

ARTS & LETTERS

The Mozart Myth

"Mozart: The Myth and The Reality" by Gregory Hayes, in *Humanities* (Mar.-Apr. 1991), National Endowment for the Humanities, 1100 Pennsylvania Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20506.

In the Oscar-winning 1984 film *Amadeus*, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-91) was made out to be a silly genius, in dramatic contrast to his rival Antonio Salieri, a pious mediocrity. The portrayal, writes Hayes, a pianist and harpsichordist, was only the latest variant of the mythic Mozart, a popular creation that has overshadowed the man known to scholars.

According to German historian Volkmar Braunbehrens, says Hayes, the real Mozart did not even use the name Amadeus. He "used simply Amadé (or Amadeo), in an attempt to translate his baptismal name Theophilus (*Gottlieb*, or 'love of God')," he wrote. "It is therefore quite appropriate that the theater and cinema associate themselves with the name 'Amadeus,' thereby announcing that they want nothing to do with Mozart's actual life."

The mythic Mozart, established soon after his death and embellished by writers and composers ever since, is, Hayes notes, "the child genius and youthful virtuoso

who, after brilliant early success in Vienna, was spurned by a philistine world of jealous peers who somehow conspired to engineer his early death" at age 35 in 1791.

The last year of Mozart's life provided the mythmakers with fertile material. The composer was deeply in debt, and in the summer of 1791, a stranger commissioned the *Requiem Mass* from him under mysterious circumstances. Franz Xaver Niemetschek, an early biographer (1798), told how Mozart was visited by an unknown messenger, bearing an unsigned letter from an unidentified patron. Niemetschek said that the ailing Mozart later came to feel that he was writing the *Requiem* for himself and that he had somehow been poisoned.

The mysterious patron's identity was long a staple of Mozart biographies, but modern scholars have determined that he was Count Franz Walsegg-Stuppach, an eccentric music lover. Although there is little evidence to support the notion that Mozart was poisoned, rumors circulated in Salieri's lifetime that *he* had thus done in his rival. Aleksandr Pushkin in 1830 wrote a play about the murderer Salieri, and Russian composer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov turned it into an opera. More recently, in *Amadeus*, playwright and screenwriter Peter Shaffer had Salieri force Mozart to dictate the *Requiem* to him until his rival at last expired from exhaustion. In reality, however, Salieri was not even present at the deathbed.

Despite the skewed portrayals, scholarly investiga-



Tom Hulce's *Amadeus* portrayal of Mozart conducting "belies both the historical evidence (Mozart would in all likelihood have been seated at a keyboard) and the art of conducting," Hayes writes.

Broadway's Last Curtain?

Thomas M. Disch, the *Nation's* theater critic, writes an obituary for Broadway in the *Atlantic* (Mar. 1991).

In the '90s . . . the Great White Way [is destined] to become a graveyard for great white elephants, as, one by one, the 36 theaters left in the Broadway area find themselves unable to attract either shows or audiences.

Those who feel a professional obligation to contradict the handwriting on the wall—theater owners, producers, and press agents—can cite cheery statistics. The League of American Theatres and Producers announced [in June 1990] that for the third year in a row Broadway set box-office records, with \$283 million in ticket sales. However, this record reflects not dramatically increased attendance but only higher ticket prices—as high as \$55 or \$60 for musicals In the 1967–1968 season 58 shows opened on Broadway: 44 nonmusical plays . . . and 14 musicals. The 1989–1990 season yielded 35 shows [including] 21 nonmusical plays (six of them revivals) and 12 musicals (four of them revivals) Musicals seem to be holding their own, but clearly 'legit' drama . . . is an endangered species

Now, except among the rich, a night on the town has become a once-a-year extravagance, a fact reflected in the strength of Broadway musicals relative to plays After all, people can see actors on TV any night of the week; they can read a good story. When they go to the theater, they want a lavish production, visible millions, their money's worth Broadway has become a tourist attraction, New York City's dilapidated and inadequate response to Disney World. Most native New Yorkers have come to regard it as . . . a place one goes to, if at all, only with out-of-town visitors

Let us suppose that legitimate theater is a lost cause on Broadway, except for a few ever-more-retro revivals each season. Doesn't that still leave the musical as a living art form? I think not, and for parallel reasons—the dwindling supply of talent and the disparity between what producers can offer and what consumers want If Broadway's musical menu is beginning to be almost as antiquarian as the Metropolitan Opera's, the reasons are no further away than your radio and your cable-TV screen. Broadway style . . . no longer represents the consensus preference in matters of song and dance.

tions in recent decades have made the real Mozart more visible. Indeed, the specialists' efforts, Hayes writes, have produced "a 'new' Mozart: a sophisticated social observer whose operas are charged with political overtones, a mercurial personality

whose tangled finances and behavior are just now becoming better understood, and an almost inconceivably gifted musician whose inspirations and compositional procedures are no less astonishing" when seen in an accurate light.

Forbidden Garden

"Mondrian's Secret Garden" by Robert Kenner, in *Art & Antiques* (Mar. 1991), Art & Antiques Associates, 89 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10003.

Dutch painter Piet Mondrian's abstract arrangements of right angles and primary colors can be seen on everything from bedsheets to bathroom tiles. But Mondrian (1872–1944) himself remains a somewhat mysterious figure. Art historians have portrayed him as having made an orderly artistic progression from landscape painter to grid maker, but to tidily portray him thus, says Kenner, a senior editor at *Art & Antiques*, they have had to ignore an im-

portant part of his work—his flowers.

"Between 1900 and 1925, Mondrian the dogmatic abstractionist sketched or painted as many as 100 realistic studies of solitary flowers," Kenner notes. "These obsessively rendered blooms—crisp snowy blue chrysanthemums, languorously wilting sunflowers, vibrant red amaryllises, [a] penciled lily . . . fresh and frank as any nude—include some of the artist's boldest, most expressive work, but