

Mozart expert asks good questions, misses answers

by David M. Shavin

The Mozart Compendium: A Guide to Mozart's Life and Music

edited by H.C. Robbins Landon
Schirmer Books, New York, 1990
452 pages, hardbound, \$34.95

Mozart and Vienna

by H.C. Robbins Landon
Schirmer Books, New York, 1991
208 pages, hardbound, \$22.50

Mozart and the Masons

by H.C. Robbins Landon
Thames and Hudson, New York, 1991
72 pages, paperbound, \$9.95

Part of the significance behind 1991 being the 200th anniversary of the death of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, evidently, is that H.C. Robbins Landon's publisher lost no time in putting Landon's research onto the market. Earlier, Schirmer had published Landon's *1791: Mozart's Last Year* (1988) and *Mozart: The Golden Years* (1989). Both of these substantial works represent Mr. Landon's more extensive thoughts on Mozart's life, and are less specialized than his three new offerings made available for the 1991 market.

In *1791: Mozart's Last Year*, Landon, to his credit, was

sufficiently provoked by the disgusting "hyena" giggle attributed to Mozart in the movie "Amadeus" to step out of academic circles long enough to provide the public with fascinating material on the suspicious death of Mozart. His desire to share with the general reading public his obvious love for Mozart continued in his book *The Golden Years*. There, Landon posed the important question, "What kind of world was it that, over the course of a decade, from 1781 to 1791, Mozart and Haydn put out a new, substantial work of genius, on an average of every two weeks?" Landon's commitment to communicate a deeper level to Mozart with the broader public is even more laudable, when one considers the criticisms some academics have leveled in his direction for his departing from his early, more narrow focus on precise scholarly productions on Haydn.

Unfortunately, in the first book, Landon punted on attempting to resolve the issues around Mozart's premature death. He began to assemble for the reader a wealth of references to consider as to the circumstances of Mozart's death, freeing the reader from the shallow, soap opera view fashionable today, whereby the motive for Mozart's murder is reduced to the jealousy of a rival composer, Antonio Salieri. Then he proceeded to ignore the implications of his leads, and grafted onto his investigation an unconvincing medical theory. Similarly, in the second book, he ignored the "sea-change" in the recognized possibilities for European culture after the successful American Revolution, and instead Landon was willing to attribute Mozart's amazing productivity and genius to a "cyclothymic disorder," or a manic-depressive imbalance in his personality. His penchant for posing the interesting questions, while punting on the answers, is not seriously threatened with his latest productions.

The *Mozart Compendium* (1990), edited by Mr. Landon from "some two dozen contributors," aims "to provide a

compendium of information on every significant aspect of Mozart and his music." Landon's editorial team makes a virtue of the diversity of views of the many authors. Unfortunately, the net effect is a bit disorienting to the reader. However, largely due to the book's index, to the glossary of names, and to the valuable and comprehensive listing of all of Mozart's works, this compendium can be quite useful in one's library as a reference tool—with one proviso. Such a library would do well to first acquire Emily Anderson's indispensable compilation of the Mozart family letters translated into English, before committing to Mr. Landon's *Compendium*. What Mozart has to say about his own activities is still massively under-appreciated by all the Mozart commentators. Interestingly enough, Landon "cut his teeth" in the field of Mozart research years ago, helping to proofread Miss Anderson's second edition of these letters.

'Sketches of Vienna'

Two-thirds of Landon's book *Mozart and Vienna* (1991), is an abridged translation of Johann Pezzl's *Skizze von Wien* (*Sketches of Vienna*). This work, originally appearing anonymously in six installments from 1786 to 1790, was written by Johann Pezzl, a member of Mozart's masonic lodge. Landon, who had earlier drawn upon this work in his *Mozart: The Golden Years*, obviously is attached to the work, and the selections he presents are indeed charming. This reviewer's favorite example is Pezzl's argument on behalf of cities:

"As soon as we no longer incline to the views of that dreamer Rousseau . . . as soon as we admit that law and order, arts and sciences, culture and reflection, society and improvement—that these are the true and only roots of human society—then one must have respect for large cities. These are the only means to develop our natural forces, to teach us that we have a soul. . . . Long live great cities! They make people out of barbarians, and this benefit reduces all critics to silence."

In the first third of the book, Landon's narrative of the Mozart family's relations with Empress Maria Theresa, her son Emperor Joseph, and the royal household, relies heavily upon the letters of Mozart's father, Leopold. The story of the devastation of smallpox in Vienna in 1767, the death of the Archduchess Maria Josepha, and Leopold's flight to protect his 11-year-old son, becomes terrifyingly real, when reading successive letters, as if they were diary entries. Smallpox caused 90% of children's deaths that season, and Wolfgang Mozart contracted the dread disease. Leopold wrote: "In Vienna people talked of nothing but smallpox. . . . I spent whole nights without sleep and I had no peace during the day." Finally, after several torturous weeks, Leopold writes: "*Te Deum laudamus!* Wolfgang! has recovered from the smallpox!"

Mozart and Haydn

Landon's most substantial contribution to this book takes the occasion of Mozart's third visit to Vienna to discuss



A meeting of the Crowned Hope lodge, including Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Of the 35 men in the painting, almost all with swords, only Mozart has a sword pointed directly at his back. The sword belongs to the man on the right who is adjusting the curtain at the edge of the painting. One can only surmise that this is a reference to Mozart's premature death.

Haydn's influence upon the 17-year-old Mozart, a favorite topic of Landon's. He began discussing this connection 35 years ago—in fact, in the context of the 1956 bicentennial of Mozart's birth. Landon sees Mozart's (1773) G minor Symphony No. 25, as an early and overt link with Haydn, focusing on the vibrant content of the musical language employed. Characteristic of both Haydn's and Mozart's minor key works of that period is a level of intentional wit and dramatic surprise that Landon does not find even in such earlier masters as Handel or Bach. Landon addressed this issue at more length in *The Golden Years*, recognizing in Mozart's later compositions a profound and more expansive development of the minor keys.

Unfortunately, the 35 years between the bicentennial of Mozart's birth and the bicentennial of his death, Landon has made little progress in solving the most interesting questions that he poses. Here, he situates Haydn and Mozart's "minor key" project as the musical analogue of the *Sturm und Drang* movement. He characterizes it as the movement of angry young men, who are prone to using an "abrupt contrast of key" to emphasize the willfulness and the eccentricity of the human element. Landon locates within Haydn and Mozart a certain "precariousness," which, he continues, is "another way of saying, perhaps, the irrational, and with that word we are back to the German literary movement. The eccentric, the irrational, in works by writers such as Klinger or Lenz

have their direct counterpart in works by Haydn. . . .” Characteristically Landon’s analysis of the more rigorous scientific implications of Haydn’s and Mozart’s work collapses back into such trivialities.

Landon’s strength, and his weakness, perhaps show even more clearly in his *Mozart and the Masons* (1991), a short 72-page paperback. Originally presented as a lecture in 1982, the book is based upon some interesting detective work by Landon regarding a previously known painting of a freemasonic meeting. The painting had been given to the Austrian Historical Museum in 1926 by Rudolf von Tinti, whose ancestors had been members of Ignaz von Born’s unique lodge, “Zur wahren Eintracht.” Leopold Mozart, in a letter otherwise famous for reporting Haydn’s praise of his son as the greatest composer ever known, mentions the two Barons Tinti as being part of the select group present at Mozart’s 1785 quartet party celebrating Haydn’s joining the “Zur wahren Eintracht” lodge.

In 1957, the Mozart scholar Otto Erich Deutsch commented rather provocatively on Mozart’s presence in the painting: “Readers steeped in fantasy will easily recognize him in the figure in the right foreground.” Landon, to his credit, looked behind the fantasy. Having obtained information that Prince Nicolaus Esterházy was the Master of Ceremonies in 1790 at the “Crowned Hope” lodge, Landon identified Esterházy in the painting. Further, he deduced from the rainbow and the crowned sun in the painting within the painting, that the lodge portrayed was in fact the “Crowned Hope” lodge. Finally, he obtained access to the Secret Files of the Court Archives in Vienna to find a police listing of the membership of the lodge, and identified many of the 35 individuals attending the meeting. Importantly, Mozart’s name appeared on the same list with Esterházy. Hence, there was good reason, beyond mere fantasy, to recognize Mozart in the painting.

Glint of steel at Mozart’s back

Landon cannot be faulted for not doing his homework. He went to considerable trouble, attempting to identify the participants in the painting, including searching archives and diaries, and consulting experts on military uniforms and insignia. However, his reading of this picture-story about Mozart and his friends is remarkable for its blindness. Focusing on the lower right corner, where Mozart is talking, he asks the reader: “Does Mozart’s neighbor, whose left hand seems to be raised in protest, look faintly shocked by what the composer is saying?” Finally, he asks, “Do we not detect, too, in that fourth Brother of the column, a surprised and slightly amused (or shocked?) glance directed towards the chattering Mozart?”

Landon has, in fact, missed the forest for the trees. Look again. He rather fairly reads the hand gesture of Mozart’s neighbor. Then, he seems to be stretching a bit in assuming that the facial expression of the “fourth Brother” is directed



Composer Joseph Haydn. While Landon rightly attributes much of Mozart’s development to his relationship with the older composer, he misidentifies their exploration of the minor keys as an expression of irrational willfulness, a musical sort of Sturm und Drang.

toward Mozart. However, despite all of his attention to detail, he takes absolutely no notice of the glinting metal at Mozart’s back!

Though there are 35 men in the painting, with almost as many swords, there is only one sword pointing directly at anyone. That sword is the one pointed directly at Mozart’s back. It belongs to the man adjusting the heavy curtains that stand between the lodge meeting and the point of view of the painter. Landon seems to think this man is “in the process of raising the heavy curtains that close off the Temple.” How he determines that this man is opening, rather than closing, the curtains is not clear. The raised eyebrow, and fixed stare of the man, certainly would suggest otherwise.

It is not yet known whether the painter telling this story, or the Tinti family who kept the picture, had knowledge about the specifics of Mozart’s premature death, or of the role of a member of the lodge, Leopold Aloys Hoffman, as a police agent against Mozart and his republican friends. It is known that Landon has had access to the Secret Files of the Vienna Court Archives for over ten years, and has provided some fascinating material, without which the world would be poorer. Unfortunately, Landon’s penchant for chatty observations on Mozart’s role in the painting, oblivious to the painter’s story, highlights the type of blind spot characteristic of Landon’s work over the years.

In short, Mozart’s story requires an unflinching grasp of the idea that a great mind, and a passionate love of beauty, are central to true republican political leadership. The best that can be said of Landon’s work is that he raises the sort of questions for the modern reader that should be asked, before he loses his grasp of the subject. Sadly, this puts him one step ahead of most of the field.