

Antonio Salieri's Revenge

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By Alex Ross



Many composers are megalomaniacs or misanthropes. Salieri was neither.

Illustration by Agostino Iacurci

On a chilly, wet day in late November, I visited the Central Cemetery, in Vienna, where

several of the most familiar figures in musical history lie buried. In a musicians' grove at the heart of the complex, Beethoven, Schubert, and Brahms rest in close proximity, with a monument to Mozart standing nearby. According to statistics compiled by the Web site Bachtrack, works by those four gentlemen appear in roughly a third of concerts presented around the world in a typical year. Beethoven, whose two-hundred-and-fiftieth birthday arrives next year, will supply a fifth of Carnegie Hall's 2019-20 season.

When I entered the cemetery, I turned left, disregarding Beethoven and company. Along the perimeter wall, I passed an array of lesser-known but not uninteresting figures: Simon Sechter, who gave a counterpoint lesson to Schubert; Theodor Puschmann, an alienist best remembered for having accused Wagner of being an erotomaniac; Carl Czerny, the composer of piano exercises that have tortured generations of students; and Eusebius Mandyczewski, a magnificently named colleague of Brahms. Amid these miscellaneous worthies, resting beneath a noble but unpretentious obelisk, is the composer Antonio Salieri, Kapellmeister to the emperor of Austria.

I had brought a rose, thinking that the grave might be a neglected and cheerless place. Salieri is one of history's all-time losers—a bystander run over by a Mack truck of malicious gossip. Shortly before he died, in 1825, a story that he had poisoned Mozart went around Vienna. In 1830, Alexander Pushkin used that rumor as the basis for his play "Mozart and Salieri," casting the former as a doltish genius and the latter as a jealous schemer. Later in the nineteenth century, Rimsky-Korsakov turned Pushkin's play into a witty short opera. In 1979, the British playwright Peter Shaffer wrote "Amadeus," a sophisticated variation on Pushkin's concept, which became a mainstay of the modern stage. Five years after that, Miloš Forman made a flamboyant film out of Shaffer's material, with F. Murray Abraham playing Salieri as a suave, pursed-lipped malefactor.

Two centuries of calumny have created sympathy for the musical devil: I found Salieri's grave festooned with bouquets. These were evidence that the man and his music are enjoying a modest comeback. Of his forty-odd operas, more than a dozen have been revived, and artists such as Riccardo Muti, Cecilia Bartoli, and Christophe Rousset have pleaded his case. I was in Vienna to attend Rousset's performance of Salieri's French opera "Tarare" at the Theater an der Wien. A German-language biography of Salieri, by the composer and musicologist Timo Jouko Herrmann, was published earlier this year. In 2015, Herrmann discovered the score of a cantata, "Per la ricuperata salute di Ofelia," with one section composed by Salieri and another by Mozart. The find made clear what scholars have long known: that the two were more colleagues than rivals, and that their relationship was complicated mainly by Mozart's tendency to see plots arrayed against him.

As brilliant as Abraham's performance in "Amadeus" is, the Salieri of stage and screen is a fictional being. The real man was a more or less benevolent character who energetically involved himself in the musical life of Vienna and taught dozens of composers, including Beethoven and Schubert. Having been plucked from orphanhood by a generous mentor, he

usually gave composition lessons for free. To be sure, he was a well-connected man who used his power to advance his cause. Beethoven once earned his wrath by presenting a concert on the same night as Salieri's annual Christmastime benefit for widows and orphans. Yet this formidable operator had a nimble wit and enjoyed jokes at his own expense. Amid the procession of megalomaniacs, misanthropes, and basket cases who make up the classical pantheon, he seems to have been one of the more likable fellows.

Above all, his music is worth hearing. Mozart was a greater composer, but not immeasurably greater. To call Salieri the "patron saint of mediocrities," as Shaffer does in his play, sets the bar for mediocrity too high. Salieri's operas are tuneful, excellently crafted, inventive in their orchestration, and sometimes startlingly progressive in outlook. "Tarare," which has a libretto by Pierre Beaumarchais, dares to show the overthrow of a despot. "Il Mondo Alla Rovescia" ("The World Upside Down") reverses gender roles. "Die Neger," his final opera, includes an interracial love duet. Although Salieri's work is outwardly conservative, it tugs in unexpected directions, perhaps because he had an unusually open mind about what could happen on an opera stage.

The classical-music world has fostered a kind of gated community of celebrity composers. Our star fixation produces the artistic equivalent of income inequality, in which vast resources fall into the hands of a few. That arrangement lands particularly hard on contemporary composers, who must compete with a group of semi-mythical figures who are worshipped as house gods. Salieri is better seen as the patron saint of musicians who prefer to live in a republic of like-minded souls rather than in an authoritarian regime where only certain voices count. With that in mind, I left my cheap rose on Salieri's grave.

In old age, Salieri apologized for his incomplete command of German. "I have only been in Germany for over fifty years," he said. "How could I have learned the language already?" He spent most of his life in Vienna, and had as much right as any of the Big Four did to a spot in the musicians' grove. Indeed, he was in the city for much longer than any of them. He was born in 1750, six years before Mozart, in Legnago, near Verona. His parents died when he was in his early teens, but he had the good fortune to attract the attention of Florian Gassmann, a visiting composer from the Viennese court. In 1766, Gassmann brought his protégé to Vienna and looked after his musical education. Salieri was soon playing for the Emperor Joseph II, who had assumed the throne the previous year.

"This is my girl back home, and this is a funny sign I saw this morning, and these are forty pictures of a sunset I took trying to get the exposure right, and this is . . ."

"Amadeus" serves Joseph no better than it does Salieri, portraying the ruler as a dithering dimwit. He was, in fact, a keenly musical man who acted as a full-time artistic administrator, attending to composers, librettists, singers, and budgets as if there were nothing more important to occupy his time. Vienna's move to the center of European musical life had much to do with Joseph's determination to attract talented artists—and, when necessary, to set them in competition with one another.



Joseph was also one of the more enlightened monarchs of the day, noted for his rejection of regal pomp, his expansion of popular education, his integration of Jews into Austrian society, and his cultivation of a modern state bureaucracy. An edict that he issued in 1782, suggesting that "all our subjects, without distinction of nation and religion . . . should enjoy a legally guaranteed freedom," was nearly as radical as anything propounded in France or America. But Joseph was autocratic in his methods, as the historian Pieter Judson observes, in his 2016 book, "The Habsburg Empire." Salieri seems to have been a loyal Josephinian, liberal in his views but unquestioning toward authority.

The young Salieri got to know Pietro Metastasio, the reigning librettist of eighteenth-century Italian opera, and Christoph Willibald Gluck, whose lucid, elegant style set the tone for the Viennese Classical period. Salieri's knack for making friends in high places suggests that he possessed considerable charm. Lorenzo Da Ponte, the master librettist of "The Marriage of Figaro," "Don Giovanni," and "Così Fan Tutte," heaped praise on Mozart's music in his memoirs, but his evocation of Salieri's personality was fonder in tone: "a most cultivated and intelligent man . . . whom I loved and esteemed both out of gratitude and by inclination . . . more than a friend, a brother to me."

Salieri wrote a memoir of his own, which his friend Ignaz von Mosel used as the basis for a biography, published in 1827. Salieri's original document disappeared, but Mosel quoted parts of it. One anecdote is particularly winning. Salieri is recounting the première, in 1770, of his second opera, "Le Donne Letterate" ("The Learned Women"). The applause is vigorous, prompting the young composer to follow the audience out into the street, in the hope of soaking up more praise. He overhears a group of operagoers:

“The opera is not bad,” said one. “It pleased me right well,” said a second (that man I could have kissed). “For a pair of beginners, it is no small thing,” said the third. “For my part,” said the fourth, “I found it very tedious.” At these words, I struck off into another street for fear of hearing something still worse.

Any creative person who has made the mistake of surreptitiously canvassing public opinion will identify with Salieri’s fatal curiosity.

After Gassmann’s death, in 1774, Salieri assumed his teacher’s title, that of chamber composer. He specialized in Italian comic opera, building up Vienna’s resources in that genre. It was he who arranged for Da Ponte to obtain a position at court. The poet’s first full-length libretto was for Salieri’s “Il Ricco d’un Giorno” (“Rich for a Day”), which failed with the public, in 1784. But Salieri had already had several major successes in Vienna, justifying the faith that the Emperor had placed in him. His ascendance was complete in 1788, when he was appointed Hofkapellmeister.

Of the early Salieri operas that have returned to circulation, perhaps the finest is “La Scuola de’ Gelosi” (“The School of the Jealous”), which was first heard in Venice in 1778 and which conquered Vienna in 1783. The German ensemble L’Arte del Mondo recorded it in 2015. Like “Figaro,” “La Scuola” is a lyrical comedy involving jealous lovers of various classes, including a countess who outwits her philandering count. The agile complexity of the finales prefigures Mozart’s most dexterous feats, and the countess’s lament for lost love—“Ah, sia già de’ miei sospiri”—has a quality of exquisite resignation that looks ahead to the arias of the Countess in “Figaro.” Salieri may not stop time as Mozart does, but the opera unfurls with captivating ease, and you understand why a discerning listener like Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was bewitched. “There is astonishing richness and variety,” Goethe wrote. “And everything is handled with very refined taste.”

In the early seventeen-eighties, Salieri’s career swerved unexpectedly. The Paris Opéra had commissioned Gluck to write a work based on the bloodcurdling mythological tale of the Danaïdes, the fifty daughters of Danaus, all but one of whom murder their husbands on their wedding night. Gluck, in failing health, asked Salieri to help him with the work and soon handed over the entire project. The Opéra resisted the switch, but Joseph II, who happened to be Marie Antoinette’s brother, intervened on Salieri’s behalf. “Les Danaïdes” caused a sensation at its première, in 1784: its stark harmonies and solemn ensembles paid homage to Gluck, while its Italianate strains brought a new flavor to French tragic opera. This deft cosmopolitanism was Salieri’s major contribution to music history, preparing the way not only for Mozart’s mature operas but also for Rossini.

Salieri was now Gluck’s heir apparent, and for several years he shuttled between Vienna and Paris. After “Les Danaïdes,” he composed “Les Horaces” (1786), which fell flat, and “Tarare” (1787), his collaboration with the great liberal showman Beaumarchais, which was a substantial hit. Christophe Rousset, the founder of the early-music group Les Talens

Lyriques, has campaigned for Salieri's French operas. Having recorded "Les Danaïdes" and "Les Horaces," Rousset last year presented "Tarare" both at the Theater an der Wien and at Versailles, with a first-rate cast of collaborators (Cyrille Dubois, Karine Deshayes, Jean-Sébastien Bou, and Judith van Wanroij). A recording will be out in June. Salieri's cause has benefitted greatly from early-music performance styles: the tangy timbres and propulsive phrasing in Rousset's renditions give vibrancy to music that can sound listless on modern instruments—like Mozart without the harmonic jolts.

"Tarare," the only text that Beaumarchais wrote expressly for the opera house, is a wild mixture of tragedy, comedy, politics, and fantasy. It is set in Hormuz, on the Persian Gulf, of all places. The despotic King Atar, having become jealous of the heroic soldier Tarare, has Tarare's wife abducted and installed in a harem. The tyrant is eventually defeated, and Tarare is crowned king, with allegorical figures proclaiming an anti-aristocratic message: "Man! Your grandeur on the earth / Has nothing to do with your status / And everything to do with your character." After the French Revolution, Beaumarchais claimed, with his usual bravado, that "Tarare" was a kind of first draft of the Declaration of the Rights of Man.

Salieri adroitly handles the dizzying array of situations that Beaumarchais throws his way, generating Oriental marches, love duets, shepherd masques, and bloodthirsty monologues. Sometimes, though, he keeps pace with events rather than taking charge of them. This is a recurring flaw of his operatic work. As the musicologist John A. Rice observes, in his book "Antonio Salieri and Viennese Opera" (1998), Salieri's habitual agreeability, which both Beaumarchais and Da Ponte praised, prevented him from asserting himself over his material, as Mozart did. At his best, though, he not only equals his contemporaries but heralds the future. The rigorous fury of his orchestral writing anticipates Beethoven, Cherubini, and even Berlioz, who was swayed toward a life in music by an electrifying encounter with "Les Danaïdes," in the early eighteen-twenties.

"Salieri and all his supporters will again try to move heaven and earth to ruin his opera." So wrote Leopold Mozart to his daughter, Nannerl, in 1786, concerning his son's "Figaro." Outside of chatter in the family circle, evidence for Salieri's supposed machinations against Mozart is scant. The story is unpersuasive in large measure because Salieri was in Paris for much of the time he was supposed to have been scheming in Vienna. Furthermore, he had a professional interest in supporting the kind of Italian opera that Mozart was producing. In Vienna, the genre was in danger of being pushed aside by singspiels. Joseph periodically made German opera a priority, more for political reasons than for aesthetic ones, and it was not Salieri's forte.

Mozart could never understand why his creations sometimes failed to attract the admiration he knew they deserved, and he looked for conspiratorial explanations. A typical missive to his father, from Paris, reads, "I think that something is going on behind the scenes, and that doubtless here too I have enemies." In fact, Mozart was not above scheming himself. Salieri must have had the sense that an ambitious up-and-comer was breathing down his neck.

Timo Jouko Herrmann raises the possibility that Mozart undertook his own Beaumarchais adaptation—"Figaro"—after learning of Salieri's intention to compose "Tarare." The terrifying harmonies of Mozart's "Don Giovanni" suggest the influence of Salieri's supernatural comedy, "La Grotta di Trofonio," whose infernal magician sounds remarkably like Mozart's Commendatore. Da Ponte originally wrote his "Così Fan Tutte" libretto for Salieri, who began working on it and then set it aside. Mozart's acquisition of the project strained relations between the two composers, although who did what to whom remains unclear.

A plot was indeed afoot against Mozart, but Salieri was not the ringleader. Ian Woodfield's new book, "Cabals & Satires: Mozart's Comic Operas in Vienna," identifies the true operatic villain of Josephine Vienna: Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf, a second-tier composer whose posthumous reputation rests mainly on his concertos for underserved instruments (oboe, viola, double-bass). Woodfield makes a convincing case that Dittersdorf organized a press campaign against Mozart's allegedly artificial and overcomplicated creations. Furthermore, Dittersdorf went to the trouble of writing a German-language satirical opera entitled "The Marriage of Figaro," in which the character of Cherubino becomes a caricature of Mozart: immature, flighty, vain, addicted to dancing. He is even called a *bardasso*, a catamite.

Whatever tensions arose between Mozart and Salieri, things never got that bad. Herrmann's discovery of the "Ofelia" cantata—a brief setting of a poem by Da Ponte, composed sequentially by Mozart, Salieri, and a forgotten person named Cornetti—puts the supposed enmity between the two composers in perspective. Although it is no proof of close friendship, it serves as a reminder that Mozart and Salieri were in constant contact as they moved in Joseph's orbit.

After the French Revolution reduced opportunities for imperial subjects in Paris, Salieri returned to Vienna for good. Joseph died in 1790, leaving the throne to his sterner-minded brother, Leopold. The once untouchable Kapellmeister began to suffer the kinds of reverses to which other composers had long been accustomed: the only opera that he completed in the four years after Joseph's death went unperformed. Perhaps because of that levelling of circumstances, Mozart and Salieri drew closer. In April, 1791, Salieri conducted a "grand symphony" by Mozart—probably the Symphony No. 40 in G Minor. In October of that year, Mozart happily reported to his wife, Constanze, that Salieri and the soprano Caterina Cavalieri had taken pleasure in a performance of "The Magic Flute": "You can hardly imagine how charming they were and how much they liked not only my music, but the libretto and everything."

In mid-November, 1791, Mozart fell ill with fever and swelling, caused by an unknown malady. (Two candidates are strep infection and kidney failure.) Salieri evidently visited Mozart's bedside a few days before the end, which came on December 5th, and he joined

the funeral procession. He probably conducted the première of the tremendous Requiem that Mozart left unfinished at his death. Later in life, Salieri said that the Requiem was the work of a dissipated man who, through music, had found his way to eternity.

In the last decade of Salieri's operatic career, from 1795 to 1804, his standing slipped further. A setting of "The Merry Wives of Windsor," titled "Falstaff," proved a success, and still gives delight today, but "Il Mondo Alla Rovescia," the comedy of inverted gender roles, discomfited the Viennese public. The libretto, by Caterino Mazzolà, is an adventurous variation on the standard conceit of a topsy-turvy world. A count and a marquise are captives on an exotic island where warrior women rule over demure men. The Count is subjected to an objectifying gaze: "I feel like an owl caught in daylight. / They're all around me, staring." When a European force comes to rescue the prisoners, a battle ensues, ending in a ceasefire. The Count, having fallen in love with a female soldier (la Colonella), chooses to remain on the island. A recording on the Dynamic label, derived from a 2009 revival, in Verona, reveals a warmhearted score, rich in mischief. When the women exclaim over the Count's "fine figure," "noble bearing," and "lovely lips," Salieri's orchestra weaves gracefully fluttering figures around him.

Also unappetizing to Viennese tastes was "Die Neger," Salieri's final opera. The librettist was Georg Friedrich Treitschke, who contributed to Beethoven's "Fidelio." The setting is an English colony in the Caribbean, where the evil Lord Bedford has driven out the kindly Lord Falkland. As the latter plans his revenge, he disguises himself with blackface and falls in with Bedford's servants. This plot point helps to explain why "Die Neger" has yet to be revived in the modern era; another problem is the title. (*Neger* was once equivalent to the English word "Negro," but it sounds offensive in modern German.) But the principal black character, a servant named John, escapes the stereotypes of the day. Remarkably, he wins the love of a white maid named Betty, with whom he shares an elegant, playful love duet in quick waltz tempo, preceded by the following dialogue:

John: Close your eyes for a moment.

Betty: (*Does so.*)

John: (*Kisses her.*) Now does it taste better from a white man?

Betty: No! — — I don't know!

John: Oh, you innocent little dove!

Betty: Good John, now there is nothing in the way of our fortune.

John: What have I always said? One must hope. With hope one goes farthest. Hope gives healthy blood.

Betty: And healthy blood brings bliss and cheer. Cheer and bliss should never leave us.

John: Never!

Herrmann infers that the interracial kiss caused unease, since it disappeared from a subsequent revival of the opera. "Die Neger" was last performed in 1806.

Salieri had addressed racially charged material before. For a 1790 revival of "Tarare" in Paris, Beaumarchais wrote a new closing tableau, "The Coronation of Tarare," which reflected Revolutionary values. Salieri agreed to set the text—a risky venture, given that Emperor Leopold's sister was under house arrest in Paris. In a "Scene of Negroes," enslaved people from Africa are presented to Tarare, who says, "Our laws will avenge this injury." The slaves then celebrate, singing in garbled French and dancing to the Revolutionary song "Ça Ira." According to Beaumarchais, several "very young Americans" hissed at that scene, in protest of the apparent antislavery message.

The music that Salieri wrote for this tacked-on pageant wins no awards for cultural sensitivity, indulging in the sort of mildly exotic rhythmic repetition that passed for "African" on the opera stage. (Rousset omitted it from his "Tarare" revival, probably for the best.) Still, the spectacle of people of color winning freedom was novel. A repertory that has canonized the racist caricature of Monostatos in "The Magic Flute" and the misogyny of "Così" can surely find at least a modest place for Salieri's creations.

Salieri suffered heavy personal losses as he grew older. His only son, Alois, who was also a gifted composer, died, of gangrene, in 1805. His wife, Theresia, the daughter of a wealthy bank official, died in 1807; one of Salieri's reminiscences is a touchingly long-winded account of their courtship. For the remainder of his career, he wrote sacred music, taught composition and singing, conducted concerts for the Tonkünstler Society, and went for long walks around the city, enjoying the shade of favorite trees. In 1819, when Carl Zelter, a close friend of Goethe's, visited Salieri, he marvelled at the old man's youthful energy and his

“ironic and humorous” spirit. Salieri told Zelter that he had composed a requiem shortly after Theresa’s death, expecting that he would soon join her. Since Salieri’s death “has not yet happened,” Zelter wrote to Goethe, “he has now composed a much shorter one, and says: that is good enough for him.”

Beethoven received guidance from Salieri in vocal writing. Singers who have struggled with the gruelling parts in “Fidelio” and the Ninth Symphony might wish that these lessons had been more effective. The spat between the two men flared in December, 1808: Salieri threatened to expel Tonkünstler Society musicians who had skipped his widows-and-orphans event in order to play in Beethoven’s “Academy” concert, a four-hour affair that featured the premières of the Fourth Piano Concerto and of the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies. Salieri’s response was harsh, although, as the musicologist Volkmar Braunbehrens notes, it might be asked why Beethoven felt compelled to schedule his concert on a night that for many years had been given over to Salieri’s benefit.

Relations between the two were soon patched up. The following year, the pianist and composer Ignaz Moscheles visited Salieri’s home and saw a message scrawled in large letters: “*THE PUPIL BEETHOVEN WAS HERE!*” At the première of Beethoven’s propagandistic battle piece, “Wellington’s Victory,” in 1813, Salieri joined an all-star lineup of fellow-composers in the percussion section.

There is no doubt that Salieri preached traditional musical values to his students. The teenage Schubert, in an 1816 diary entry, remarks on how Salieri inspired his pupils to avoid “the eccentricity which combines and confuses the tragic with the comic, the agreeable with the repulsive.” This seems to be a warning against the gathering vogue of Beethoven. Schubert would embrace that vogue, yet he remained fond of his teacher, who had first taken notice of him when he was a choirboy. Salieri said of Schubert, “He can do everything: he composes operas, songs, quartets, symphonies, whatever one wants.” The Italianate lyricism that is threaded through Schubert’s daring harmonic designs pays tribute to Salieri’s regime.

In the early eighteen-twenties, Salieri’s health and mind began to fail. Gossip spread across Vienna that he had confessed to having poisoned Mozart, and had attempted suicide. The story shows up in Beethoven’s conversation books—as his deafness increased, his interlocutors scribbled comments on paper—and the notion apparently caused the great man some distress. But two medical orderlies who had attended to Salieri testified that he had said nothing of the kind. On one of his clearer days, he assured Moscheles that the rumors were false: “Tell the world that old Salieri, who will soon die, told you so.” The funeral was conducted with due ceremony. The long requiem, not the short one, was played.

Where did the poison story come from, and how did it become attached to Salieri? Mozart himself may have been the one to set it in motion. On his deathbed, he supposedly said,

“Surely I have been given poison! I cannot let go of this thought.” He probably did not suspect Salieri, who no longer agitated him, but suspicions smoldered in the family circle. Mozart’s paranoia thus reached beyond the grave.

The early nineteenth century saw the rise of nationalism in German-speaking countries. Salieri was typecast as a foreign interloper, an Italian intrigant—a pattern already visible in Leopold Mozart’s letters to his son. Herrmann perceptively points out the role that nationalism played in the marginalization of Salieri’s reputation: “The cosmopolitan composer, fluent in Italian, German and French and artistically significant in all three linguistic areas, could not be fully absorbed in any European nation. With the emergence of nation-states, the historical Salieri gradually became a homeless figure, and his great artistic and social merits eventually fell into oblivion.” A similar fate would befall Salieri’s pupil Giacomo Meyerbeer, another pan-European artist, who receded from view after achieving global fame, in the mid-nineteenth century.

The folktale of Mozart and Salieri has even deeper roots. It is a variation on the mythic duality of Abel and Cain, or of the Prodigal Son and his brother: the favored son versus the dutiful one, the rule-breaker versus the conformist. That polarity drew the attention of Pushkin, who has his humorless, embittered Salieri say:

Where, where is rightness? when the sacred gift,
Immortal genius, comes not in reward
For fervent love, for total self-rejection,
For work and for exertion and for prayers,
But casts its light upon a madman’s head,
An idle loafer’s brow . . . O Mozart, Mozart!

And so Salieri drops poison in Mozart’s glass of wine. Shaffer’s “Amadeus” adopts the same dynamic, although there the elderly, half-demented Salieri merely believes that he has killed Mozart—a self-accusatory metaphor for his poisonous intent.

Above all, the myth of the murderous Salieri assists in the deification of the genius, who cannot be brought down except by the intervention of a diabolical force. Mozart’s death becomes a kind of Passion, in which Salieri plays the role of Judas or Pontius Pilate, delivering the Son of God—“Amadeus” means “lover of God”—to the sacrifice from which he will rise again, in the religious rite of the concert hall.

The danger of the word “genius” is that it implies an almost biological category—an innately superior being, a superhero. It is probably no accident that the category of “genius,” an obsession of the nineteenth century, coincided with the emergence of the pseudoscience of race, which held that certain peoples were genetically fitter than others. At the same time, “genius” easily becomes a branding term used to streamline the selling of cultural goods. The perils of the term become clear when the authorship of a work is uncertain. In 1987, the

musicologist John Spitzer published an amusing and edifying article about the Sinfonia Concertante for Winds, K. 297b, which was long thought to be by Mozart. In its heyday, the Sinfonia was said to be “truly Mozartean” and as “monumental as a palace courtyard.” Once uncertainty about the attribution set in, the piece was called “cheap and repetitive.” The notes themselves had not changed.

This is not to say that the greatness of Mozart—or of Monteverdi, whose melting duet “Pur ti miro” may actually be by Francesco Saccati; or of Bach, whose Halloweenish Toccata and Fugue in D Minor is probably by someone else—is a fiction. Rather, it’s that the dividing line separating “genius” from the rest of humanity is blurrier than we might expect. The Sinfonia Concertante is a lovely but somewhat inert piece. Whether it’s one of Mozart’s lesser creations or another composer’s finest hour is unclear. The revelation of “Per la ricuperata salute di Ofelia,” the omnibus work to which both Mozart and Salieri contributed, is that one would be hard pressed to choose between their offerings. Neither piece is remotely memorable.

In “Il Mondo Alla Rovescia,” the Count is sent to the temple of the Chaste Pigeons, a kind of rehab for misbehaving men. The music that accompanies the entrance of the High Pigeon and his followers is a luminous pastiche of the Divine Mozart, with an unmistakable quotation from the “Gran Partita” Serenade. The villain of “Amadeus” hails that work as the “voice of God.” The real Salieri takes things a little less seriously. If we listen closely, we may hear him laughing at us across the centuries. ♦