
Book Reviews

Another attempt to cover up Mozart's assassination fails

by David M. Shavin

The Mozart Myths: A Critical Reassessment

by William Stafford

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There is the old *New Yorker* cartoon showing Mrs. Lincoln at Ford's Theater being asked, after the assassination of her husband at Ford's Theater in 1865, "Well, other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, how did you like the play?" One senses, after reading William Stafford's *The Mozart Myths*, that the professor never quite got the joke.

William Stafford has done yeoman's work, in reading the bulk of the extant biographical material on Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who died on Dec. 5, 1791, and in submitting the material to textual analysis. He clarifies how different levels of sedimentation have muddied the image of Mozart. For example, his discussion of the process behind the production of the early biographical information on Mozart, starting with the standard questionnaire that the biographer Friedrich Schlichtegroll sent to Mozart's sister Nannerl and to Johann Andreas Schachtner, the friend of Mozart's father, in 1792, is both orderly and refreshing. Further, Stafford begins to sort out the interrelationships of the early biographies of Mozart from 1791 to 1828, when Constanze Mozart published the *magnum opus* compiled by her second husband, Georg Nikolaus Nissen. However, concluding the introductory chapter with a thumbnail sketch of the landmarks in biographical work on Mozart, Stafford's book then proceeds to run aground.

He has structured his book around the idea that the circumstances of the death of Mozart have directly or indirectly haunted most of the interpretations of Mozart's life. Stafford finds in the different biographies of Mozart a subconscious thread in the approaches of the different authors, depending upon their response to his premature death. For example, those who assume Mozart was simply irresponsible with his

health, color their stories to emphasize how genius and practicality are mutually antagonistic.

The greatest defect in Stafford's book centers upon the facts surrounding Mozart's death. Early on (in Chapter 2, "Was There Foul Play?"), he feels obligated to diverge from his gentlemanly, dispassionate sorting-out of the mythologies around Mozart, to make sure that one and all know that Mozart died a natural death, without any possibility of foul play. In fact, for Stafford, nothing important about Mozart can be known except that he "certainly was not poisoned." The only other conclusions he allows himself in the book are secondary matters: Mozart had a sharp tongue; he did not always meet deadlines; he lived beyond his income; and his wife was not the cause of his ruin. Everything else, supposedly, is inconclusive.

Stafford gets even more ridiculous when he poses what he considers to be the critical question: "Why, then, was the death such a sharp turning-point in his reputation. . . ?" For Stafford, there is no puzzle, mystery, or question about Mozart's death, except to the extent that people get nervous about it. He views the most important question about Mozart's premature death only insofar as it "impacted upon" his reputation!

Unfortunately, the sheer blindness in his question is rivaled only by his deafness. Namely, in his excavation of the real Mozart, he simply does not hear Mozart's music! For example, after finishing Stafford's impressive summary stressing the difficulty in determining anything definite about Mozart from all the secondary sources, the reader surely wishes for Stafford to turn to the original source, and provide some clues from Mozart's music. But the best Stafford can do is to conclude blithely: "The real Mozart is not forever hidden behind gossip and legend; for the letters are a wonderful source." He ignores the other productions that issued from Mozart's hand—which certainly did "impact" his reputation: his music. While Mozart's letters are indeed valuable sources, when read apart from his compositional work, they turn into another source of confusion for the myth-makers. Stafford's historical method leaves no room for the central

productions of his ostensible historical subject, Mozart.

So why would a deaf professor attempt to unravel the myths about Mozart for the English-speaking world? His method for dismissing any discussion about Mozart's political enemies provides a clue as to what is on the mind of Professor Stafford.

Daumer and the Freemasons

It is known that in the last three months of Mozart's life, his overwhelmingly successful opera, "Die Zauberflöte" ("The Magic Flute"), brought before the citizens of Vienna crucial issues of the connection between love and knowledge, and of the necessity for a population in a republic to make knowledge their personal acquisition. Mozart's fight to undermine and destroy the secretive, conspiratorial weapons used by the oligarchy against the American Revolution among German-speaking people was not lost upon Goethe, Schiller, Beethoven, and other republican circles of the time.

In 1861, a controversial article, "Out of the Attic," by G.F. Daumer, appeared in Mainz, Germany, alleging that Mozart was poisoned by a cultish assortment of Freemasons, Illuminati, Jacobins, and Carbonari. This evil collection was asserted to have existed over the centuries, to have used many front groups, and to be devoted to power, to free love, and to nature-worship. Daumer named several leading members of this conspiracy, including David Hume, Voltaire, Marie Jean Antoine Condorcet (a key figure in the French Revolution), and anarchist Pierre Joseph Proudhon. He even suggested that a scribbler in the British Museum in London, named Karl Marx, was one of their assets.

Daumer correctly locates the explosive role of the Lutheran chorale sung by the two armed men in "The Magic Flute," in angering those among the Freemasons who harbored un-Christian motivations. (In fact, this chorale was set to Mozart's beloved C-minor series material, an unmistakable reference on Mozart's part to his own successful fight for knowledge.) Daumer situates Mozart's poisoning in the context of similar poisonings of the Emperor Leopold II, and, earlier, of Gotthold Lessing. Daumer also takes care to distinguish the evil inner core of Freemasons from most of the men Mozart worked with.

The careful, systematic Professor Stafford does not attempt to examine history regarding these matters. Daumer's locating of Mozart's murder within the context of the murders of Lessing and Emperor Leopold provides more than enough of a basis to inquire further. Stafford simply misses the forest for the trees. But in his attempt to squelch such an investigation, more than a little can be gleaned.

Stafford's "scholarly" treatment of Daumer consists of his ill-motivated and fraudulent effort to tie Daumer's 1861 article to the rantings of Nazi General Erich Ludendorff and his wife Mathilde, in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1910, Hermann Ahlwardt's book, *Mehr Licht (More Light)*, takes Daumer's theme, and where Daumer describes the inner core of evil,

Ahlwardt inserts the word "Jew." In this form, the Ludendorffs spread the originally Nietzschean argument that Jews introduced weakness into Christian morality and undermined the Teutonic "survival of the fittest" ethic. Stafford's ill-disguised message is that if one attacks the Freemasons, one must have pro-Nazi tendencies.

Stafford cannot deal with Daumer's claims except by: 1) smearing him with guilt by association; and 2) reducing what's left of Daumer's argument to "a strained interpretation of 'Die Zauberflöte.'" Stafford's inability to hear any evidence in this opera, or in any of Mozart's music, has already been mentioned. However, in his smearing of Daumer, his academic pretense also collapses down to his level of musical sensibility.

The most obvious question here is, why does the careful professor not find it the least suspicious that Ahlwardt takes the trouble to rewrite Daumer's material to demonize the Jews and let the inner core of Freemasonry off the hook? Stafford lays himself open to the same criticisms that he makes of some of his opponents, that "they have assiduously mastered the primary and secondary sources. The problem is rather their remarkably unscholarly and uncandid use of them."

Stafford introduced his discussion of Daumer, and of the role of Freemasons in Mozart's death, as follows: "We come now to the darkest and most astonishing series of stories of Mozart's death." He proceeds to bury Daumer's charges in the mud of Nietzschean and Nazi paganism, attacking those who seek conspiracies as being overly obsessed with the battle between good and evil. He ends by consoling us that "the material considered here leaves the reader with a slight sense of defilement." On this last note, ironically enough, one can find agreement with the professor.

Mozart's creativity

In the following 214 pages, having dispatched the possibility that Mozart was murdered, Stafford displays how the confusion over his subject's death haunts the interpretations of his life. Whether Mozart was a beast or an angel; whether he used women or they him; whether he was a genius or a misfit; whether or not a social misfit, whether his life was part of a larger plan or an existentialist confusion—all these different lenses are examined and are found to be lacking.

In reality, it is Stafford's methodology that is bankrupt. Mozart's life was rich enough, and substantial enough, to defeat any historiography that cannot locate his creative, compositional activity in fundamentally altering society's mastery over its creative processes. The blindness and deafness in these matters totally incapacitate Stafford's ability to carry out a competent detective's investigation of Mozart's death.

The failure of deductive detective work

For example, Stafford notes in passing that I.T.F.C. Arnold's 1803 book *Mozarts Geist (Mozart's Mind)*, is the first

published argument attempting to disprove that Mozart was poisoned. However, he evinces no interest in why Arnold, a writer of gothic novels, feels compelled 12 years after Mozart's death to write such a book. Further, since Stafford seems to have no sense as to what is at stake in the dialogues between Joseph Haydn and Mozart over the development of sonata form, he consequently displays no interest in evaluating why this same scribbler Arnold would be involved, so soon after his first book appeared, in providing a watered-down version of the Haydn-Mozart relationship.

Here again, Stafford quotes from a fascinating memorandum by Mozart's son Karl Thomas, about his father's poisoning, but shows no ability to fathom what it means historically. Karl Thomas wrote: "Another indicative circumstance is that

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the body did not become stiff and cold, but remained soft and elastic in all parts, as was the case with Pope Ganganelli and others who died of organic poisons." Stafford's only treatment of this quote is to speculate whether or not Constanze also shared Karl's opinion, indicating he had little knowledge and/or little concern with the implications. What would a competent evaluation of Karl Mozart's observation need to begin to take into consideration?

In brief, Ganganelli was Pope Clement XIV, who had banned the Jesuits in 1773. In the year following his edict, he was greatly agitated over the possibility that he would be poisoned. The fact that in 1774 he did die under mysterious circumstances, did not allay rumors that he was being overly suspicious. Republican circles generally assumed that he was poisoned (e.g., Friedrich Schiller's reference to Ganganelli's suspicious death in "The Ghost-Seer").

Though the forces that allied with Pope Clement XIV in banning the Jesuits included such unhealthy elements as those around the Duke of Orleans, they more generally represented exactly the same forces that would shortly constitute the League of Armed Neutrality, including Minister of France Etienne Choiseul, Charles III of Spain, and Joseph II of Austria. An analysis of the details is beyond the scope of this article; however, it can be summarily stated that the factional alignments in the period around the American Rev-

olution among Mozart's circles are substantially those that Ganganelli also faced.

With the Jesuits banned, Mozart's friends Baron van Swieten and Joseph von Sonnenfels headed up the Education Ministry for Joseph II's Austrian Empire. Certainly a key component in the success or failure of the cultural and education policies of these people was Mozart. Thus, for Karl Mozart to compare the circumstances of his father's death with what he took to be the poisoning of Ganganelli is not insignificant. One would have to be ideologically committed to the complete disassociation of creativity from the making of history, not to pursue Karl Mozart's observation.

Heavy-handed footnotes

A final anecdote might put the deficiency in Stafford's book into perspective. *The Mozart Myths* takes care to heavily footnote most of its many details. Stafford intends for the book to sort out the wealth of myths regarding Mozart, and he takes care to track the more insubstantial matters. However, early on, for no apparent reason, Stafford feels compelled to footnote the statement: "Today Mozart's genius, his immense natural gifts and his universality as a composer are unquestioned." He refers to the last page of Stanley Sadie's 1965 book *Mozart* for validation.

But who would footnote such a statement? What was on Stafford's mind that he would seek a footnote for the statement that the cited qualities of Mozart's genius are "unquestioned"? To be sure, the cited concluding paragraph of Sadie's biography on Mozart speaks of him as the "most universal artist" among musicians. But what is going on here?

It is possible that this is just a case of a deaf professor bowing to another authority, in a somewhat ridiculous gesture. However, it may not be unrelated that this curious academic obeisance immediately precedes Stafford's monumentally stupid question cited earlier, where he introduces the central subject of Mozart's death, only to focus on how the death was "such a sharp turning-point in his reputation." Perhaps it is to the professor's credit that, just prior to telling a big whopper, he displays the equivalent of a facial tic.

Stafford's book is interesting because, in fact, most of the myths around Mozart are related to difficulties people have with his early death. Also interesting is the fact that Mozart's life, his creative work, and the political and cultural struggle surrounding his life and death totally overwhelm the professor's attempt to neutralize his subject. Since Stafford does not deal with most of Mozart—his works—it is upon the issue of Mozart's death that Stafford's methodology is smashed.

Having finished a book structured around Mozart's death, the reader might conclude: "Well, except for that messy death, the book was an interesting adventure." But in Stafford's *The Mozart Myths*, the joke is not told nearly as well.