

Chapter 1

The Handsomest Couple in Salzburg

Mozart was born on 27 January 1756 in the city of Salzburg. At the time of his birth it was a wealthy city state sitting between Bavaria and Austria, and independent of both. It had grown rich and important on the back of its abundant natural product, salt, which gave it its name, *Salz-Burg* – ‘Salt Castle’.

Technically it was part of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, and so loosely speaking was part of Germany.* Mozart himself was in no doubt. Throughout his life he referred to himself as German by birth and a German composer.

* Salzburg has had a chequered history, due largely to the shifting borders of Continental Europe during the Napoleonic wars. It was annexed to Austria after the Battle of Austerlitz in 1805. It was briefly transferred to the Kingdom of Bavaria as punishment for the Austrian defeat at Wagram in 1809. In 1815, at the Congress of Vienna, the city was definitively returned to Austria, the bicentenary of which was celebrated in 2015–16.

From its earliest years Salzburg had an abbey, and by the eighteenth century a cathedral had stood there for a thousand years. The most powerful man in Salzburg was the archbishop, who was not only the most senior religious figure but also a prince of the Holy Roman Empire, answerable only to the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor in Vienna.

The prince-archbishop, and the canons under him, ran the city of Salzburg, and they ran it according to strict Roman Catholic principles. A *Law on Morals*, issued by the archbishop in 1736, a mere twenty years before Mozart was born, decreed:

Men are not to leave their beds without wearing shirt and trousers, nor women without wearing shirt and petticoat. Trousers must be waist high, fastened in front. Women's skirts must cover half the calf; shirts and bodices must be made wide enough as to overlap and lace properly. Absolutely forbidden is the irritating, bestial and fiendish habit occurring in the public baths, where men and women bathe together almost naked and then dry each other off.

The prince-archbishop's court was by far the biggest employer, controlling the lives of a huge number of people, from lawyers, soldiers and local industrialists, down to secretaries, valets and maidservants.

And musicians. Salzburg was a cultured city, maintaining a large court orchestra and choir, and giving employment to a number of composers. In all, around a hundred musicians were employed by the court.

Traditionally the archbishop of Salzburg held himself aloof from the people of the city, allowing his canons to extort money from them. For centuries there had been palpable resentment directed

from the city, and from outlying villages in the diocese, towards the wealth that existed within the cathedral.

There was thus quiet satisfaction when, in 1753, a new archbishop was appointed – a cultured man, with affection towards his people, and a great love of music. Archbishop Siegmund Schrattenbach made it his aim to put Salzburg at the forefront of music within the states of the Holy Roman Empire.

This was an enormous stroke of good fortune for one man in particular, who some years earlier had left his home in Augsburg in Bavaria to escape a career in the priesthood, and headed for Salzburg to pursue his vocation in music. After attending university in Salzburg he secured a position at court as a violinist and violin teacher.

With prodigious musical talent, and a regular income, it was not long before he married. Following the appointment of the new archbishop, he became a court composer, and soon after that deputy kapellmeister. He was rising fast in his chosen profession and the future looked rosy. He and his wife were in a position to start a family.

His name was Johann Georg Leopold Mozart.



History has not been kind to the father of the boy genius, and it is not hard to see why. Contemporaries described him variously as acerbic and difficult, aloof and domineering. He controlled the lives of those closest to him in every detail. His wife was barely allowed to make a decision for herself, and his children would find that their every move was decided for them well into adulthood.

It seems that Leopold Mozart's contrary character was formed early in life. Born in Augsburg, he was the eldest of nine children,

and found himself left increasingly to his own devices by a mother who had too many demands on her time to pay him much attention.

At the age of seventeen, just four months after his father's sudden death, he took himself out of school. If this upset his mother, he was to make matters much worse by announcing he had no desire to take up the family business of bookbinding, or to follow his mother's second wish by entering the Jesuit priesthood.

An estrangement became a rift when Leopold decided to leave Augsburg altogether and head for Salzburg, intending to turn his natural talent for music into a career. He enrolled at Salzburg university, where his headstrong character really showed itself.

In September 1739, at the age of nineteen, he was expelled for 'want of application and poor attendance'; in effect, for truancy. But what really shocked the university authorities was his calm acceptance of his fate. The rector reported:

A few days before the examination he was called before the Dean and informed that henceforth he would no longer be numbered among the students. Having heard this sentence, he offered no appeals, accepted the sentence, and departed as if indifferent: therefore he was not called for further examination.²

'As if indifferent ...' You can just picture the look on his youthful face that caused the rector to write these words. Maybe it was a slight curl of the lip, the beginnings of a sardonic smile. There must have been something in his expression that struck the academic panel, and made it worth noting. If one is tempted to admire Leopold's independent spirit, such admiration must surely be tempered by his display of youthful arrogance.

It was a quality that stayed with him in later life. Those academics would not be the last to feel the force of Leopold's character.

But there was method behind Leopold's seeming indifference to the end of his student career. He immediately obtained employment as a musician, and as early as the following year published his first compositions, a set of six trio sonatas.

Meanwhile Leopold's relationship with his mother only got worse. He informed her that he had met a young woman in Salzburg and intended to marry her. This was, as it were, the final straw. If Leopold married a Salzburg girl, it was unlikely he would ever return to live in Augsburg. His mother disapproved so totally that she disinherited him.

The rift was never healed. As far as we know, Leopold's mother never met her daughter-in-law. Even more extraordinary, when her two highly talented grandchildren were brought by their parents to Augsburg, where they gave three public concerts, she did not come to see them perform.

Consider this. Wolfgang Mozart, boy genius, comes to Augsburg at the age of six to demonstrate his extraordinary musical skills – which are already known and marvelled at – and his own grandmother refuses to leave her house to come and see him.

When a break occurs between mother and child, whatever brave words the son may choose to put on it, however successfully he may suppress it, the guilt can linger and fester. I believe this is what happened with Leopold. He was in any case a difficult character. The fact that the schism was never healed is likely to have made him an even more irascible and unpredictable individual.



Unlike Leopold, the woman he chose to marry, the woman who would give birth to the greatest of musical geniuses, remains a somewhat shadowy figure. As we shall see, in the many letters that

Leopold would write to her during travels with their son, she rarely rates a mention.

Anna Maria Pertl* was born in the village of St Gilgen, on the banks of the Wolfgangsee in the Salzkammergut mountains, one of the most beautiful regions of Austria.

What could have been an idyllic childhood was anything but. Anna Maria's father, who was forty-five when he married, had suffered a near-fatal illness five years before she was born. His health continued to decline and she was only three years old when he died.

He left the family destitute. As his health worsened he had borrowed more and more money, and at his death his debts totalled more than four times his annual salary as a minor local official. His effects were confiscated and Anna Maria, together with her mother and elder sister, had to move from the calm of a lakeside village to the bustle of Salzburg, where they lived on charity.

It seems that both his daughters had inherited his ill health. Anna Maria's elder sister died soon after the move, and Anna Maria herself was described in charity records as 'constantly ailing' and 'the constantly ill bedridden daughter'.

Her fragile health was clearly not helped by having to look after her widowed mother. What she could not yet know was that her father had possibly passed on one truly great gift. Although he had not pursued music as a profession, he was a highly gifted musician. It might not have manifested itself in his daughter, but it most certainly would in her own children.

* Mozart biographers seem evenly divided over whether his mother was Anna Maria or Maria Anna. The portrait of her that hangs in Mozart's birth house in Salzburg is labelled Anna Maria. Also, since her daughter was christened Maria Anna, and one of the children's cousins too, I shall refer to her throughout as Anna Maria.

The Handsomest Couple in Salzburg

It is not known how Anna Maria came to meet a young violinist at court by the name of Leopold Mozart, but after what appears to have been a fairly lengthy engagement – ‘All good things take time!’³ Leopold wrote to his wife on their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary – they married on 21 November 1747. Leopold had just turned twenty-eight; his wife was thirteen months younger.

Leopold had, as he wrote later in the same letter, and with a rare touch of humour, ‘joined the Order of Patched Trousers’. He had reason to celebrate his marriage. His wife was, by all accounts, docile and obedient which, given Leopold’s natural proclivity for decision-making and brooking no disagreement, made for a contented union.

Leopold and his wife Anna Maria were soon considered the handsomest couple in Salzburg. Their portraits, painted when they were in middle age, show fine sensitive faces. There appears to be a touch of self-assurance, arrogance even, in the portrait of Leopold, with his half-lidded eyes and slightly curled lip, and Anna Maria’s pose perhaps presents a stronger character than we suspect to be the case.

Yet if those faces had been shown etched in some pain, it would have been understandable. Exactly nine months after their marriage a son was born, named Leopold after his father. The infant lived for less than six months.

Anna Maria was already pregnant again when he died, and gave birth to a daughter, Maria Anna, four months later. The child lived for just six days. Anna Maria was soon pregnant once more, and less than a year later gave birth to another daughter, again named Maria Anna. This infant lived for a little over two months.

Three children lost in the space of seventeen months, and the couple had not yet been married three years.

It is hardly surprising that when another daughter was born exactly a year after they had lost their third child, Leopold and Anna

Maria lived in a state of high anxiety, celebrating each day that the child survived as a miracle.

Once again – and one can imagine this decision being made only after much soul-searching – they named their daughter Maria Anna, like her two deceased sisters. The third Maria Anna, known as Nannerl, was to live for seventy-eight years and three months.

But the couple's heartbreak was not yet over. A son Johann Karl, born sixteen months after Maria Anna, lived for just three months, and a daughter Maria Crescentia, born in the following year, died at seven weeks.

Six children in a little less than six years, and only one who had lived to see a first birthday. It is impossible to know, when Anna Maria fell pregnant yet again, whether she was elated or in despair. Infant mortality was high in the mid-eighteenth century, and there will have been many families in Salzburg who lost as many, or more, children than the Mozarts. But still the toll of seven pregnancies in such a short period of time must surely have debilitated Anna Maria both physically and emotionally.

I imagine an exhausted woman, now thirty-five years of age – middle aged, in fact – resigned to almost constant child-bearing, followed by the infinite sadness of seeing tiny coffins bearing each child away. Now a seventh child was on the way.

Anna Maria gave birth to a son at eight o'clock on the evening of 27 January 1756. It was not an easy delivery. The placenta failed to emerge naturally and Leopold reported that it had to be removed forcibly. As a result Anna Maria became extremely weak; she was at high risk of fatal infection, and for a time it was not known if she would survive.

A child who was more than a day old without being baptised was believed to be in danger of hellfire, and so the infant was baptised at ten thirty the following morning. He was given the names

Johannes Chrisostomus Wolfgangus Theophilus. The first two names were for the saint, St John Chrysostom, on whose name day the child had been born; Wolfgangus was for his maternal grandfather; Theophilus was the Greek version of Gottlieb, 'Beloved of God', the name of his godfather.

From the start he was called by his third name, Wolfgang, or more often its diminutive, Wolferl. In later life he himself preferred the Latin version of his fourth name, Amadeus, though he was more inclined to use Amadè, or Amadé, or even (when in Italy) Amadeo.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was his parents' seventh, and final, child. He and his elder sister Nannerl were the only two to survive into adulthood. But his was not to be a long life. Nannerl would outlive her younger brother by almost thirty-eight years.



As soon as they were married, Leopold and his wife had moved into an apartment on the third floor of a building at 9 Getreidegasse ('Grain Lane').* The building was owned by the Hagenauers, a family that dealt in groceries and spices on the ground floor and one imagines the infant Wolfgang and his sister growing up with the pungent aroma of these products under their noses.

It was a fortuitous move. The Hagenauers became firm friends of their tenants, the Mozarts. Johann Lorenz Hagenauer was also a banker and music lover. Not only did he encourage Leopold to take his young son on tours of Europe, but in effect bankrolled them by issuing credit in cities along the way.

* The whole building was acquired by the Salzburg Mozarteum Foundation in 1917, and is today a museum devoted to Mozart.

The building was in the old town in the centre of Salzburg. The Getreidegasse was the commercial heart of the city. It was home to court offices, bakers, grocers, goldsmiths, hotels and taverns. It was the most heavily populated street in the whole of Salzburg.

The boy Mozart thus spent his formative years in the heart of the city, surrounded by its noise and bustle. He remained a city boy all his life, and when many years later he moved to Vienna, he never lived beyond the close suburbs, preferring always to be as near to the centre of the city as possible.

The Mozart apartment, while not large, was able to accommodate a family of four. There was also room for a clavier, a small keyboard instrument. Had more of the children survived, it's likely the family would soon have had to move out. As it was, they remained there for twenty-six years, until the seventeen-year-old Wolfgang's fame and resultant earnings allowed them to move to a larger home.

The apartment in the Getreidegasse frequently echoed to the sound of music. Leopold and his professional friends would play together, and Leopold was able to supplement his income by giving private violin lessons there.

He was a very successful teacher. In the year Wolfgang was born he had published a book entitled *Versuch einer gründlichen Violinschule* ('A Treatise on the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing'). It was reprinted twice in German, and was then translated into Dutch and French.

Leopold Mozart was firmly established as one of Salzburg's leading musicians, and it would not be long before he was appointed deputy kapellmeister (deputy head of music at court), a senior position second only to the kapellmeister himself.

Given his professional reputation, it must have come as a welcome surprise to Leopold when he realised his eldest child Nannerl

was showing signs of an interest in music. Maybe she sang for him; maybe she picked out notes on the clavier.

He will no doubt have surmised that, given his own natural musical talent, supplemented by that of his father-in-law before his untimely death, his children might display some aptitude for music. Little could he have known just to what an extent that would prove to be true.

Trusting his instincts, he began to teach Nannerl the clavier when she was around seven years of age. She took to it immediately, surprising and delighting her father. He probably did not pay much attention at first when his young son, just three years of age, began to watch these lessons intently. When they were over the boy would pick out notes, playing simple chords and smiling at the pleasing sound.

To aid Nannerl's progress, Leopold compiled a book of pieces for harpsichord by composers of the day, including a number of anonymous ones, almost certainly by Leopold himself. Mostly the pieces were minuets, but he arranged them in such a way that they became increasingly difficult, the rhythms more complex, ever wider jumps, tricky ornamentation, advancing to hands crossing over.

The book, which Leopold called *Notenbuch für Nannerl* ('Book of Notes for Nannerl'), was exactly what Wolfgang needed, as playing thirds up and down the keyboard began to bore him. He started playing the pieces in Nannerl's book.

Leopold began to pay attention. He could clearly see that Wolfgang was gifted. He started to teach his young son some minuets, then some more difficult pieces. Recalling this later in life, Nannerl said Wolfgang could learn a minuet in just half an hour, and a more difficult piece in an hour. He would then play them with the utmost delicacy, faultlessly, and in exact time, she said. This might normally be expected in a highly talented young musician at least ten years older than Wolfgang.

Realising that his son was more than just usually talented, Leopold began to teach him the organ, and then the violin, at the age of four. The boy took to them naturally, particularly the violin. But his father was something of a taskmaster, and Wolfgang had to work hard to gain his approval.

On one extraordinary occasion, two of Leopold's colleagues came to the apartment in the Getreidegasse to run through some new string trios with him. Little Wolfgang, aged six, nagged his father to allow him to play second violin. Leopold was adamant he could not. He was a child, nowhere near competent enough. Wolfgang insisted he could do it. Again his father refused. Wolfgang cried tears of frustration and left the room.

The second violinist, one Johann Andreas Schachtner, suggested to Leopold he let the boy play alongside him. It couldn't do any harm. Leopold relented, on condition Wolfgang followed Schachtner's lead.

'I was astonished to realise,' Schachtner recalled, 'that I was soon entirely superfluous.'⁴ He put down his violin and allowed Wolfgang to continue. The boy successfully navigated all six trios, reading from sight.

Wolfgang, emboldened, asked his father to let him play the first violin part. This meant Leopold relinquishing the lead to his young son. Schachtner related how Wolfgang, given his small hands, had to resort to 'wrong and irregular positions',⁵ but he and Leopold were stunned to admit he carried it off without any serious mistakes.

We are indebted to Schachtner for recalling another occasion, which happened at about the same time, and was of even more significance than the string trios run-through.

He and Leopold returned to the apartment after Thursday service to find the small boy sitting at the table, pen in hand, blotches

of ink on a piece of paper. They watched him dipping the pen to the bottom of the inkwell, which caused drops of ink to spill onto the paper. Wolfgang wiped the blotches away with the palm of his hand, and continued writing. They asked him what he was doing.

‘I am writing a clavier concerto. The first movement is nearly ready,’ the boy replied.

Leopold laughed at his son’s bravado, pointing out that nothing could be read under the ink smears. But then he began to look more closely. Soon, according to Schachtner, he was shedding tears of wonderment and joy.

‘Look, Schachtner, how correctly and properly it is written. But it is too difficult. No one could play this.’

‘That’s why it’s a concerto,’ Wolfgang said. ‘You must practise very hard to be able to play it.’⁶

Then, to the men’s utter amazement, Wolfgang demonstrated what he meant on the keyboard.

He soon put it aside, though, as if instinctively he knew that he should start with less ambitious compositions. He composed several small pieces for clavier, which his father wrote down in Nannerl’s book. Several pages went missing in the intervening centuries. Two pieces have survived. Soon after his fifth birthday, Wolfgang composed an Andante and Allegro in C major for clavier (к. 1a and 1b).^{*} They are his first known compositions.

Leopold Mozart was now in no doubt. He had a son with a musical talent neither he, nor anyone, had ever encountered before. The question confronting him: how should he handle it?

^{*} According to the numbers assigned to Mozart’s compositions by Ludwig von Köchel in his catalogue of 1862.