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THE PLAYWRIGHT AS THEOLOGIAN: PETER SHAFFER'S *AMADEUS*

COLIN GUNTON

I THE ABSOLUTE

Two preliminary remarks will, to begin with an appropriate metaphor, set the scene. The first is that we live, and have lived in England since the 19th century at least, in an age of theological loss of confidence, even of nerve. The effect has been paradoxical. Theologians spend a disproportionate amount of their time in attempts to defend their faith and their trade, to make it intelligible and acceptable under modern conditions. Yet the atmosphere of their endeavours is often surprisingly inward looking, not to say churchy, centred as they are on such questions as whether we can, or should, any longer propagate this or that article of traditional belief. The paradox is, of course only apparent: for defence breeds defensiveness, and defensiveness takes away the freedom to look about with open eyes for signs of grace. But important questions will out, and what the theologian neglects is sometimes to be found in works which lie outside mainstream theological debate. So it is with Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus,* whose original stage version has, even more than the later film, much for the theologian to ponder.[1]

The second preliminary remark takes us nearer to the heart, and it concerns the man named in the title of the play, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Mozart has some claim to be the theologian's composer, at least to the degree that he has seemed to some of them to be in a class of his own. Karl Barth, famously or notoriously – for he could really not find time or reason to take much trouble over any other music – is a case in point:

> Why is it that this man is so incomparable? Why is it that for the receptive he has produced in almost every bar he conceived and composed a type of music for which "beautiful" is not a fitting epithet; music which for the true Christian is not mere entertainment, enjoyment or edification, but food and drink; . . . music which is never a slave to its technique nor sentimental . . . ?[2]

But appeal could also be made to David Friedrich Strauss (1808-74), a theologian of very different temper and coming from an era when Mozart did not always attract the kind of appreciation he does today:

> . . . Strauss was insatiable; he was so enraptured by music that he could listen for hours . . . For Strauss, no one could surpass the music of Mozart; that was for him immediate gratification without any reflection, the most soul-filling satisfaction.[3]

We must, however, realise that such superlatives are not the prerogative of the theologians. In that respect also, the children of this world are often as wise as the children of light. In conversation with Bernard Levin and in response to *Amadeus,* Sir Colin Davis made on television a number of points that stand comparison with Barth's. So also Mozart's recent biographer, Wolfgang Hildesheimer, not one to make much of the theological dimensions of the matter, is unable to avoid using words stolen from Christian theology, speaking of the "collective feeling" that "Mozart is an utterly unique phenomenon, indisputably and forever on the credit side of life's ledger, so sovereign and omnipresent that he reconciles us somewhat to the debit side. Indeed, Mozart seems to be reconciliation itself, a kind of redeeming miracle."[4] When speaking of this composer, it seems almost impossible to avoid the language of absolutes, so that we are already set very near to, if not actually within, the theological pale. For when there is talk of the absolute, can talk of Gopd be far behind? Certainly not for Peter Shaffer.

The play's central character is not Mozart himself, but another composer, Antonio Salieri, who looks back in old age on the encounter between himself and the (younger) Mozart. Salieri is the model of a certain religious type, instantly recognisable by (and among) the pragmatic English. As a young man, he is desperate to be a composer, and offers God a bargain: you make me a great composer, and I will service you all my life:

> Every Sunday I saw him in church, painted on the flaking wall. I don't mean Christ . . . No: I mean an old candle-smoked God in a mulberry robe, staring at the world with dealer's eyes. Tradesmen had put him there. Those eyes made bargains, real and irreversible. "You give me so – I'll give you so! No more. No less!" . . . I knelt before the God of Bargains . . . "Signore, let me be a composer! Grant me sufficient fame to enjoy it. In return, I will live with virtue" (p. 20).

The bargain apparently succeeds. Salieri obtains worldly success, popularity and acclaim, and, as court composer, uses his position, as he had promised, to better the lot of his fellows.

When he meets Mozart, however, Salieri begins to feel that he has been cheated by his God. At the very beginning of their encounter, he realises that he is in the presence of one whose gifts he is forced to recognise. In the play, realisation first begins to dawn when he writes for Mozart a march to welcome the young composer to Vienna. Mozart, ostensibly to flatter him, plays the march from memory, and then begins to improvise, freely, turning a banal piece into something of genius. Looking back, Salieri asks himself, "was it then – so early – that I began to have thoughts of murder?" (p. 39). Later, Salieri sees some recently completed manuscripts, and realises that Mozart composed, without correction, straight from head to paper. "I was staring through the cage of those meticulous ink strokes at an Absolute Beauty." And he is forced to realise his own mediocrity: "I know my fate. Now for the first time I feel my emptiness as Adam felt his nakedness." (pp. 58 f). Accordingly, in order to take his revenge on the God who has cheated him, Salieri resolves to murder God's favourite. "My quarrel wasn't with Mozart – it was through him. Through him to God who loved him so." (p. 64). The latter part of the play recounts the story of Mozart's decline and death, poisoned by his rival. But it is important to know also that in parallel with the murder goes an equally important destruction of Salieri himself. He con-

tinues to experience worldly elevation, but it is dust and ashes for him by virtue of his increasing awareness of the infinite qualitative distinction between himself and Mozart, between mediocrity and the absolute.

II THE TREASURE

The theological importance of the play is to be found in the questions it raises and the opportunities it gives for thought about central features of the relation between God and his creation. The following would appear to be central among them.

1. The nature of election. The matter of election or predestination is a difficult one under modern conditions because of the way it has been taught in the Western Christian tradition. The mind automatically recoils from a doctrine that appears to teach religious determinism, that God has destined each one of us either to heaven or to hell, before even we were born or able to respond freely to the gospel. But if we return to the biblical roots of the notion, we shall see that it is to do with a much more concrete and this-worldly relation. The Old Testament, in particular, tells how not only Israel, but particular people – and not only Israelites, as Isaiah 44.28 ff witnesses – are called by God to do a particular job. Classic examples are perhaps the calls of Amos and Jeremiah to fulfil particular prophetic tasks, even though such careers were the last things that either had in mind (Amos 7.14 ff, Jeremiah 1.4 ff). We are concerned here with the mysterious matter of the divine calling, which appears to operate quite independently of any human ideas of qualification or desert.

But *Amadeus* shows us that this is more than simply a religious question, as all the deepest questions are. There has always been puzzlement as to why life's successes and failures are so unevenly distributed. The great Greek tragic dramatists asked one form of the question, probing the mystery of apparently undeserved suffering in the divine dispensation. Salieri, similarly, asks a kind of negative religious question: why do the gifted succeed, even though they do not seem to deserve it, while the worthy, who toil away at life, receive few of the rewards? Notice that the question is even more poignant in the case of Salieri, because he has gained many worldly rewards. But for one who wants above all to be a great composer, they are as nothing. *It is a just world?* Because of Mozart, Salieri decides that it is not:

> You put into me perception of the Incomparable – which most men never know! – then ensured that I would know myself for ever mediocre. *Why? . . . What is my fault?* . . . I have worked and worked the talent you allowed me. *You know how hard I've worked!* – solely that in the end . . . I might hear Your Voice! And now I do hear it – and it says only one name: MOZART! (pp. 59 f).

Salieri's theological response to all this is to say not that God calls Mozart, but that he *uses* him, or at least that is what he tells the dying Mozart, in order to make his death the more bitter. (p. 101). God has used him, and now is simply throwing him on the scrap heap. The irony is that Salieri wanted precisely to be used, but was refused, with the result that his world has fallen apart:

> All around me men seek liberty for Mankind. I sought only slavery for myself. To be owned – ordered – exhausted by an *Absolute*. This was denied me, and with it all meaning. (p. 107).

The harsh fact is, however, that such things do not come to order, and, as has often been observed, the universe is not in that sense a just place. Indeed, one of the things that Mozart has to teach is, as the quotation from Hildersheimer near the beginning of this article suggested, that the matter is somewhat more complicated. But Salieri is classically Pelagian in claiming to be able to earn his way with God – "the God of bargains". He is destroyed as a person because he cannot accept what he has and is as a gift of divine grace. That is something that the old doctrine of predestination, for all the inadequacy of the way it was formulated, has to teach us. We understand Mozart if we see in his genius the free gift of the creator. Even Salieri almost realises this:

> I was a good man, as the world calls good. What use was it to me? Goodness could not make me a good composer. Was Mozart good? Goodness is nothing in the furnace of art. (p. 62).

2. The nature of inspiration. Inspiration raises similar questions to those treated in the section on election, because it is one of the words used to refer to the way in which human achievements are believed to derive from sources outside ourselves. It is a universal human preoccupation, and is revealed by the fact that we speak of all kinds of things as being inspired; an idea, a piece of music or even the Bible as a whole. Artists, in particular, have often felt that what they paint or write comes from beyond themselves, as when Stravinsky is reported to have said that he did not compose *The Rite of Spring,* but was the channel through which it flowed. It was for this kind of reason that Plato suspected the arts: they seemed to drive out reason through the onset of a divine madness. Something takes over which deprives the agent of control over thought and action. But there are ways of understanding inspiration which do not imply a loss of human freedom. It can be interpreted as something given to finite creatures to enable them to produce work which comes to them as an apparent gift or to transcend their apparent limitations in creations of transcendent greatness, while yet remaining, or, indeed, becoming, truly themselves.

The difference between Mozart and Salieri, as they are depicted in the play, is that one is inspired and the other is not. Again, it is not a question of worthiness. Inspiration is a gift independent of the desert or effort of the recipient, though that must not be taken to imply that no effort is required to realise the gift in concrete production. Mozart was as a matter of fact almost totally preoccupied with music, dominated by work. But he did not, and could not, earn his gifts. It simply is a fact that someone either has or has not inspiration of this quality. One of Salieri's *dicta,* comparing Mozart's operas with his own, make the point well enough: " . . . He from the ordinary created legends – and I from legends created only the ordinary." (p. 82).

Speaking of the Gospel entrusted to him, Paul tells the Corinthian Christians that "we have this treasure in

earthen vessels". (2 Cor. 4.7). Shaffer suggests something of the nature of inspiration by showing that that was the character of Mozart's genius. The drama over-plays Mozart's childish and irresponsible behaviour, depicting the composer as an arrogant young fool – "his high whinnying giggle" – coarse-speaking and totally lacking in tact. But that makes the transcendence of his gift only the greater. The contrast between Mozart's character and his music is brought out in a scene where Salieri first begins to realise the true nature of the music. He is present at a performance of the Adagio from the *Serenade for Thirteen Wind Instruments:*

> It started simply enough; just a pulse in the lowest registers . . . – like a rusty squeezebox. It would have been comic, except for the slowness, which gave it instead a sort of serenity. And then suddenly, high above, sounded a single note on the oboe. It hung there unwavering – piercing me through . . . I called up to my sharp old God *"What is this? . . . What?!"*

Salieri rushes from the room, able to stand no more the pain of the music. His comment on the experience tells us all that we want to know about treasure in earthen vessels. "It seemed to me that I had heard a voice of God – and that it issued from a creature whose own voice I had also heard – and it was the voice of an obscene child." (pp. 30 f).

3. The nature of human relationships. The modern age has witnessed an attempt, almost unique in the history of civilisation, to understand human life outside and independent of its relation to its maker. It is, at least theoretically, a perfectly feasible exercise, although there is now far less optimism about its outcome than was once the case. However that may be, the witness of those who have probed deeper has been that without redemption, we are lost. Shaffer's play witnesses, to an extent, to the truth of that claim, for it sees the divinity of Mozart's music to lie in part in its redemptive character.

Mozart's life, again according to the exaggerated portrayal of the play, is a series of messes. Alienation from his father and marriage to a foolish prattling woman are chief among them, and they are crowned by a decline into poverty and early death. It is against this background that the significance of some of the operas is displayed. It is sometimes said that, after Shakespeare, Mozart is the greatest of all dramatists, and in a reference to the final act of *The Marriage of Figaro,* Salieri is made to show us why this is so:

> I saw a woman, dressed in her maid's clothes, hear her husband utter the first tender words he has offered her in years only because he thinks she is someone else. Could one catch a realer moment? (p. 78).

"Mozart", says the critic William Mann, "understood the heart of women absolutely", and Shaffer in this play suggests that in the operas we see, transfigured yet real, the people whom Mozart failed in some way or other in his life. Whether such reading of autobiography into the characters is justified must be doubtful, but the fact remains that it enables the author to make his point. Thus there is the suggestion that *Cosi fan Tutte* puts on the stage in a kind of redeemed portrait of Mozart's wife and her sister, while Mozart's slighted father appears as Sarastro in *The Magic Flute.* It is in connection with this latter opera, on the face of it not much more than a kind of German pantomime, that Salieri enables us to see the redemptive function of the music.

> I saw a vast sun rise on a timeless land . . . ; and by its rays all the poisons we feed each other drawn up and burnt away! . . . And in this sun – behold – I saw his father. No more an accusing figure, but forgiving! (p. 96).

Well might Bernard Levin repeat the comment that the words which Sarastro sings are among the few that might be put into the mouth of God without blasphemy.

III THE SPIRIT

Patrick Sherry has argued that among the lessons to be learned from both *Amadeus* and celebrations of the significance of Mozart in writers like Barth is due appreciation of the work of the Holy Spirit in inspiration and the creation of beauty. He also comments, rightly, on the weakness of the theology of Barth in this very area.[5] Yet there is a remark made by Barth in his treatment of the theological significance of the music of Mozart, in itself puzzling, which suggests at least a place where links can be made. "Why is it possible to hold that Mozart has a place . . . also in eschatology . . . "? (p. 298). The Western theological tradition has been so captivated by its rather ecclesiastical way of conceiving the Spirit that it has tended to neglect a major New Testament theme. The Holy Spirit is the action of God making real in the present the eschatological future, the time of redemption.

Each of the three topics we have met in *Amadeus* is an illustration of this theme. It is most obvious in the case of inspiration, and not only because we can read into that term a notion of "breathing in" by the Spirit. We are not merely concerned with beauty which is the fruit of inspiration; the matter is eschatological also, as Sherry realises: "For him (Barth), the beauty of art anticipates the restoration of the wholeness of the creation." (p. 236 f). Linked with this is the third of our topics, that of redemption. The hymn to the Spirit that is the eighth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans explictly links, in vv. 18-24, the redemption of the human and the wider creation which is the context within which human life is lived. Peter Shaffer's play enables us, by its celebration of the music of Mozart, to see in that link something more than fanciful mythology. The music of Mozart does enable us to glimpse something of the reconciliation of all things, of sinful creature and fallen world, that is promised in Christ and realised, from time to time, by anticipation in the here and now.

But what of election? How does that fit into the pneumatological scheme? It could be said that the weakness, amounting to a scandal, of Western treatments of this theme since Augustine is that by neglecting the place of the Spirit in the concrete summoning of particular people to particular tasks, they have made it seem like some deterministic scheme in which the fate of all is decided before time. Yet if, with Robert Jenson, we say:

"the Holy Spirit is the choosing God",[6] we can see that here, too, the function of the Spirit is to enable those who will respond to live as members of the eschatological kingdom this side of eternity. That is what election is about. This may seem rather a long way from the pre-occupations of *Amadeus*. But it is worth noting that one of the few direct biblical allusions in the play is to a pneumatological text, John 3.8: "They say the Spirit blows where it listeth: I tell you NO! It must list to virtue or not blow at all." (p. 60). So speaks Salieri, the Pelagian, but, unjust though it may appear, that is not the world in which the Spirit sets us free. God is free, too, and it is through his free Spirit alone that gifts such as those of Mozart, but also those of all his creatures, come to realisation.

One final point must be made in a reference back to the opening paragraph of this paper. Has Peter Shaffer taught us anything of the nature of the theological task? The obvious, if rather banal point, is that theologians, too, need the inspiration of the Spirit if we are to escape from the prisons in which our expectations and presuppositions so often encase us. Shaffer's freedom to tackle questions of utmost human importance should contribute to a process of liberation. But that is too feeble a conclusion to a paper over whose pages the spirit of Mozart is hovering. Let us, then, borrow a final point from his biographer. Speaking of the operas, Hildesheimer says: "It is the music which makes the unbelievable believable and the thoroughly improbable truthful." (p. 227). Is that not part of the theologian's task, too?[7]

FOOTNOTES:

1. Peter Shaffer, *Amadeus*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books (1981).
2. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Volume III, Part 3*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark (1960), pp. 297 f.
3. Cited by Horton Harris, *David Friedrich Strauss and his Theology*. Cambridge University Press (1973), p. 30.
4. Wolfgang Hildersheimer, *Mozart*. E.T. by Marion Faber, London. Dent (1983), p. 13.
5. Patrick Sherry, "Mozart, *Amadeus* and Barth". *New Blackfriars* 67 (May 1986), pp. 233-240.
6. Robert W. Jenson, "The Holy Spirit", *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, Philadelphia. Fortress (1984), Vol. 2 p. 138.
7. I am grateful to Francis Watson both for encouragement to write up this paper and for timely criticisms of its first draft.

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