

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791) was a keyboard virtuoso and composer whose work is considered to be the pinnacle of the Classical era. He was a musical genius, producing exceptional work in every genre available to him, including operas, ballets, symphonies, concertos, and solo instrumental works. Mozart's music was unique in its breadth and clarity, representing both a continuation of tradition and an embrace of innovation. He is widely considered one of the most influential composers in the history of Western music.

Mozart began writing music at the age of five under the instruction of his father Leopold, an accomplished violinist, teacher, and composer. By age seven, he was touring Europe with his sister Nannerl, performing for royalty and nobility on the violin and the harpsichord. His childhood was spent traveling, allowing him to meet influential musicians and familiarize himself with a wide array of musical styles. He became one of the most sought after composers of his day, most notably in the world of opera, where his success was unparalleled. Prior to his untimely death at the age of 35, Mozart composed well over 600 works, among them some of the most enduring pieces of the Classical era.

Dueling Pianofortes

On Christmas Eve in 1781, Vienna's aristocracy gathered at the court of Emperor Joseph II to witness an unprecedented event: a musical duel between Mozart and Muzio Clementi (1752–1832), the two greatest keyboard virtuosos of their day. Clementi, like Mozart, was a former child prodigy who achieved a successful career as a composer and performer. He was regarded by many as "the father of the pianoforte" because he was among the first to master and promote the new instrument, and his technical ability at the keyboard was said to be unmatched. The two composers had never met and had no idea that they would be competing that night. It was not until they arrived at the Emperor's palace that the purpose of the gathering became clear.

The competition took place in three stages, beginning with each composer playing selections from his own music. Although it is not known what Mozart played, Clementi performed his "Toccata," Op. 11, and *Sonata in B-flat Major*, Op. 24, no. 2, lively pieces that feature many rapid and delicate passages. Next, the two composers took turns sight-reading from a sonata supplied by the Grand Duchess of Russia that was, in Mozart's opinion, "wretchedly written out." Finally, a second piano was brought out, and each composer improvised on a theme from the sonata while the other accompanied. Mozart would later write to his father that "the other instrument was out of tune and three of the keys stuck," but he had no reason to worry. The emperor declared the contest a draw, and later confessed that he preferred Mozart's playing to Clementi's. The two composers would not cross paths again, but the legendary duel left a lasting impression on Mozart. He would later borrow from Clementi's sonata when composing his opera *The Magic Flute*.

