Who was Mozart? Of course, we all know his music. That ineffable music, so melodic, textured and refined! Yet, who was the man behind those genius creations? So much has been written about Johannes Chrysostomus Wolfgangus Theophilus Mozart (January 27, 1756 – December 5, 1791), more than about any other composer, much vetted, but quite a bit apocryphal or hyperbolic, that the truth is hidden. There are so many stories circulating about Mozart that they have their own name: Mozart myths. That posterity calls Mozart, “Amadeus,” is itself a myth, when that was neither on his birth certificate nor a name he used in his lifetime (he preferred either Amadé or Amadeo as his middle name).

There are many Mozarts. There is the eighteenth century Mozart, the neglected artistic genius. There is the re-imagined nineteenth century Mozart, the perfect, porcelain musical god on a pedestal. There is the deconstructed twenty-first century Mozart, whose 626 canonical compositions are as commonly heard on historical performance practice instruments as they are by modern orchestras, the Mozart who is recognized today as western music’s first ‘freelance’ musician, who perfected Viennese Classical Style. For many listeners, one or another of the above historical Mozarts remains their truth, regardless of the truth.

Mozart is certainly known by his music, joyous and yet often tinged with sadness. He composed over 54 symphonies, 27 concerti for piano, five for violin, exquisite works for clarinet, oboe, horn and flute, 22 operas, oratorios, and a vast oeuvre of sublime chamber music and Lieder. A good portion of Mozart’s music, just like the 1782 Lange portrait of Mozart himself (above), remained unfinished. This magnificent trove reflects his genius; can anything more be revealed by an examination of Mozart himself? Here was a man with all the warts and imperfections of humanity, who at the same time possessed a gift so rare and extraordinary that his output, the music which is so beloved, has been likened to the foundational melodies of the universe.

What was Mozart like? More than any other composer, Mozart’s image remains one of the least certain. Musicologist Arthur Schurig asserted that “Mozart has been the subject of more portraits having no connection with his actual appearance than any other famous man; and there is no famous man of whom a more worshipful posterity has had a more incorrect physical picture than is generally the case with Mozart.” He had a strong nose and chin, fine blondish hair, an abnormal external left ear (but pristine inner ears, given his absolute pitch and eidetic memory). His sister Maria Anna (Nannerl) commented that “my brother was a rather pretty child…. small, thin,

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and pale in color and lacking in any pretension as to bodily appearance.” The composer Johann Hasse wrote that “the boy Mozart is handsome, vivacious, graceful, and full of good manners.” Michael Kelly, the tenor whose vocal talent was much beloved by Mozart and who sang in the premiere of Le Nozze di Figaro, famously reminisced that “Mozart was a remarkably small man, with a profusion of fine hair, of which he was rather vain. He always received me with kindness and hospitality. He was fond of punch, of which I have seen him take copious draughts. He was kind-hearted and always ready to oblige; but so very particular that when he played, if the slightest noise were made, he left off.” Thomas Attwood, one of Mozart’s composition students, recalled his teacher being “of cheerful habit, though lacking a strong constitution.” Mozart was small in stature, about five foot three inches (1.6 meters). He himself corroborated this when, as a fourteen-year-old in April 1770, he wrote to his sister in Salzburg about his visit to the Vatican, stating, “I had the honor of kissing St. Peter’s foot in the church, and having had the misfortune of being so small, I, that same old dunce Wolfgang Mozart, had to be lifted up.” In 1777, at Mannheim, Mozart met the Webers, whose four musically talented daughters would figure greatly in his life. Although Mozart later married Constanze Weber, he initially fell in love with her elder sister, Aloysia, who spurned him. In her dotage, Aloysia was asked why she rejected so famous a man as Mozart, to which she replied, “I did not know, I only thought . . . well . . . he was such a little man.” Mozart himself put it best, when he said, “Mozart magnus, corpore parvus” (“Mozart the great, small in size”).

Contemporaries on Mozart. Franz Joseph Haydn recognized Mozart’s genius during his lifetime and said as much to Mozart’s father, Leopold, at a 1785 chamber music event at which the last three of Mozart’s six string quartets (dedicated to Haydn) were performed: “I tell you before God, and as an honest man, that your son is the greatest composer known to me in person or by name. He has taste, but above all, he has the greatest knowledge of composition.” After Mozart’s death, Haydn wrote to their Masonic friend Michael Puchberg: “For some time I was quite beside myself over his death, and could not believe that Providence should so quickly have called away an irreplaceable man into the next world….Posterity will not see another talent as his in a hundred years.” The author Karoline Pilcher, a contemporary of Mozart and Haydn, wrote that, “Mozart and Haydn, whom I knew well, were men who displayed in their personal intercourse no other outstanding mental ability and little intellectual cultivation of a learned or higher education. Everyday character, flat humor and with Mozart, a scanty sensible lifestyle, was all they publicly manifested, and yet, what depths, what worlds of fantasy, harmony, melody and feeling, lay concealed within these modest exteriors! Through what inner revelation came to them this understanding, how they must have seized it, to bring forth such powerful effects, and express in tones, feelings, thoughts, passions, that every ear must feel with them, and be spoken to us as well as from greater depths.”

What ailed Mozart? For someone possessed of such remarkable productivity, Mozart was often ill. This was in large part a consequence of his era, a function of the endemic diseases and epidemics to which he was inevitably exposed as a result of extensive travels undertaken in childhood. In the fall 1765, while on a European grand tour both Nannerl and Mozart contracted typhoid fever and acute rheumatic fever, from which they almost died. Mozart may have had any of a number of conditions, including streptococcal (“strep”) infections, erythema nodosum (a painful skin disease), typhus, smallpox, acute rheumatic fever, and kidney trouble. The recurrent strep infections may have led to chronic endocarditis, and renal failure. Mozart twice fell on his head, sustaining blood clots, and he was also self-medicating with antimony. Could Mozart have had acute trichinosis?! Indeed, Mozart wrote to Constanze in October 1791, two weeks before his final illness, that he had eaten pork cutlets, con gusto! Some scholars believe that Mozart suffered from the manic-depressive disorder cyclothymia, a condition common in creative types, which would explain his bursts of intense creativity, such as the summer of 1788 during which in just
six weeks, he wrote his great and last three symphonies. They were composed with no known commission; Mozart never heard them performed except in his imagination.

Tonight we will hear the last of these symphonies, the joyous 41st in C major, posthumously nicknamed “Jupiter.”

One of Mozart's most amazing feats of compositional genius is displayed in the fugal coda of its last movement, where five separate four-note melodies are brilliantly stated, intertwined, modulated and resolved (indeed, here Mozart mastered even J.S. Bach's complex fugue and counterpoint!).

Mozart's last days. A distinction should be made between Mozart's chronic illnesses and the proximate cause of his untimely demise before the age of 36. Mozart died of the consequences of a cerebral hemorrhage resulting from hypertension secondary to acute kidney disease, when he was already severely anemic. To compound matters, Mozart's physicians, Mathias von Sallaba and Thomas Closset (two of the best in Vienna) bloodlet him of almost a liter of blood, which only served to worsen the anemia and hasten death. Acute rheumatic fever was the consensus of a Delphi panel of physicians. Mozart's death certificate (there was no autopsy) stated "heitziges Frieselfieber" ("heated miliary fever"), a common clinical diagnosis of that era, but one which is too non-specific on which to opine a diagnosis; it may have related to the inflammatory rash of rheumatic fever, which in turn may have been a result of Mozart's presumed repeated streptococcal infections. There is evidence of a streptococcal epidemic in Vienna in December 1791. Mozart did not have a pauper's funeral – in fact, he had a second-class funeral, only the aristocracy had first-class obsequies.

Peter Shaffer and Milos Forman's universally lauded play and movie, Amadeus, was a brilliantly crafted psychodrama portraying Mozart succumbing to the wiles of the Viennese court composer, Antonio Salieri. Nothing is further from the truth. The two composers were cordial competitors, shared compositional duties on a cantata as well as an unfinished opera (The Philosopher's Stone), Salieri attended and enjoyed a performance of Mozart's opera, Die Zauberflote, and he even gave piano lessons to Mozart's and Constanze's younger son. There is no evidence that Salieri poisoned Mozart or otherwise was an accomplice in Mozart's demise.

The Mozart Effect. Does music make us smarter? Does Mozart's music in particular? This discussion underpins the so-called “Mozart effect.” Otolaryngologist Alfred Tomatis coined the term in his 1991 book, Pourquoi Mozart?, discussing the concept of auditory processing integration. Examining singers who were having trouble singing certain notes in tune, Tomatis discovered that they had a coincident hearing defect in the same frequency as the vocal problem, between hearing (audition) and voicing (phonation); “the voice can only reproduce what the ear can hear.” Tomatis used Mozart's violin concerti and Gregorian plainchant to improve auditory processing, to "retrain the ear" of patients who had acquired sensorineural hearing loss. Among those who gained improvement were Maria Callas, Gerard Depardieu, Benjamin Luxon, and Sting (Gordon Sumner). In 1993, Frances Rauscher, Gordon Shaw, and Katherine Ky, researchers at the University of California, Irvine, investigated a “Mozart effect” in the journal Nature. Rauscher's team found that a group of students who were "pre-treated" for ten minutes by listening to the first movement and part of the second movement of Mozart's two-piano sonata in D major, K. 448, performed better on a spatial-task reasoning Stanford-Binet test (a spatial reasoning IQ test) test than when the same students were pre-treated with a "relaxation tape" or after they had sat in silence for ten minutes prior to testing. These results were temporary, lasting only through the time taken for the experiment (about fifteen minutes) and were specifically related to visual-spatial task reasoning, and not to other measures of intellect. More recent research has both confirmed and contradicted the results of the study. The music educator Don Campbell was influenced by Tomatis' work and the results of the Rauscher study and went on to write the best-selling 1997 book The Mozart Effect: Tapping the Power of Music to Heal the Body, Strengthen the Mind, and Unlock the Creative Spirit. Campbell's claims went far beyond spatial intelligence improvement to include notions that Mozart's music improved mental health and cognitive ability.

The Mozart effect has evolved into the assertion that early childhood exposure to classical music (specifically,
Mozart’s music) can bestow a beneficial effect on mental development, leading to advantages and a range of lifetime achievement. Is there a feature intrinsic to certain types of music that enhances brain function? One study analyzed compositions by Mozart and fifty-seven other composers, and found that the music of Mozart, as well as that of Johann Sebastian Bach and Johann Christian Bach (but not the music of the other composers), contains a high degree of long-term periodicity. Specific harmonic patterns and chordal repetitions found especially in the music of Mozart and J. S. Bach and J. C. Bach (the latter was an influence on the young Mozart) align neurons in regions of the brain involved with auditory processing and memory (specifically the parietooccipital cortex and right prefrontal cortex) which lead to temporary heightened mental capacity and function, neurophysiological evidence for a “Mozart Effect” (as well as a “J. C. Bach Effect” and a “J. S. Bach Effect”). The music of Mozart evokes pleasure and taps deeply into our emotions, creating heightened intellectual and even spiritual awareness and rapture. Another genius, the Nobel-prize winning physicist Albert Einstein, said it well, “Mozart’s music is of such beauty and purity that one feels he merely found it, that it has always existed as part of the inner beauty of the universe waiting to be revealed.”

AMADEUS IN RETROSPECT by Vincent de Luise MD Assistant Professor, Yale University: Cultural Ambassador, Waterbury Symphony Orchestra

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