

THREE POSTHUMOUS REPORTS CONCERNING MOZART IN HIS LATE VIENNESE YEARS

DAVID J. BUCH



Three posthumous documents not taken into account in the secondary literature on Mozart may offer insight into the last few years of the composer's life. While these reminiscences do not solve any mysteries, they could eventually help to shed new light on significant but as yet unresolved biographical questions.

FROM THE DIARY OF WILHELM BACKHAUS

The first report is a diary entry on the death of the singer-composer Franz Xaver Gerl (1764–1827), the first Sarastro and a friend of Mozart and his family.¹ Mozart scholars are familiar with Wilhelm Backhaus (1779–1834), an actor and singer in the Mannheim court theatre who played Antonio in *Le nozze di Figaro* (24 October 1790) and wrote of encountering Mozart without recognizing the composer.² Entries from Backhaus's diary, now lost, were copied by another actor and singer, Stefan Grua (1797–1866), who wrote Backhaus's entries on the reverse sides of various theatre posters now preserved in a bound, chronological collection in Mannheim's Reiß-Museum. One of these entries, from March 1827, provides the following information:

Um halb 11 Uhr starb mein alter Freund Gerl an der Halszehrung im 61t. Jahr. Er war ein herrlicher Mensch und ein sehr guter Sänger. Motzardt schrieb den Sarastro für ihn. Sein Tod war sanft und leicht den 12t. wurde er begraben. Aller folgte trauernd seiner Leiche, denn Alle liebten ihn. Er war ein sehr guter Freund von Motzard . . . Sie waren täglich beisammen, und spielten Zwicken was Motzardt sehr liebte. Gerl erzählte of[t] von ihm.³

My old friend Gerl died at the age of sixty-one of a throat infection at around half past ten. He was a splendid man and a very good singer. Mozart wrote [the role of] Sarastro for him. His death was peaceful and easy and he was buried on the twelfth. Everyone sadly followed his body, for all loved him. He was a very good friend of Mozart. . . . They were together daily, and played 'Zwicken,' which Mozart liked very much. Gerl often spoke of him.

The reference to Mozart's fondness for a card game called Zwicken is new information and the kind of detail that seems unlikely to have been invented.

1 On Gerl see Alfred Orel, 'Sarastro . . . Hr. Gerl. Ein altes Weib . . . Mad. Gerl', *Mozart-Jahrbuch* (1955), 66–89. New evidence of Mozart's and Gerl's collaboration with Emanuel Schikaneder, Benedikt Schack and Johann Baptist Henneberg on the Viennese singspiel *Der Stein der Weisen* (1790) is given in my article 'Der Stein der Weisen, Mozart, and Collaborative Singspiels at Emanuel Schikaneder's Theater auf der Wieden', *Mozart-Jahrbuch* (2000), 89–124.

2 Otto Erich Deutsch, *Mozart: Die Dokumente seines Lebens* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1961), 331. The full citation, taken from the same set of inscriptions on theatre posters, is given in Roland Würtz, 'Die Erstaufführungen von Mozarts Bühnenwerken in Mannheim', in *Das Mannheimer Mozart-Buch*, ed. Würtz (Wilhelmshaven: Heinrichshofen, 1977), 181.

3 Roland Würtz, *Verzeichnis und Ikonographie der kurpfälzischen Hofmusiker zu Mannheim nebst darstellendem Theaterpersonal 1723–1803*, Quellenkataloge zur Musikgeschichte 8 (Wilhelmshaven: Heinrichshofen: 1975), 70. Grua's Backhaus transcriptions are also preserved in an unpublished typescript by Wilhelm Hermann, 'Johann Wilhelm Backhaus. Eine Tagebuchnotiz des Mannheimer Schauspielers' (Mannheim, Reiß-Museum). I would like to thank Alena Jakubcova for bringing these sources to my attention. (All translations are my own.)



Zwicken (the word was apparently taken from a verb meaning to ‘pinch’ or ‘squeeze’ and appears to refer to either pressure or extracting money) was popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In 1807 Josef Richter mentioned the game in his collection of epistolary vignettes to an imaginary country relative, *Die Eipeldauer Briefe*:

Das sogenannte Zwicken, oder Lafeten, wie ‘s d’ Lakey und Kutscher gnennt habn, ist jüngst neuerdings verboten worden, weils unter die wirklichen Hasardirspiel ghört, und weil sich viele dadurch z’ Grund gricht habn, und weil vielleicht mancher Kutscher den Habern verspielt hat, den seine Pferd hätten kriegen solln. Da komm ich aber die Täg in ein Bierhäusl, wo immer ein Kompani von gar eleganten Kaufmannsdienern fast täglich Zwicken gespielt hat.⁴

The so-called *Zwicken*, or *Lafeten*, as lackies and coachmen have named it, has just recently been banned, because it actually belongs among the games of chance, because many have driven themselves into the ground through it, and perhaps because many a coachman has gambled away the oats that his horses should have got. Yet each day I go to a beer pub where a group of elegant servants working for merchants play *Zwicken* almost every day.

Gustav Gugitz identified an Imperial ban on the card game, published in the *Wiener Zeitung* for 26 September 1807,⁵ which also refers to a broader ban on gambling issued in 1784. The Grimm brothers traced the term as far back as 1783; one of their sources mentions its popularity at court.⁶

Gerl’s remark concerning *Zwicken* brings to mind the oft-repeated supposition that Mozart’s large debts were at least in part caused by gambling.⁷ The evidence for this hypothesis derives from third-hand reports of Mozart’s gambling that first appeared in the nineteenth century. Disinterested accounts representing direct evidence are lacking. Unlike other early reports of Mozart’s fondness for games, however, this is a diary entry, not intended for publication, so there is no reason to assume that Backhaus fabricated the quotation. Gerl, a longtime friend of the composer and his family, and a singer-composer who enjoyed a close connection to Mozart in the last two years of his life, might have exaggerated facts to make himself appear more important than he actually was. But this offhand remark about Mozart enjoying a card game does not suggest self-aggrandizement.

Even if we are willing to accept this vignette, it does not demonstrate or even suggest that gambling caused Mozart’s debts.⁸ Many individuals play cards without risking their financial security; some gamble with only small amounts of money. Others actually win. In any event, this small bit of information concerning one of Mozart’s pastimes, innocuously provided to a curious friend by a former colleague and friend of Mozart, offers a small but intriguing detail concerning the composer’s recreational activities.

4 Josef Richter, *Die Eipeldauer Briefe 1799–1813 in Auswahl herausgegeben*, ed. Eugen von Paunel and Gustav Gugitz (Munich: Georg Müller, 1917–1918), volume 2, 259.

5 Richter, *Die Eipeldauer Briefe*, volume 2, 455.

6 Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, ed. Gustav Rosenhagen (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1854), volume 16, 1120: ‘ein bestimmtes kartenspiel spielen: das jetzregierende liebblingsspiel der hofleute heißt zwicken *Briefe eines Franzosen* (1784) 1, 101.’ The reference is to Johann Kaspar Riesbeck, *Briefe eines reisenden Franzosen über Deutschland an seinen Bruder zu Paris* (no place, 1783).

7 See Uwe Krämer, ‘Wer hat Mozart verhungern lassen? Anmerkungen zu biographischen Details’, *Musica* 30 (1976), 203–211. Billiards and bowling are mentioned along with card games as Mozart’s favourite (and possibly pernicious) pastimes. More recently Günther G. Bauer, *Mozart: Glück, Spiel und Leidenschaft* (Bad Honnef: Karl Heinrich Bock, 2003) discusses these pastimes but does not mention Gerl’s words.

8 Recent research has uncovered a substantial court judgment against Mozart of 1435 Gulden and 32 Kreuzer, owed to Prince Carl von Lichnowsky, who had been a friend and travelling companion of the composer. But there is no evidence that this debt had anything to do with gambling. See Walter Brauneis, ‘... wegen schuldigen 1435 f 32 xr’: Neuer Archivfund zur Finanzmisere Mozarts im November 1791’, in *Mitteilungen der Internationalen Stiftung Mozarteum* 39/1–4 (1991), 160–161, and Cliff Eisen, *Mozart: Die Dokumente seines Lebens, Addenda: Neue Folge* (Kassel, 1997), 73.



FROM THE MEMOIRS OF IGNAZ VON SEYFRIED

Ignaz von Seyfried (1776–1841) is known to scholars as a prolific composer and a musical director of Emanuel Schikaneder's Theater auf der Wieden (c1798–1801) and Theater an der Wien (1801–1826). Seyfried is often described as a student of Mozart, and some commentators have even suggested that he was present at the first performance of *Die Zauberflöte*.

Between 1824 and 1841 Seyfried wrote an autobiographical account of his life. The autograph manuscript⁹ has never been published and its contents have remained largely unexamined.¹⁰ The memoirs never mention any performances of the opera led by Mozart, and Seyfried would certainly have recounted such an experience had it occurred. Seyfried also makes clear that, although he twice refers to Mozart as his teacher, he was not a student in the conventional sense of the word.¹¹ Instead, he writes that his father brought him to Mozart's residence to hear the master play on a regular basis. On page 5 of the memoirs Seyfried states:

Noch ein anderes Glück blühte mir damals; ich durfte Mozarten, mit welchem mein Vater in freundschaftlichen Verhältnissen stand, einigemale in jeder Woche besuchen, ihn spielen hören, und meinen Vortrag dem seinigen nachbilden.¹²

Yet another bit of good fortune came my way at that time: a few times each week I visited Mozart, who was on friendly terms with my father, to hear him play and to model my performance after his own.

Seyfried provides no specific dates for these visits, but while discussing Johann Nepomuk Hummel's death in 1837, he writes:

Er [Hummel] war einer meinen ältesten Jugendfreunde; wir kannten uns beynahe ein halbes Jahrhundert lang, von jenem Zeitabschnitte nemlich, als Nepomuck bey Mozart freien Tisch u: Wohnung hatte, ich aber dreymal die Woche von diesem Meister Clavierstunden erhielt.¹³

He [Hummel] was one of the oldest friends from my youth. We had known each other for almost half a century, specifically from the time that Nepomuk had free room and board at Mozart's place and I had been having piano lessons with the master three times a week.

Hummel lived with the Mozarts from early 1786 until sometime in 1788. Thus Seyfried's sessions at Mozart's apartment must have occurred during this period. Unfortunately Seyfried does not clarify how long these sessions continued, though his wording (see note 12) suggests that they ceased only with Mozart's death.

9 Ignaz Loyola von Seyfried, *Skizze meines Lebens. / Theilnehmenden Freunden zum Andenken / gereicht. / Am 24 Aug. 1841 erhalten. / Tobias Haslinger. Se[y]f[r]ie[d] M[anu]p[ro]p[ri]a*. Vienna, Universität für Musik und Darstellende Kunst, Bibliothek, shelfmark I. N. 36561.

10 Some segments are quoted in Bettina von Seyfried, *Ignaz Ritter von Seyfried. Thematisch-bibliographisches Verzeichnis: Aspekte der Biographie und des Werks* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1990). There are numerous errors in many quotations in the book.

11 On page 5: 'den theuren, unvergeßlichen Lehrer u. Freund'; on page 34: 'mein theurer Lehrer, der größte Mozart'.

12 The paragraph continues: 'I would have had incalculable advantages in the time that followed had not that fatal day of 5 December 1791 unfortunately torn from me the dear, unforgettable teacher and friend, the greatest music master in the entire world, a premature loss, which, as usual, was felt in its full scale only when the unappreciated man could disarm envy and cabal through his immortal creations.' (nicht zu berechnende Vortheile würden mir in der folgezeit dadurch erwachsen seyn, hätte der verhängnißvolle 5^{te} December des 791^{sten} Jahres nicht mir den theuren, unvergeßlichen Lehrer u. Freund, der ganzen Welt den größten Tonmeister, ach! leider, viel zu früh entrissen, ein Verlust, der wie gewöhnlich erst dann in seinem vollen Umfange empfunden ward, als der Verkannte Neid u. Cabalen nur, mehr durch seine unsterblichen Schöpfungen entwaffnen konnte.)

13 See page 72.



Further evidence suggests that this kind of ‘aural instruction’ was not an uncommon practice. In her memoirs, first published in 1844, Karoline Pichler describes a somewhat similar situation:

Musik wurde in unserm Hause, nach dem Wunsche meines Vaters, viel getrieben, der große Mozart, obwohl nicht meine Lehrmeister, schenkte mir manche Stunde, ich hatte oft Gelegenheit, ihn spielen zu hören und mich nach seiner Anweisung zu vervollkommen.¹⁴

In accordance with the wishes of my father, music was pursued avidly in our house. The great Mozart, though not my teacher, gave me many lessons where I had the opportunity to hear him play and thus I could improve according to his instruction.

Thus regularly bringing one’s children to hear a master practise and play may have been customary for parents of young piano students in the late eighteenth century.

SEYFRIED’S COMMENTS IN THE *NEUE ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR MUSIK*

Seyfried provides information about the commissioning of *Die Zauberflöte* in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, a journal to which he contributed irregularly. In this case Seyfried was assessing a recent article concerning Johann Baptist Schenk and correcting numerous errors concerning Emanuel Schikaneder, the librettist, singer, actor and impresario for the Theater auf der Wieden:

Er [Schikaneder] zahlte dem Schöpfer der Zauberflöte blanke hundert Species=Ducaten; – ein damals besonders für die precaire Existenz einer kleinen, subordinirten Nebenbühne unerhört bedeutendes Honorar, dessen sich der Meister bis dahin nicht einmal von Seiten einer Hof-Intendanz rühmen konnte, – und überließ nebstdem noch den Reinertrag der Partiturenverkaufs der Wittwe seines verewigten Freundes.¹⁵

He [Schikaneder] paid the creator of the *Magic Flute* a shiny 100 ducats, at that time, especially for a small subordinate secondary stage, an unprecedentedly large fee, which the master to that point could not boast even from a court theatre. On top of that he gave the net profits from the sale of the score to the widow of his immortal friend.

Seyfried was probably not in a position to know these things first hand, though he certainly had a close relationship to Schikaneder and many musicians and singers who participated in the first performances of Mozart’s opera. Thus the information here is second- or third-hand and should not be taken *prima facie* as fact. One hundred ducats was in fact the normal fee paid to Mozart for his court operas in Vienna.¹⁶ Many of Seyfried’s second-hand accounts are inaccurate, for example the report of Schikaneder changing the plot of *Die Zauberflöte* recounted in an undated letter to Friedrich Treitschke.¹⁷

14 Deutsch, *Mozart. Die Dokumente seines Lebens*, 473.

15 Ignaz von Seyfried, ‘Commentar zur Erzählung: Johan Schenk, von J[ohann]. P[eter]. Lyser, in Nr. 27 u. s. des 11ten Bandes der neuen Zeitschrift für Musik’, *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 12/46 (5 June 1840), 184. The first part of Seyfried’s article appears in 12/45 (2 June 1840), 179–805, and is signed at the end, ‘Wien, im März 1840. Seyfried.’ This contradicts the account given in Friedrich Rochlitz, ‘Verbürgte Anekdoten aus Wolfgang Mozarts Leben, ein Beytrag zur richtigern Kenntnis dieses Mannes, als Mensch und Künstler’, *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 6 (7 November 1798), 83–84. The *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* account is often attributed to Constanze Mozart, who reproduced it later in Georg Nikolaus Nissen, *W. A. Mozarts Biographie* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1828; reprinted Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1964), 548–549.

16 See Dexter Edge, ‘Mozart’s Fee for “Cosi fan tutte”’, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 116/2 (1991), 211–235.

17 Deutsch, *Mozart. Die Dokumente seines Lebens*, 471–472.



In his article for the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* Seyfried goes on to describe the premiere of *Die Zauberflöte* with Mozart conducting and Franz Xaver Süßmayr turning pages for him.¹⁸ Seyfried may have got this information from Süßmayr, who composed three operas for the Theater auf der Wieden: *Moses oder Der Auszug aus Ägypten* (1792), *Der Spiegel von Arkadien* (1794) and *Idris und Zenide* (1795). Other possible sources include Schikaneder and Johann Baptist Henneberg, the keyboard master, composer and Kapellmeister at the Theater auf der Wieden from 1790 until 1801.

18 *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 12/46 (5 June 1840), 184: ‘... for that limited venue, not much better than a wooden shack, Mozart composed his immortal Magic Flute; he personally directed the premiere there on 30 September 1791, at which Süßmayr, the faithful Pylades, sat to his right, diligently turning the pages of the score.’ (. . . für jene beschränkte Localität nicht viel besser als eine Holzbude, schrieb Mozart seine nie alternde Zäuberflöte, und leitete dort am 30sten September 1791, persönlich die erste Aufführung, wobei Süßmayr, der treue Pylades, ihm zur Rechten saß, und fleißig die Partiturblätter umwendete.)