About the Music

In March 1781, soon after the premiere of his first mature opera, *Idomeneo*, the twenty-five year old Mozart made his permanent move from Salzburg to Vienna – a move famously finalized by a swift kick in the rear from the chamberlain to his former employer (and adolescent archenemy), Prince-Archbishop Colloredo. The young composer was embraced by the musical elite of the imperial capital, in particular Baron Gottfried van Swieten, whose massive music library was placed at his disposal. At this same time, Mozart was reintroduced to, and began courting, a soprano named Constanze Weber, the younger sister of one of his childhood sweethearts. On August 4, 1782, they married, over the stern objections of his father, Leopold. It is against this remarkable backdrop, marking Mozart's professional, financial, intellectual and emotional emancipation, that the *Mass in C minor* (KV 427) (called the "Great" Mass) came into being.

Mozart first refers to the *Mass* in a letter to his father dated January 1783, still euphoric over his marriage and the blessed news of Constanze's first pregnancy. On June 17, 1783, the couple's first son, Raimund Leopold, was born. Scarcely a month later, Mozart and his wife left for an extended summer visit to Salzburg, where she could recuperate and he could continue work on the *Mass* and other projects, leaving the infant behind with a foster mother. In a sad but common turn of events for the period, young Leopold did not survive the summer. This news reached the young couple in August and became an early test of their marital bond. On October 26, 1783, according to his sister, Nannerl, "Wolfgang's new mass" was offered at Saint Peter's Abbey in Salzburg (the cathedral being out of the question given the circumstances of Mozart's dismissal), with Constanze singing the soprano solos. It was to be the only performance of the work in the composer's lifetime. The day after, Mozart and his wife left for Vienna, never to return.

In terms of its scope and artistic objectives, the *Mass* marks a major departure from Mozart's earlier work in the genre. Archbishop Colloredo anticipated the Enlightenment liturgical reforms of Emperor Joseph II by at least a decade, bringing an austerity to worship that dictated that the entire mass last no more than forty-five minutes, inclusive of music. Though Mozart himself considered the dozen or more Salzburg masses to be very good work, and indeed they are, they were necessarily short and sweet (Stravinsky would later dismiss them as "sweets of sin"), and concerned with formula rather than form. Coming at the time of his exposure to the works of Bach and Handel through access to van Swieten's library, the implied length and majestic, well-considered writing of "Wolfgang's new mass" places it on a par with Bach's *Mass in B minor*, the later oratorios of Haydn and even the Beethoven *Missa Solemnis*.

Musically, the *Mass* is a leading example of Mozart's rediscovery of counterpoint and its subspecies, the fugue, as a major technical resource. This rediscovery was in part sponsored by Constanze, who was much more of an intellectual influence on her husband than her vapid portrayal in Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* would have us believe. In a letter to his sister, enclosing

the gift of a keyboard fugue, Mozart writes:

> My dear Constanze is really the cause of this fugue's coming into the world. Baron van Swieten, to whom I go every Sunday, gave me all the works of Handel and Sebastian Bach to take home with me (after I had played them to him). When Constanze heard the fugues, she absolutely fell in love with them. Now she will listen to nothing but fugues, and particularly (in this kind of composition) the works of Handel and Bach. Well, as she has often heard me play fugues out of my head, she asked me if I had ever written any down, and when I said I had not, she scolded me roundly for not recording some of my compositions in this most artistically beautiful of all musical forms and never ceased to entreat me until I wrote down a fugue for her.

The magisterial fugues of the *Mass*, especially the Cum Sancto Spiritu movement, are therefore as great an offering to Mozart's young bride as the gorgeous solos he composed specifically for her voice.

Mozart strove for an intelligible, expressive sort of music, one characterized by architecture rather than decoration, authenticity rather than condescension. A mature emphasis on form and structure, combined with the intense emotional impact of the Kyrie and Qui tollis movements and extraordinarily distinguished writing for solo voices and orchestra, make the *Mass* justly deserving of its title and a leading example of Mozart's achievement as an artist. As Robert Gutman writes, in the worthwhile *Mozart: A Cultural Biography*:

> Bach's and, in particular, Handel's spirit, breathed in at van Swieten's matinees, guides whole sections of the score; but, unlike so many period-style efforts by his contemporaries, these double choruses, fugues, and less formal contrapuntal passages never suggest a hand ruffling the shallows to give the impression of depth. Reinterpreted and given new dimensions through Mozart's finely colored harmonies, ever fresh and scrupulous melodic detail, and volatility of humors, these units show forth as brilliant reinventions, as refinements of the pastiche of the Salzburg masses, the rhetorical grandeur of the Qui tollis for two four-part choirs the finest example.

Nothing tempts scholars to speculate so much as the "unfinished" masterwork of a great composer. While such speculation yields much creative discourse, it is not necessary to an appreciation of the *Mass* as a full expression of the composer's worth. In the end, we cannot but agree with Ferrucio Busoni's elegant appraisal, written in Mozart's 150th anniversary year: "He is passionate, but keeps to the forms of chivalry. He disposes of light and shadow, but his light does not pain and his darkness still shows clear outlines. Idealist without losing touch with the earth, realist without ugliness."