunmore and Grantham, and had the Honour to kiss their Majesties Hands': *The London Evening-Post* no.1053, Thursday 15–Saturday 17

The piece was reserved for the conclusion of a concert on 19 April 1743 at the King's Theatre in the Haymarket:

HAY-MARKET.  
AT the KING's THEATRE in the Hay-  
Market, this Day, will be perform'd an ENTERTAINMENT  
of VOCAL and INSTRUMENTAL  
MUSICK.  
Consisting of various MOTETTS, CHORUS's, CONCERTO's,  
&c. to be divided into three Parts, after the Manner of an  
ORATORIO.  
The whole to Conclude with the celebrated PIECE of  
VOCAL MUSICK *from ROME*.  
Pit and Boxes to be put together, and no Persons to be admitted  
without Tickets, which will be deliver'd this Day, at the Office in  
the Haymarket, at Half a Guinea each. Gallery 5 s.  
[LDP:]

The Gallery will be open'd at Four o'Clock. Pit and Boxes at Five.

[DA:] To begin at Six o'Clock.<sup>26</sup>

Offered at the venue of Lord Middlesex's opera company, the concert was probably a response to Handel's hugely successful oratorio season in 1743, which included the premiere of *Samson* and London's first performance of *Messiah* (styled *A New Sacred Oratorio*, 23 March).

Performances of the *Miserere* continued thanks to the Academy of Ancient Music concerts. The programme for one of these, on 6 April 1749, lists it as 'Motet for five Voices. / Part of the LIst Psalm' by 'Signor Allegri' and introduces it as '*The Miserere which is sung throughout the holy Week in the Pope's Chapel at Rome*'.<sup>27</sup> By 1761 the piece was considered one of the 'MOST USUALLY performed by the academy' and its text duly included in their 166-page edition of core repertory.<sup>28</sup>

This evidence suggests that Mozart, who appears to have met every important musician in London, could have had easy access (visual and aural) to Allegri's *Miserere* in 1764–65. John Stanley, for instance, was a longtime member of the Academy. His friendship and common passion for ancient music with Lady Clive, for whom Wolfgang performed in March 1765, provides one of many plausible sources. Although the piece was available (though in very few copies) elsewhere in Europe, it is unlikely it was performed in public concerts and, given the papal prohibition, even more so in Catholic churches. By contrast, there is strong likelihood that a Catholic family of musicians feeling religiously isolated in secular London would at least be curious to expose themselves to a direct musical link with the Vatican. If so, Wolfgang's impressionable mind could possibly have retained sufficient parts of the music to render his subsequent listenings in Rome a case of aural *déjà-vu*.

The common thread between Mozart's disputed age and possible acquaintance with Allegri's *Miserere* in 1764–65 is, of course, London.

26. *The London Daily Post, and General Advertiser* no.2650, Tuesday 19 April 1743, p.[1]; *The Daily Advertiser* no.3822, Tuesday 19 April 1743, p.[2].

27. *Motets, and Other Pieces; Performed by the Academy of Ancient Music, On Thursday, April 6, 1749* (London, 1749), p.7.

28. *The Words of such Pieces as are most usually performed by The Academy of Ancient Music* (London, 1761), p.8.

As Europe's greatest capital and the motherboard of modernity, it provided unique conditions for learning and growth. Empiricism and its social expression as entrepreneurship welcomed intellectual curiosity and celebrated novelty as much as they interrogated it. It may be hard to say how the nine-year-old Wolfgang experienced his last months in London. Yet the daily exposure to strangers, be they admirers or sceptics, and to musical contrasts, from the operatic craze for Manzuoli to the archaic sounds in the Academy of Ancient Music concerts, must have left a strong impression upon him and perhaps set the ground for his freelance aspirations 15 years later.