

MUSIC IN THE AGE OF COFFEE

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Don Giovanni: Ehi caffè!
Leporello: Cioccolata!
Masetto: Ah Zerlina, giudizio!
Don Giovanni, finale of Act 1

On 7–8 October 1791, about two months before his death, Mozart wrote to his wife: ‘Right after you left I played two games of billiards with Herr Mozart (who wrote the opera for Schikaneder’s theatre); then I sold my nag for 14 ducats; then I had Joseph summon Primus and bring me black coffee, with which I smoked a wonderful pipe of tobacco; then I orchestrated almost all of Stadler’s rondo’.¹ In orchestrating the finale of the Clarinet Concerto under the influence of caffeine and nicotine, Mozart was very much a man of his age.

One of the most remarkable and distinctive features of musical life in eighteenth-century Europe was the astonishing level of productivity achieved by many of its composers. The sheer number of major works written by Antonio Vivaldi (nearly five hundred concertos, at least forty operas and a vast amount of sacred music), Georg Philipp Telemann (whose 1,700 church cantatas represent just one part of his enormous output), J. S. Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and many others reflects, in part, the century’s predominantly optimistic, energetic mood, which encouraged writers such as Voltaire and Diderot to be similarly prolific. It was probably no coincidence that this age of almost manic intellectual and artistic creativity was preceded by the introduction into Europe of a drug that, although not isolated and named until 1819, thoroughly pervaded eighteenth-century life.

The role that caffeine and the drinks that contain it have played in the development of early modern European culture has excited much interest recently among students of the period.² This essay is a preliminary attempt to encourage historians of eighteenth-century music to enter the scholarly dialogue about the drug and the drinks through which its users ingested it.³

1 Mozart: *Briefe und Aufzeichnungen*, ed. Wilhelm A. Bauer and Otto Erich Deutsch, 7 volumes (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1962–1975), volume 4, 157.

2 See, for example, Jordan Goodman, ‘Excitantia: Or How Enlightenment Europe Took to Soft Drugs’, in *Consuming Habits: Drugs in History and Anthropology*, ed. Jordan Goodman, Paul E. Lovejoy and Andrew Sherrat (London: Routledge, 1995), 126–147; Woodruff D. Smith, ‘From Coffeehouse to Parlour: The Consumption of Coffee, Tea and Sugar in Northwestern Europe in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries’, in *Consuming Habits*, 148–165; Philip Lawson, *A Taste for Empire and Glory: Studies in British Overseas Expansion, 1660–1800* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997; I refer in particular to Lawson’s essays ‘Tea, Vice and the English State, 1660–1784’ and ‘Women and the Empire of Tea: Image and Counterimage in Hanoverian England’); Roger Schmidt, ‘Caffeine and the Coming of the Enlightenment’, *Raritan* 23 (2003), 129–149; Markman Ellis, *The Coffee House: A Cultural History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004), Brian Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffee House* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005); Marcy Norton, ‘Tasting Empire: Chocolate and the European Internalization of Mesoamerican Aesthetics’, *American Historical Review* III (2006), 660–691; and *Eighteenth-Century Coffeehouse Culture*, ed. Markman Ellis, 4 volumes (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2006). That interest in the subject is not yet exhausted is suggested by a session at the most recent annual meeting of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (Atlanta, 22–25 March 2007) entitled ‘“The Chocolate Made Me Do It”: The Eighteenth-Century Use of Stimulants. . . and Their Effects’.

3 This is a slightly expanded version of an essay that first appeared in German, under the title ‘Musik im Kaffee-Zeitalter’, in *Mozart: Experiment Aufklärung im Wien des ausgehenden 18. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Herbert Lachmayer (Osfielden: Hatje Cantz, 2006).



Europeans discovered coffee in the seventeenth century. And they were soon celebrating its psychoactive effects in poetry, such as the anonymous *Brief Description of the Excellent Vertues of that Sober and Wholesome Drink Called Coffee* (1674):

From the rich chambers of the rising sun,
 Where arts, and all good fashions first begun,
 Where earth with choicest rarities is blest,
 And dying Phoenix builds her wondrous nest,
 COFFEE arrives, that grave and wholesome liquor,
 That heals the stomach, makes the genius quicker,
 Relieves the memory, revives the sad,
 And cheers the spirits, without making mad.⁴

The opening of what might have been Europe's first coffee-house, in London in 1652, led to the establishment of coffee-houses in many of the continent's largest cities by the beginning of the eighteenth century (see Table 1). By 1715 London and Paris each had several hundred coffee-houses. They provided the institutional framework for a flourishing culture of caffeine.

Table 1 The spread of coffee-houses in Europe and North America⁵

City	Year of first coffee-house
London	1652
Oxford	1655
Cambridge	1664
The Hague	1664
Amsterdam	1665
Bremen	1669
Paris	1671
Marseille	1671
Hamburg	1679
Venice	1683
Vienna	1685
Boston	1689
Leipzig	1694
New York	1796
Salzburg	1700
Philadelphia	1700
Prague	1714
Stockholm	1718
Berlin	1721

The caffeine ingested in these coffee-houses had two mutually reinforcing effects. First (as the poem quoted earlier attests), it stimulated individual coffee drinkers, increasing their mental energy, alertness and sense of well-being. Second, as coffee drinkers interacted with one another, the caffeine encouraged

⁴ Quoted in William H. Ukers, *All About Coffee*, second edition (New York: The Tea and Coffee Trade Journal, 1935), 67.

⁵ Bennett Alan Weinberg and Bonnie K. Bealer, *The World of Caffeine: The Science and Culture of the World's Most Popular Drug* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 18, and Ellis, *The Coffee House: A Cultural History*, 259.



conversation, the give-and-take of opinions and information. Coffee-houses became places where intellectuals and artists could test and (depending on the political conditions) extend the limits of freedom of expression. Caffeine thus helped to fuel the Enlightenment.

The caffeine-stimulated conversation by which the ideals of the Enlightenment were spread is very much in evidence in the first scene of Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, set in a *bottega di caffè*. Alfonso is a man of the world, a *philosophe*. The conflict between him and the two young soldiers is a conflict between two different views of human nature: precisely the kind of debate in which eighteenth-century intellectuals engaged in coffee-houses all over Europe.

Così fan tutte also shows the ingestion of caffeine in the domestic sphere. Our first glimpse of Despina is of her preparing chocolate for Fiordiligi and Dorabella, and taking a furtive sip:

Che vita maladetta
 È il far la cameriera!
 Dal mattino alla sera
 Si fa, si suda, si lavora, e poi
 Di tanto che si fa, nulla è per noi.
 È mezza ora, che sbatto,
 Il cioccolato è fatto, ed a me tocca
 Restar ad odorarlo a secca bocca?
 Non è forse la mia come la vostra,
 O garbate signore,
 Che a voi dessi l'essenza, e a me l'odore?
 Per Bacco vo assaggiarlo:
 Com'è buono!

What an accursed life is that of the chambermaid. From morning till night we make things, we sweat, we work, and then, of all the things we make, nothing is left for us. I've been whipping the chocolate for half an hour; now it's ready, and all I can do is smell it while my mouth stays dry? Is my mouth not like yours, kind ladies, though you get the essence, and I get the smell? Well then, I'll try it. How good it is!

Don Giovanni takes advantage of caffeine's appeal to the lower classes. He offers both coffee and chocolate to Zerlina, Masetto and their companions in the hope that it will stimulate their merriment to the point where Masetto will not notice Zerlina's abduction.

The Café Procope in Paris, founded in 1689, became a magnet for literary people. Voltaire's appetite for coffee was insatiable, according to Frederick the Great: 'Either to dispel sleep or to revive his senses, he drank coffee in vast quantities: fifty cups a day was hardly sufficient'.⁶ Diderot took coffee and worked on the *Encyclopédie* at another Parisian coffee-house, the Café de la Régence. Samuel Johnson, the celebrated lexicographer and man of letters, was another coffee-house habitué; but he ingested caffeine mainly in the form of tea, of which he drank forty cups a day. Johnson called himself 'a hardened and shameless tea drinker, who has for twenty years diluted his meals with only the infusion of this fascinating plant; whose kettle scarcely has time to cool; who with tea amuses the evening, with tea solaces the midnight, and with tea welcomes the morning'.⁷

Coffee-houses also attracted those (perhaps the majority of their customers) to whom caffeine gave *the feeling* of being brilliant and learned; it was to these that the philosopher Charles Louis de Montesquieu referred (through his alter ego Usbek) in his satirical *Lettres persanes* of 1721:

6 Frederick the Great, 'Eloge de Voltaire', *Nouveaux Mémoires de l'Académie Royale des Sciences et Belles-Lettres*, 1778 (Berlin, 1780), 21.

7 Quoted in Winberg and Bealer, *The World of Caffeine*, 173.



Coffee is very much in use in Paris. There are many public houses where it is sold. In some of these houses the news is announced; in others chess is played. There is one in which coffee is prepared in such a way that it gives intelligence (*esprit*) to those who drink it; at least no one, among all those who leave this place, thinks he is not four times as intelligent as when he entered.⁸

The Café Procope was located across the street from the Comédie Française, one of Paris's principal theatres, and its clientele included actors and musicians. But that was not the only place where musicians were exposed to caffeine early and often. In Leipzig around 1701 the young Telemann founded a Collegium Musicum, a music society consisting largely of university students that performed in one of the city's several coffee-houses. Later, in Frankfurt, Telemann organized concerts for the Frauenstein, a club whose members gathered to drink coffee and to smoke. J. S. Bach took over the direction of Telemann's Leipzig Collegium in 1729, and its coffee-house concerts brought him too into contact with caffeine (if he did not know its effects already from personal experience). He celebrated the pleasures of coffee in his Coffee Cantata of 1732, a work written for the Collegium and probably performed in Zimmermann's coffee-house. Bach's possessions at the time of his death in 1750 suggest that in his private life he took part whole-heartedly in Leipzig's caffeine culture. His estate included:

1 coffeepot, large	1 brass coffeepot
1 ditto, smaller	1 ditto, smaller
1 large teapot	1 ditto, even smaller
1 coffee dish	1 brass coffee tray ⁹

Niccolò Jommelli's craving for chocolate seems to have equalled Voltaire's for coffee and Johnson's for tea. This great opera composer took advantage of his professional contacts at the court of Lisbon in an attempt to get his hands on chocolate freshly arrived in Portugal from its tropical colonies. With the obsessiveness of an addict he wrote to Gaetano Martinelli, librettist at the Portuguese court theatre, on 14 November 1769:

I am very concerned – but all joking aside, let us speak with true friendship – I am very concerned to have a good supply of chocolate. This P. Maestro, my dear brother. . . , great dilettante and exceedingly perspicacious philosopher/chocolate maker, has counselled me to have a sufficient quantity of chocolate sent from Portugal, where the most excellent can be obtained, whereas here with no matter how much diligence one can only obtain the common and ordinary kind. He has further suggested not to have it sent whole, or rather in the bean, but already made into paste, pure and without sugar (as he has seen in Rome, likewise coming from Portugal) in such a way that it can then be newly worked here in order to add the quantity of sugar and cinnamon that I like best.

So now I beg you to take upon yourself this commission, making a selection from well matured, perfect and choice cacao, and having it reduced to a simple paste, which must then be put in so many lie pots, or big iron boxes, well closed and well tinned throughout, as is done for fine Spanish tobacco, not only to protect the paste from sea water or from any kind of odour or bad smell, but also to protect it thus from every swindle or fraud that could happen during the trip, to change it, or steal it, as very often happens.

The amount I leave to your discretion, as long as it is no less than 200 pounds of paste. Here the best cacao from Portugal (but, as I have already said, always ordinary and common) is worth 14 or 15 grains a pound (which is little more than a *paolo*). There, it must be less; still, do not restrict yourself by the price and be satisfied if the product is perfect. Pay for it what you must.

8 Charles Louis de Montesquieu, *Lettres persanes* (Paris, 1721), letter 36.

9 *Bach-Dokumente*, ed. Werner Neumann and Hans-Joachim Schulze, 3 volumes (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1963–1972), volume 2, 492.



If everything goes according to this plan (which I hope for by your love, with all the greatest possible diligence), you will be able to send it by way of Genoa, addressed here in Naples to His Excellency Sig. de Sá, Minister Plenipotentiary of His Most Faithful Majesty [the King of Portugal]. . . .

My friend, I am so accustomed to this blessed chocolate, and my health finds it so helpful, that I would sooner deprive myself of some other comfort, even if important, so that I can have it every morning. The great trouble, then, is that I like it good, and here good is very difficult to have. *Basta*. For a little while still – while the provision that my aforementioned brother made in Rome lasts – I am fairly well off, but when this is finished, I will find myself in trouble. I put myself in your hands.¹⁰

In Vienna composers seemed to have preferred coffee to chocolate or tea. While Mozart liked his coffee black, with a pipe of tobacco, his librettist Lorenzo da Ponte used coffee in conjunction with snuff, wine and the charms of a sixteen-year-old girl to sustain him through twelve-hour sessions in which he wrote three librettos simultaneously (including *Don Giovanni*). One of Beethoven's first acts on his arrival in Vienna in 1792 was to invite Haydn, his teacher, out for coffee. Beethoven's own intake of caffeine was substantial, to judge from the reminiscences of his early biographer Anton Schindler:

For breakfast he had coffee, which he prepared himself, for the most part, in a glass coffeemaker. Coffee seems to have been his most indispensable form of nutrition. He prepared it with the same kind of care for which those in the Middle East are famous. Sixty beans were calculated as the proper amount for each cup, and often counted, especially if guests were present.¹¹

Another caffeine user, Gioacchino Rossini, noticed that the drug's effect wore off after a certain amount of constant use. Honoré de Balzac, in his *Traité des excitants modernes* of 1838, quoted Rossini as saying: 'Coffee is a matter of fifteen or twenty days: luckily the time to make an opera'.¹² That suggests he composed at least some of his operas in a creative fervour induced by caffeine.

Handel achieved similar feats of compositional speed, writing *Messiah* in three weeks and the twelve *Grand Concertos*, Op. 6, in about a month. His consumption of both coffee and chocolate probably contributed to his stamina on these and other occasions.

Not every prolific composer drank coffee, tea or chocolate. Antonio Salieri, according to his early biographer Ignaz von Mosel, drank only water; pastries and sweets were his only weakness.¹³ And of course it is impossible to quantify how much caffeine musicians ingested or how much of their productivity, if any, they owed to the drug. Nor did the year 1800 bring with it any lessening of interest in caffeine. Beethoven and Rossini were by no means alone in demonstrating its virtues to nineteenth-century composers. But it seems likely that, in contributing to the eighteenth century's mood of optimism and well-being, and helping to stimulate the mental energy and endurance of writers, musicians and audiences alike, caffeine played a significant role in that era's extraordinary musical achievements.

10 Translation (used here, with some minor changes) and transcription of the original document in Marita McClymonds, *Niccolò Jommelli: The Last Years, 1769–1774* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1980), 493–496.

11 Anton Schindler, *Biographie von Ludwig van Beethoven*, 2 volumes (Münster: Aschendorff, 1871), volume 2, 193.

12 Honoré de Balzac, *Traité des excitants modernes* (Paris: Edition du Boucher, 2002), 14.

13 Ignaz von Mosel, *Ueber das Leben und die Werke des Anton Salieri* (Vienna: Wallishausner, 1827), 207.