

## ***Amadeus***

### **Program Notes**

Peter Shaffer's play *Amadeus* was first seen on the London stage in December 1979. It was a huge success. It went on to win a Tony Award and other awards for Best Play, and the 1984 movie version won eight Academy Awards including Best Picture and Best Screenplay, which was also by Shaffer. He has rewritten parts of the play several times, as he describes in detail in the Preface of the most recent published version of the play.

The protagonists are two real-life composers who are given fictional characteristics. Antonio Salieri (1750-1825) is the villain and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) is the fool who is time and again outwitted, and eventually murdered, by Salieri. Shaffer elaborated on three elements from Mozart's real life. First are his known scatological habits (found in his letters to family members), which Shaffer exaggerated. Second is a rumor published shortly after his death that he was poisoned (discredited, though Salieri claimed to have poisoned him, in his demented old age). Third is the anonymous commissioning of a Requiem Mass which he left incomplete at his death. Shaffer made the nameless person Salieri, though we know otherwise. He also made Salieri madly jealous of Mozart (of which there is little evidence in reality). The play is historical fiction, and it has been so successful that H.C. Robbins Landon, an internationally famous musicologist, was persuaded by his publisher to write a scholarly book addressing the historical inaccuracies, in *1791: Mozart's Last Year*.

## **The Role of Music**

In Shaffer's words, "Sound is actually the name of the main character in our story." Indeed the stage instructions are specific about what music should be played when. The vast majority of pieces are by Mozart, with a few by Salieri. Sometimes specific compositions are directly tied to the dialogue and action, such as when the composers attended a performance of *The Magic Flute*; at other times Shaffer chose something suitable, for instance, for salon music. The prominence of musical sound keeps the audience's awareness that the plot is about the brilliant music that one composer cannot reconcile with the character of its creator.

## **The Plot**

The play is in two acts, both bookended by scenes of old man Salieri in November 1823 admitting what he did to Mozart and trying to kill himself. The main portion of the play is an extended flashback to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. When Mozart first arrived in Vienna in 1781, Salieri was excited to meet him because of his superb compositions, only to be disgusted by Mozart's childish delight in unseemly behavior and vulgarity. Salieri felt that such a person should not have been gifted by God with musical genius, so he began to undermine Mozart's attempts to earn a living as a musician. All the while, Mozart thought that Salieri was his friend and that his failed attempts to find employment were despite Salieri's efforts on his behalf rather than because of his sabotage. Salieri became more and more extreme as Mozart struggled with poverty and ill health. After he tried to make Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* a failure, but was thwarted by Emperor Joseph II, Salieri anonymously commissioned a Requiem Mass from Mozart. What Shaffer called the "Final Encounter," when Salieri visited a very ill Mozart, has

been rewritten many times, making it less melodramatic than it was at first, and bringing out more humanity in Salieri's character. In the most recent version, Salieri pleads for Mozart's forgiveness but Mozart simply sings a children's song.

### **The Movie**

For most people reading these Program Notes, the movie *Amadeus* will be the most familiar to them. Shaffer, who wrote the screenplay, has said that he regretted that the language had to be simplified, but that it was too theatrical for the intimacies of a movie. He altered the plot so that Salieri planned to pass the Requiem off as his own work, to be played at Mozart's funeral. He added a scene where Mozart on his sickbed dictated part of the Requiem to Salieri, with the use of closeups to show the creative process and interruptions to see Mozart's wife's carriage rushing her to be with him. He considered writing the scene into his fourth revision of the play for the Stratford Festival Theatre, Ontario, but decided it would not work as well on stage.

Jane Girdham