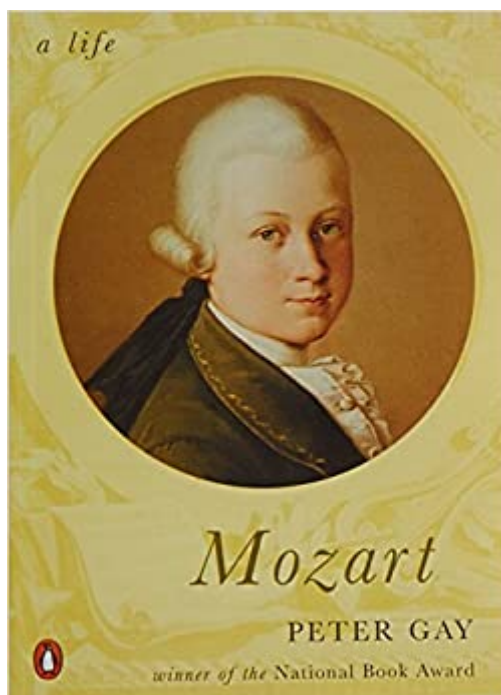


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Mozart: A Life (A Penguin Life)



Synopsis

A biography of the greatest musical mind in Western history Mozart's unshakable hold on the public's consciousness can only be strengthened by historian and biographer Peter Gay's concise and deft look at the genius's life. Mozart traces the development of the man whose life was a whirlwind of achievement, and the composer who pushed every instrument to its limit and every genre of classical music into new realms.

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Customer Reviews

In his lifetime, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart didn't have the best of luck with his patrons. One of them, Archbishop Colloredo of Salzburg, actually had his chamberlain kick the composer in the ass to signal the end of his employment. Mozart has been luckier, however, with his biographers. In the last 20 years alone, he has been the subject of two fine books: Maynard Solomon's meticulous study, which slides Mozart's rather mystifying psyche under the analytic microscope, and Wolfgang Hildesheimer's more sardonic effort, in which the author seems determined to strip every last bit of romantic varnish from the traditional portrait. Now Peter Gay joins the party with his own brief life. Weighing in at 177 pages, Mozart will never displace its deep-focus predecessors. But it's a delightful introduction to the composer, whose entire existence was, as Gay puts it, a "triumph of genius over precociousness." It's one thing, after all, to knock 'em dead at age five--at which point the waist-high Mozart was already a keyboard virtuoso. It's quite another to keep developing at the

same prodigious pace. "A child prodigy is, by its nature, a self-destroying artifact: what seems literally marvelous in a boy will seem merely talented and perfectly natural in a young man. But by 1772, at sixteen, Mozart no longer needed to display himself as a little wizard; he had matured in the sonata and the symphony, the first kind of music he composed, and now showed his gifts in new domains: opera, the oratorio, and the earliest in a string of superb piano concertos." Gay gets in all the essentials: Mozart's mind-blowing maturation, his family life, his weakness for billiards, and (of course) his seriously scatological style as a correspondent. Like Solomon, he takes an Oedipal approach to Wolfgang's perpetual head-banging with his overbearing father. And like Hildesheimer, he's at pains to scotch certain cherished myths--the mysterious figure who commissioned the Requiem, for example, turns out to be no otherworldly harbinger of death but a chiseling wannabe who hoped to pass off the finished product as his own work. Perhaps best of all, Gay never goes sublime on us. His portrait is attractively level-headed, and at one point he's even modest enough to knock his own metaphors for their puerility. Here, surely, the author is being hard on himself. But he's right about one thing: as far as artistry goes, this former child prodigy does make children of us all. --James Marcus --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In the new Penguin Lives series, edited by former New York Times editor James Atlas, Gay's Mozart biography comes with particularly high expectations, given the author's distinction as a historian (he won the National Book Award for volume one of *The Enlightenment*). There is little new information here, yet Gay's overview of the composer's life and work is lucid and concise. Noted for his studies of Freud and Victorian society, the author clearly knows the Mozart literature as well. His book includes a fine bibliographical essay, in which he admits to leaning on Maynard Solomon's 1995 tome, *Mozart: A Life*. Gay provides brief glimpses into the social and historical contexts of Mozart's music: changing attitudes toward listening, the economics of composition and new audience sectors. Also notable is the discussion of how well Mozart's works were received and the author's survey of how Mozart was regarded by subsequent composers. Gay offers a straightforward and helpful introduction to Mozart, debunking romantic interpretations of the composer's life. (Gay maintains that Mozart's burial in an unmarked grave was due to the practice of the period, when extravagant funerals were frowned upon, rather than to poverty.) However, in a book this size, it's hard to stay away from the occasional oversimplified phrase (Mozart "could not have written mediocre music if he tried"). While Gay's judgments of Mozart's works are mostly unsurprising and in line with general opinion, they are discussed vividly and with enthusiasm and bolstered with famous quotes and thorough references. BOMC selection. (June) Copyright 1999

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As a pianist who has played Mozart for years, I have always had an interest in the man himself. Hence, I have read several books to understand more about the man behind the music. I wish this had been one of the first, if not the first book I had read about Mozart as the author provides a terrific narrative on Mozart without taking any deep dives. Hence, the book is perfect for someone who wants a good understanding of the man but is not interested in knowing every detail. I will be purchasing copies for friends for Christmas and I am sure the book will be a welcome gift. Highly recommended!

Anyone who has children can relate to this book and the trials of poor Leopold Mozart with his son Wolfgang. Even now as I write this I am experiencing the most vexing problem of trying to impart my wisdom in my children especially my two teenage daughters who, are themselves struggling to gain independence and who inevitably know it all. Truly a most vexing problem for me. I have two more younger ones that have yet to try my patience and go out on their own, worldly and confident in their own abilities to conquer and reign without my help. We shall see what is what in the end won't we parents? Can you relate to my plight? If so then this is a fairly well written little book on the life of Mozart as good as any I guess. There is much to this little man and his own relationship with his father here and how it shaped his life and his works. Recurrent themes in his operas appear to be the end result of ongoing paternal angst. There are more expansive histories available but the man's life is at times open to interpretation so sometimes less is more. This book gets to the point, presents the stages and influences of his development and incorporates them nicely. It does a good job of dispelling the myths associated with the man and is quite clinically basic in its approach. All you really need to know without the influence of letters to this one and that one back and forth ad nauseum which if presented poorly can make a book longer than it has to be. For the rabid fan of every factotum, no it probably will not do. But for the regular person who wants to know and have a good look at Mozart's life a "just the facts mam" kind of person, you know, just enough current information on the life of Wolfgang A. Mozart to carry you through some martinis and social banter armed with the truth about him with a well respected author and biographer at the helm then this book is the one for you to read. Secretly, I too wanted to believe in the movie 'Amadeus' and all of its assertions but it's all hogwash. Salieri did not kill Mozart or contribute to his death in any way. In fact they were actually cordial friends respectful of each other and not mortal enemies as people tend to believe. The cause of death is another matter which I will let you research on your own. I don't want

to spoil all your fun. This book will start you on your way very well as it reduces the fluff and gets to the pure genius that was Mozart, a man that was probably the last of his kind, one of the greatest composers ever to yet live, ahead of his time yes, yet had day to day problems just like the rest of us and left us way too early because medicine hadn't caught up yet. The book will fill you in.

A quick look at the life and major works of the composer without going into great depth or detail. You do not have to understand music theory or composition to understand this biography. It does go deeply into and spends quite a bit of time, throughout the whole book, on the influence of Mozart's father, Leopold. It is almost a mini-bio of this man of music. Again, this is a short, compact overview of his life, but does compel you to want to go out and find something much more detailed about his life, times, and music.

Peter Gay's MOZART is a no-nonsense, straight to the point brief biography of Mozart. Organized by themes--the Prodigy, the Son, the Servant, the Freelance, the Beggar, the Master, the Dramatist, the Classic--Gay seeks to dispel certain myths created by the Oscar winning movie, Amadeus--such as Mozart's rare use of that form of his middle name in the Latinate--while reaffirming Mozart's undeniable musical genius. The major drawback of the book is one that Gay could not avoid, you can only imagine Mozart's compositions in your mind as you read. Gay tries to paint the picture of how magnificent, truly unmatched Mozart's gift was, but words only go so far. The positive thing along the same lines, however, is that I can't wait to play "Jupiter" and piano concertos like no. 20 and 21 and soak in their richness, which ultimately is Gay's goal. Reading about Mozart must serve hearing what endures in his music.

Peter Gay's `Mozart' is the sort of book a heavy-hitting historian like Gay writes while on holiday at the beach. Lite, witty and short, but still substantial enough to satisfy. (The same could be said for many of the excellent volumes of the Penguin Lives series--alas, now defunct.) As nearly every other reviewer has pointed out, this slim volume treats Mozart's correspondingly brief life with Gay's celebrated prose style. No new details are introduced, at least nothing destined to alter Mozart scholarship (for all the details, you'll want the much longer `Mozart: A Life' by Maynard Solomon). What Gay brings to Mozart's life is readability, historical context (this is PETER GAY, after all) and a nice quick summary for those readers who have an interest in Mozart but may not care to spend more than a few hours studying him. One nice advantage of the book, especially for those looking to gain a better understanding of Mozart's music, is that Gay connects the events of Mozart's life to the

production of some of his musical masterpieces. With Gay's book and iTunes, you can quickly build a "best of" Mozart library as you read along.

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