

WILD ABOUT WOLFGANG

By Sue Jackson

First published in spring 06 in *YL magazine*

I have a confession to make. I'm no expert on classical music, but I know what I like. And that's Mozart. I'll tell you why. Several years ago I was scheduled for surgery, and the only other time I'd had an operation was when I lost my tonsils at six. So the night before found me in my hospital bed, freaking out.

In a moment of inspiration, my partner, who knew I'd begun a dalliance with Mozart, went out and bought a Mozart box set, borrowed my teenage son's boom box and returning to the hospital, set up my sound system. There was no way I could sleep, so, all night long I lay listening to that sublime music. By morning, when the orderly arrived to collect me, I was relaxed, calm and cheerful. So I know Mozart was a genius. And it seemed only fitting that in this year, the 250th anniversary of his birth, I should go to Europe to pay homage.

I was certainly not alone. Vienna and Prague, where Mozart spent lots of time, were ablaze with Mozart fever and awash with memorabilia. There were Mozart jigsaws, mugs, table napkins, stationary, pens, ties, paperweights, chocolates, watches, t-shirts and my personal favourite, custom-made for Europe's other great event this year – Mozart soccer balls. At first, I thought: how crass, but then I thought again, because Mozart might well have given his stamp of approval.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart spent his whole life chasing the dollar, or to be precise, the kreutzer, the gulden, the lira and the franc. Patronage, commissions,

teaching, performances, he tried them all, yet still he had to move house frequently and sometimes hide from his creditors. Although the darling of Viennese high society, he was treated badly by some employers, and frequently complained about receiving payment in lace cuffs or snuff boxes, when what he needed was cash.

But Mozart was no pauper. The problem was that while he earned big, he spent big too. Glitzy clothing was one of his weaknesses. In the Mozart museum in Vienna, I saw his favourite red coat, tiny because he was a tiny man, but made of gorgeous fabrics, stiff with embroidery. Of course Mozart had appearances to keep up. He was, after all, the rock star of his generation. And like rock stars the world over, Mozart's behind-the-scenes work practices as well as his on-stage behaviour could be decidedly unconventional.

It was amazing to see samples of sheet music, written in his own hand, with scarcely a correction, and to learn that he could compose six pages of sheet music in a single day. Even more amazing was to hear that he frequently played billiards or darts, gambled or chatted with his friends as he did so. Apparently, it was as if the music was playing in his head, and all he had to do was transcribe it, at speed.

While Mozart didn't smash instruments on stage, by the standards of the day, his behaviour at performances could be equally shocking. Once, as a child, he gave a recital at the grand Schonbrunn palace for the Holy Roman Empress, the staid Maria Theresa. At the end of the recital, perhaps delighted at his own brilliance, he jumped up from the keyboard and leapt into the lap of the startled

Empress. As I walked through the hall of mirrors where it all happened, I couldn't help smiling.

There is plenty of evidence for this story of Mozart's Royal faux pas, but other stories are more suspect, because Mozart has always attracted fictionalisation. This is surprising really because the facts themselves were extraordinary enough.

By the age of three, Mozart could play a number of instruments. By four, he was composing. At five, he could play the piano blindfolded with his hands crossed over each other. He was so prolific in his short life – he died at thirty-five - that if you sat down to listen to his music non-stop, you would not stand up for eleven days.

Despite his prodigious output, Mozart spent more than a third of his life on the road, and performed in over two hundred major cities and towns, from Naples to London. In Prague, a city of many churches, there is a running joke about his frenetic level of activity: 'Guess which Prague church organ Mozart **didn't** play?'

One fact I was pleased to learn was that for someone who has enriched so many lives, Wolfgang found joy in his own, especially with his family. His wife, Costanza, shared his love of music, and they frequently sang and played together. Although short, their marriage was a happy one, not a common achievement for prodigies.

For all his genius, Mozart demonstrated an array of all-too-human flaws. While the wonderful film *Amadeus* came in for considerable criticism for making too much of these, his letters leave no doubt that he could be vain, shallow, coarse,

envious, selfish, profligate, a name-dropper and a show-off. Personally, I find it even more intriguing, and comforting as well, that somebody who was no angel could produce such heavenly music.

Speaking of his music, one of the places where I paid homage was the Burgtheater in Vienna, where we saw a less famous opera, *The Abduction from the Harem*. In fact, the Burgtheater was the venue for the very first performance, when the Emperor Joseph, who had commissioned the work, gave his considered verdict: 'Good... but too many notes.' There were critics in our audience too, complaining variously of the modern-day costumes, a tenor graffitiing the set and a lead soprano singing her main aria while hanging upside down, Circus Oz-style, from a trapeze. I suspect that Mozart, who broke all the rules by using German lyrics and setting the action in a harem, would have loved it.

The medieval St Vitus Cathedral in Prague provided the perfect setting for Mozart's famous *Requiem*. It is partly famous because Mozart saw its composition as a portent of his own death, because it was commissioned by the 'Dark Stranger', who visited him by night and would not disclose his identity. The truth is much more prosaic. The 'stranger' was most probably a church official cutting out the middle-man by dealing directly with the composer.

Understandably, Mozart procrastinated with this commission and, tragically, was still composing it on his death bed. When we arrived at St Vitus for the *Requiem*, it was already packed, and there was lots of medieval-style jostling for seats. But from the moment the performance began, the audience was spell-bound.

Before leaving Vienna for home, we ate our last meal at the Restaurant Frauenhuber, where Mozart played the piano nine months before he died. Sitting

in my red velvet banquette, tucking into schnitzel and apple strudel, I couldn't help wondering how it must have felt to have Mozart as your piano man.

The trip was wonderful and I learned many fascinating details about Mozart's life and music in Europe. But I think I'd already experienced his essence much earlier, back in that hospital bed, because as Mozart himself put it: 'Patience and tranquillity of mind contribute more to cure our distempers as the whole art of medicine.'