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**The Mozart phenomenon
in the Postmodern interior:
Michael Nyman's television opera
*Letters, Riddles and Writs***

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Abstract. This article examines Michael Nyman's 1991 television opera *Letters, Riddles, and Writs*, created in collaboration with Jeremy Newson and Pat Gavin to commemorate the bicentennial of Mozart's death. It was part of the BBC's experimental project *Not Mozart*, which reflected the values of postmodern culture. The libretto of the opera was based

on documentary sources—fragments of Mozart’s letters and his “carnival” riddles. This article examines the artistic concept of the work, which was shaped by two central ideas. The first, inspired by the psychoanalytic research of American musicologist Maynard Solomon, concerned Mozart’s relationship with his father. The second engages with issues of creative self-reflection, plagiarism, and the place of classical music in a multicultural context. Special attention in the article is paid to the compositional features of the opera and Nyman’s methods of treating borrowed musical material, which were based on the principle of deconstruction. The study concludes that the British composer invests the opera genre with the qualities of a metacomposition, transforming it simultaneously into both a psychological exploration of the artist’s identity and a form of artistic self-diagnosis. By breaking some stereotypes and creating others, Nyman emphasizes the relative nature of our ideas about Mozart and the fact that they are shaped by cultural context.

Keywords: musical theater of the 20th century, Michael Nyman, *Letters, Riddles and Writs*, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Leopold Mozart, postmodernism, deconstruction, plagiarism

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Музыкальный театр

Научная статья

Феномен Моцарта в постмодернистском интерьере: телеопера Майкла Наймана «Письма, загадки и иски»

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Аннотация. Объектом исследования статьи выступает телеопера Майкла Наймана «Письма, загадки и иски», созданная в 1991 году в сотрудничестве с Джереми Ньюсоном и Пэтом Гэвином по случаю двухсотлетней годовщины со дня смерти Моцарта. Она явилась частью экспериментального проекта BBC *Not Mozart*, отразившего систему ценностей постмодернистской культуры. Либретто оперы базировалось на документальных источниках — фрагментах писем Моцарта и его «карнавальных» загадках. В статье рассматривается художественная концепция сочинения, которую определили две ведущие идеи. Первая была инициирована психоаналитическими исследованиями американского музыковеда Мейнарда Соломона и касалась взаимоотношений Моцарта с отцом. Вторая была связана с вопросами творческой саморефлексии,

затрагивала проблемы плагиата, а также существования классики в условиях мультикультурализма. Отдельное внимание в статье уделяется композиционным особенностям оперы и приемам работы Наймана с заимствованным музыкальным материалом, которые опирались на принцип деконструкции. В ходе исследования делаются выводы, что оперный жанр британский композитор наделяет чертами метакомпозиции, превращая его одновременно и в психологическое исследование личности художника, и в творческую самодиагностику. Ломая одни стереотипы и создавая другие, Найман подчеркивает относительность наших представлений о Моцарте и их обусловленность культурным контекстом.

Ключевые слова: музыкальный театр XX века, Майкл Найман, «Письма, загадки и иски», Вольфганг Амадей Моцарт, Леопольд Моцарт, постмодернизм, деконструкция, плагиат

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Introduction

January 27, 2026, marks the 270th anniversary of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's birth. This significant date serves not only as an occasion for numerous celebrations but also invites us to reflect on the creative legacy of the Austrian genius within the context of contemporary cultural values. This article does not aim to trace the changes in the perception of the Mozart phenomenon in the public consciousness of the 20th and 21st centuries. Instead, it pursues a more modest goal: to identify, through a specific artifact, the characteristic value orientations underlying conceptions of creative personality and attitudes toward tradition among composers whose artistic thinking developed under the sign of postmodernism. Michael Nyman's television opera *Letters, Riddles, and Writs* (1991) was chosen as such a model, representing a kind of hermeneutic attempt at a psychoanalytic study of Mozart's personality.

Nyman is primarily known to the Russian audience as a film composer, although works in academic genres (operas, ballets, quartets, etc.) constitute a vital part of his creative output. Over the last decade, interest in the British master's music within Russian musicology has grown significantly, as evidenced by a series of scholarly publications focused on the specifics of his compositional method [1; 2] and issues concerning his music-theatre works [3; 4; 5]. The opera examined in this article has not previously been the subject of specialized musicological study.

History of Creation and Artistic Concept

Letters, Riddles and Writs is part of a project timed to coincide with the bicentennial of Mozart's death. The concept aimed, on the one hand, to demonstrate how the music of the great Austrian composer provides inspiration for contemporary composers and, on the other hand, to highlight the ambiguity of perceiving and interpreting a genius's personality and legacy from a historical perspective. In addition to Nyman, the project featured composers Judith Weir, Louis Andriessen, Misha Mengelberg, Heinz Karl Gruber, and Mathias Rüegg.

The cycle, provocatively titled *Not Mozart*, consisted of six short films:

1. *M Is for Man, Music, Mozart* (directed by Peter Greenaway).
2. *Bring Me the Head of Amadeus* (directed by Barrie Gavin).
3. *Letters, Riddles and Writs* (directed by Jeremy Newson and Pat Gavin).
4. *Not Mozart* (directed by Ernst Grandits).
5. *W. A. M. Limited* (directed by Anthony Garner).
6. *Scipio's Dream* (directed by Margaret Williams).

The project was produced for British BBC television and fell into the category of experimental cinema. Most of the video sequences were surrealist in nature (for instance, in Barrie Gavin's film, Mozart's skull travels across Austria), while the composer's music underwent various "modernized" arrangements (for example, in Ernst Grandits' film, musicians of the Vienna Art Orchestra performed jazz fantasies based on Mozart's themes). On the whole, the *Not Mozart* cycle reflected the value system of postmodern culture, where the phenomenon of Mozart's creative personality became surrounded by various myths and bore only an indirect relation to the actual historical figure. In virtually all the films, the image of the composer was linked in one way or another to the consumer culture: Mozart's music was, on the one hand, transferred into a different cultural context, merging with jazz, rock, and the avant-garde, and on the other hand, it became a commercial brand and, consequently, a source of profit (for example, one of the central leitmotifs in Ernst Grandits' film was *Mozartkugeln* chocolates, considered a hallmark of Vienna).

The libretto (script) for Nyman's television opera was written by Jeremy Newson,¹ who also co-directed the production with Pat Gavin,² however, the idea for *Letters* belonged entirely to the composer. The plot is based on a series

¹ Jeremy Newson (1947–2020) was an English actor, director, and producer. Gained fame in the 1990s as a creator of documentaries about the world of fashion and the entertainment industry.

² Pat Gavin is an English artist, director, and actor. Four-time BAFTA winner as best designer and animation director.

of phantasmagoric visions appearing to Mozart on his deathbed. The half-hour television opera is divided into two parts. The first focuses on the composer's relationship with his father, who appears at times as a wise Sarastro,³ at others as a mercenary miser contrasting his son's impressive income with meticulously calculated expenses, and at still others as a despotic tyrant controlling every aspect of Mozart's life, including his marriage to Constanze. It cannot be said, however, that such a characterization is so far from the truth. For example, in musicological research, Leopold Mozart is often described as a calculating man who "always knew how much he had spent and on what, was able to navigate freely between different European currencies, remembered how much a particular item cost in different countries [...], demanded constant reports on expenditures" [6, pp. 62–63]. He also reportedly did not draw a clear line between "obligation and investment" [7, p. 12], but at the same time "possessed God-given gifts as a teacher" [8, p. 136].

The events of the second half of the opera unfold in a courtroom, where Michael Nyman stands trial, accused of flagrant intellectual theft⁴—the plagiarism of Mozart's music. Franz Joseph Haydn acts as the accuser, while Ludwig van Beethoven serves as the defender (or rather, their busts do, in keeping with the fantastical logic of a feverish dream). During the hearing, a court pianist, played by Nyman himself, performs excerpts from the works under judicial consideration (an excerpt from the first movement of Mozart's Quartet KV 428 and the introduction to the song *I am an unusual thing* from the opera *Letters, Riddles and Writs*⁵). A witness for the defense—the 19th-century Swiss musicologist Hans Georg Nägeli⁶—refers to Haydn's advice to compose in accordance with chosen models. The film concludes with a song in which Mozart foresees his imminent death.

³ In the autumn of 1791, a few months before his death, Mozart himself conducted *Die Zauberflöte* in Vienna, and the film's creators make imaginative use of this biographical detail.

⁴ A line by Haydn, acting as the prosecutor at the court hearing.

⁵ It should be noted that in this instance, a *mise en abyme* technique typical of postmodern art arises, imbuing the opera's artistic text with the characteristics of a metanarrative.

⁶ Nägeli's lectures on music were very popular in the 19th century. Significantly, he was critical of Mozart (for more details, see [9]).

The authors cast German singer and actress Ute Lemper in the leading role, emphasizing the androgynous image of the composer. On the one hand, this decision was a consequence of the representational practices of mass culture, reflecting gender shifts in the structure of modern society; on the other hand, it endowed the image of the Viennese classic with an aura of uniqueness and singularity. The roles of Haydn and Beethoven were performed by Julian Glover and Tony Rohr, while the part of Leopold was assigned to the singer David Thomas.

The texts of the opera's songs and duets were based on authentic documentary materials: specifically, the correspondence between Mozart and his father and the so-called "carnival" or Zoroastrian riddles. The latter were devised by the composer in 1786 during the Vienna Carnival and sent to Leopold Mozart on a separate sheet titled *Excerpts from the Fragments of Zoroaster* [10, p. 345]. For a long time, they were considered lost, but they were rediscovered in the Berlin State Library in 1970 [11].

In total, Mozart composed eight riddles. Two of them were inked over by Georg Nissen, Constanze Mozart's second husband. The reason for such action was likely their content, which he considered unacceptable for reasons of censorship.

The riddles became the subject of a specialized study by the American musicologist Maynard Solomon, known for his psychoanalytic approach to interpreting the biographies of famous musicians. In 1985, he published an article in the journal *American Imago*, in which the riddles were examined through the lens of Mozart's complicated relationship with his father and interpreted as a challenge to the latter's authority. According to the musicologist, due to his emotional attachment, the composer always desired to win Leopold's approval⁷ while simultaneously wishing to free himself from his father's constant control. However, "neither distance nor silence could free Mozart from a lifelong paternal domination of overwhelming intensity," Solomon stated. "On one important level, Mozart's biography is the story of the intricate mechanisms and maneuvers by which he tries to reach an accommodation with the man who had not only fathered him, but had been his primary instructor in all matters and had sought to control his every action through relentless mental pressure alternating with seductive benevolence" [10, p. 357].

⁷ "Your most humble son" or "Your most obedient son," Mozart ended most of his letters to his father with these words.

In the program notes for the opera, published on the Wise Music Classical website,⁸ Nyman indicated that it was Solomon's article that defined one of the key ideas of the work—the exploration of the relationship between Mozart and his father, interpreted through a psychoanalytic lens.

Nyman and Newson relied on the three-volume edition of the letters published in English and edited by Emily Anderson.⁹ Notably, the fragments that formed the basis of the libretto were also cited in Solomon's article. A significant portion of them was taken from Leopold's letters of 1778 and Mozart's letters of 1781, a period marked by growing tensions between father and son. Below are fragments of the libretto with references to the correspondence:

LEOPOLD

Oh, my dear Son! When you were a child, I gave up
all my time so that you could not only to provide
later on for yourself, but also that I might enjoy
a comfortable old age, devote myself to the welfare of
my soul and be enabled to meet my death in peace.

*(Leopold Mozart to his Son,
February 5th, 1778¹⁰)*

If you stay away, I'll die much sooner. If I could have
you live with me, I'll live several years longer.

*(Leopold Mozart to his Son,
August 3th, 1778¹¹)*

You must not lose sight of your main objective in life,
which is to make money.

*(Leopold Mozart to his Son,
October 15th, 1777¹²)*

⁸ Wise Music Classical. (n.d.). *Letters, Riddles and Writs* – Michael Nyman. Retrieved May 11, 2026, from <https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/11442/Letters-Riddles-and-Writs--Michael-Nyman/>

⁹ Anderson, E. (Ed.). (1938). *The Letters of Mozart and His Family* (Vols. II–III). Macmillan and Co.

¹⁰ Anderson, 1938, p. 685–686.

¹¹ Anderson, 1938, p. 877.

¹² Anderson, 1938, p. 467.

When you make new acquaintances, you immediately wish to give your life and property to them.

*(Leopold Mozart to his Son,
August 27th, 1778¹³)*

I say nothing about women, for where they're concerned the greatest reserve and prudence are really necessary.

*(Leopold Mozart to his Son,
February 5th, 1778¹⁴)*

You really must consider first the welfare of your parents or else your soul will go to the devil.

*(Leopold Mozart to his Son,
February 11th–12th, 1778¹⁵)*

MOZART

Dearest Papa, *He* knows that my sole aim is to help you and to help us all. Must I repeat to you a hundred times that I can be of no use to you? Here is Vienna than there in Salzburg. I implore you, dearest, most beloved father, spare me such letters. I entreat you to do so, for they only irritate my mind and disturb my heart and spirit; and I, who must keep composing, need a cheerful...

*(Mozart to his Father,
June 9th, 1781¹⁶)*

¹³ Anderson, 1938, p.896.

¹⁴ Anderson, 1938, p.687.

¹⁵ Anderson, 1938, p.709.

¹⁶ Anderson, 1938, p. 1103.

Dearest Papa, I intend to marry. You are horrified at the idea. But I entreat you to listen to me the voice of nature speaks as loud in me as in other men louder perhaps than in many a big strong lout a fellow. I cannot think of anything more necessary than a wife... But who is the object of my love? Not Sophie, not Josepha, it is Constanze.

(Mozart to his Father,
December 15th, 1781¹⁷)

According to the creators' vision, Sarastro and Nægeli symbolized different hypostases of Leopold, reflecting the duality of his nature and intensifying the psychoanalytic subtext. The image of Mozart's Sarastro embodied the idea of the "enlightened monarch," an ideal philosopher-ruler and a source of life's wisdom [12, p. 40]. Leopold's identification with him pointed to the perception of the father as a wise mentor, a guide into the secrets of musical art, and a talented educator thanks to whom Wolfgang became a prodigy. Conversely, the identification with Nægeli demonstrated negative traits—arrogance, disapproval, envy, and misunderstanding. It is telling that during the trial in the film, Nægeli cynically equates the 18th-century compositional practice of borrowing with the 20th-century "cannibalization" of classical idioms, turning the accuser Haydn's own words against him.

In Solomon's view, Mozart's carnival riddles became a way "to settle the score" with his father and to expose his hostility [10, p. 347]. The psychoanalytic aspect of the charades in *Letters, Riddles and Writs* was emphasized by Beethoven, who claimed that Mozart was trying to tell his father something he just can't come out with. Significantly, each riddle was followed by songs based on fragments of Mozart's letters to Leopold, which seemed to decode the hidden meaning of the charades.

Nyman chose two riddles for the opera. Their content is as follows¹⁸:

¹⁷ Anderson, 1938, p.1167.

¹⁸ Retrieved May 11, 2026, from <https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/11442/Letters-Riddles-and-Writs--Michael-Nyman/>

No. 1

We are many sisters; it is painful for us to unite as well as to separate. We live in a palace, yet we would rather call it a prison, for we are securely locked up and must work for the sustenance of men. The most remarkable thing is that the doors are opened for us quite often, both day and night, and we still do not come out, except when one pulls out by force.

No. 2

I am an unusual thing; I have no soul and no body; one cannot see me but can hear me; I do not exist for myself; only a human being can give me life, as often as they he wishes, and my life is only of short duration, for I die almost at the moment in which I am born. And so, in accordance with men's caprice, I may live and die untold times a day. To whose we give life I do nothing — but those on whose account I am born I leave with painful sensations for the short duration of my life until I depart.

Mozart's charades belonged to the tradition of bawdy riddles. It was their ambiguity, as Solomon believed, that reflected the composer's contradictory feelings toward his father.

The first charade's answer is "teeth." In psychoanalysis, this image is usually interpreted either as a subconscious death wish toward a relative (Jung) or as the suppression of sexuality (Freud). The creators of the television opera explicated the hidden meanings of the text by placing a miniature figure of Mozart inside Leopold's mouth, thus visualizing the sense of imprisonment experienced by Mozart.¹⁹ The ambiguity of the first charade stems from the fact that in German,

¹⁹ According to Solomon, the palace referred to in the riddle "is really a prison, where he [Mozart] must work for the benefit of others rather than for his own gratification or fulfillment" [10, p. 350].

the word “Zahn” (tooth) in slang also means “chick” (a young woman), thereby containing an allusion to a brothel. The idea of suppressed sexuality and protest against the father is confirmed by Beethoven’s subsequent words (“So, his father had an all-consuming desire to control young Mozart. No wonder he fell into the arms of a woman”) and the song *Dearest Papa*, based on fragments of a letter to his father dated December 15, 1781, in which the composer reveals his plans regarding his marriage to Constanze. Nyman emphasizes this romantic longing at the musical level with allusions to Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*, thereby appealing to the theme of forbidden or impossible love.

The probable answer to the second riddle is “sound.” Its ambiguity stems from a description that is equally applicable to a “smell.” In the latter case, the riddle takes on a humorous tone due to coprological associations, which were highly characteristic of Mozart’s epistolary style. However, Nyman and Newson ignore this aspect and, following Solomon, interpret the riddle through a psychoanalytic lens, focusing on the fear of death. They rely on passages in which phrases concerning the transience of life and the approach of death are predominant: “my life is only of short duration,” “I die,” “I may live and die untold times a day,” and “the short duration of my life.” As if to confirm this interpretation, there follows a song in which Mozart foresees his death. Its verbal basis consists of the composer’s words allegedly spoken three days before his passing. Here, the creators of the television opera turned to the travel diaries of Vincent and Mary Novello, who visited Mozart’s widow in Salzburg in 1829. According to Constanze, when her dying husband learned of his appointment as the music director of St. Stephen’s Cathedral, he exclaimed sorrowfully: “I am appointed to a situation which will afford me leisure to write music just to please myself. And I feel capable of doing something worthy of the fame I’ve acquired. Instead, I must die...”²⁰ These very words formed the basis of the song.

As Carlo Cenciarelli rightly asserts, the adoption of Solomon’s hermeneutic position determined the specificity of the figurative interpretation of the composer in the television opera. Nyman created an image of a “Dionysian Mozart” [13, p. 28],

²⁰ Novello, V. (1975). A Mozart pilgrimage: Being the travel diaries of Vincent & Mary Novello in the year 1829. Eulenburg Books, p. 126.

a creator torn by inner conflicts, in contrast to other prevailing images of him in popular consciousness (for instance, the “Apollonian” image or the image of the “idle reveller” embodied in Pushkin’s little tragedy *Mozart and Salieri* and in Miloš Forman’s film *Amadeus*).

In addition to family relationships presented in a psychoanalytic light, *Letters, Riddles and Writs* also touched upon issues of copyright, presented with a fair amount of irony. The accusations of intellectual theft brought against Nyman during the court hearing defined the second most important idea of the opera, concerning not only creative self-reflection but also the problem of the classical tradition’s existence in the context of multiculturalism. The poignancy of these questions is all the more evident since the music of the entire opera was not originally composed material but consisted exclusively of a “remake” of Mozartian material.

The emergence of the theme of plagiarism in an opera dedicated to Mozart is by no means accidental. “I can more or less adopt or imitate any kind and any style of composition,” the Austrian master declared.²¹

Indeed, his work clearly exhibits influences, borrowings, intersections, and dialogues with the music of other composers, a fact frequently noted in scholarly literature and prompting questions about Mozartian originality. This issue is resolved quite clearly in the monograph by Pavel V. Lutsker and Irina P. Susidko, who perceptively observed: “Ultimately, in Mozart’s time, *how* a composer handled a theme was far more important than how original or absolutely unique the theme itself was. And it is much more interesting today to comprehend the result than simply—without commentary—to state the initial impulse” [6, p. 413]. These words, characterizing 18th-century compositional practice, strikingly describe the situation at the end of the 20th century as well, especially the position of Nyman, who openly declared in various interviews: “I do not hide that I steal...”²² and viewed his creative method as an opportunity to take a fresh look at familiar material. The judicial proceedings staged in the opera, as well as its verdict—which, through the mouth of Beethoven,

²¹ Anderson, 1938, p. 692.

²² A phrase spoken by Nyman in an interview with Dmitry Ukhov in 1998.

justifies composing in accordance with chosen models²³—were likely the British composer’s response to criticism from foreign musicologists who considered his compositional practice an indicator of “commercial opportunism” [14, p. 344].

The parts of the television opera exploring Mozart’s relationship with his father and the issues of plagiarism are united by another problem that can be defined as the “anxiety of influence”—a concept developed by the American literary critic Harold Bloom [15]. Based on the ideas of Freud, Nietzsche, and Emerson, this concept is centered on the psychological barrier experienced by writers due to the conservative pressure of literary tradition. According to Bloom, the influence of great predecessors is inevitable, but their originality hinders the self-affirmation of new poets, causing an “anxiety of influence.” This is overcome through a “struggle” with the influence of the classics, manifesting as a conscious reinterpretation of their legacy. “Strong” writers, in order to realize their own vision, radically distort the masters, whereas “weak” ones merely repeat their ideas, creating derivative works.

The concept of the “anxiety of influence” reflects the Freudian Oedipus complex, and in this respect, both parts of Nyman’s opera align perfectly. Piety and admiration, turning into a hidden rebellion against the dear, function here as a *topos* realized, on the one hand, in Mozart’s riddles and letters, and on the other, in Nyman’s “remaking” of his music. The intersection of these ideas is emphasized both aurally and visually. For instance, in the first half of the opera, the Wagnerian allusion permeating the song *Dearest Papa* actually turns out to be a fragment from the second movement of Mozart’s Quartet KV 428.²⁴ Thus, accusations of intellectual

²³ Interestingly, a complex system of references arises in this instance. Beethoven appeals to the words of Nägeli, who quotes Czerny, who, in turn, refers to Haydn. This concerns Carl Czerny’s treatise *School of Practical Composition*. The creators of the opera include an excerpt from the sixth chapter in the libretto: “The best method is, undoubtedly, that which Joseph Haydn recommended to his pupil: ... must so compose *according to the models chosen*, that the same key, time, form of the period, number of bars and even each modulations, shall be strictly followed ...” (Czerny, C. (1848). *School of Practical Composition; or, Complete Treatise on the Composition of all Kinds of Music* (J. Bishop, Trans., Vol. 1). R. Cocks & Co., p. 36).

²⁴ The connection between this excerpt and the Wagnerian leitmotif of longing from *Tristan und Isolde* was once pointed out by Georgy Chicherin. See [16, p. 195].

theft could be brought not only against the author of *Letters, Riddles and Writs* but also against Wagner. In the second part of the film, Nägeli defends Nyman's "anxiety of influence," legitimizing his compositional practice based on the deconstruction of Mozartian material.

*Genre and Compositional Features,
Working with Musical Material*

The genre and compositional structure of the opera partially appeal to the traditions of the *Singspiel*, particularly in the form it took in Mozart's own works: Nyman alternates songs²⁵ and duets with spoken dialogues. *Letters, Riddles and Writs* is further linked to the *Singspiel* by its fantastic narrative character (though here the plot is transformed from a fairy tale into a surrealist one), a critical (in Nyman's case, ironic) attitude toward reality, and the comicality of situations and dialogues²⁶ juxtaposed with dramatic intensity. Other shared features include a small number of musical numbers, a rapid succession of scenes creating a chronicling effect, and an orientation toward popular music—which, in the contemporary mass consciousness, Mozart's music has undoubtedly become.

Letters, Riddles and Writs belongs to the genre of television opera, which allows for the use of the extensive resources of television technology. This provides opportunities for alternating and combining close-ups and panoramic shots, montage, and special artistic effects based on a polyphony of visual layers. The special effects, makeup, and costumes are striking in their spectacle and craftsmanship, while the deliberate visual aesthetics of each frame are only slightly inferior to the artistic style of the famous Peter Greenaway, with whom Nyman has collaborated since 1976.

²⁵ Nyman calls the solo numbers "songs," but given the dramatic character of the music and in accordance with the traditions of early opera, in our view, they can also be designated as arias.

²⁶ This primarily concerns the dialogues between Haydn and Beethoven, which frequently evoke a smile. An example is Haydn's retort to Beethoven's indignation regarding Leopold's mercenariness (Leopold believed his son's main goal in life was to earn money): "He wasn't an artist. I wasn't an artist. Only you were the artist, Ludwig. The rest of us were jobbing composers trying to make ends meet." It should be noted that the comedy is often provided by numerous anachronisms, which frequently provoke bewildered questions from the Viennese classics ("What's a dollar?" Haydn asks Beethoven; "What's copyright?" Beethoven wonders in turn).

As noted above, visual techniques often help the authors bring hidden meanings to the surface. For instance, it is telling that not only the first riddle, “We are many sisters,” but also the following song, *Dearest Papa*—in which the intention to marry Constanze is voiced—is sung by a sickly-looking Mozart while positioned inside Leopold’s mouth (*Illustration 1*). The combination of the letter’s text with such a visual sequence heightens the sense of hopelessness and helps the viewer interpret the decision to marry not only as resistance to paternal authority but also as the acquisition of long-awaited freedom. Indeed, the appearance of Constanze’s portrait through the gap in the teeth, steadily approaching the viewer while the dark color palette shifts to bright hues and the music moves from minor to major, seems to facilitate the hero’s escape from imprisonment. During the performance of the second riddle, Mozart’s face dominates the frame in a close-up, and his appearance takes on traditional features for the first time (the actress is clad in a wig, a knee-length coat, an embroidered waistcoat, culottes, silk stockings, a jabot, and cuffs; see *Illustration 2*). Due to this, the text of the charade becomes associated not so much with sound in general, but directly with Mozart’s music.



*Illustration 1. A frame from the television opera
Letters, Riddles and Writs (1991)*



*Illustration 2. A frame from the television opera
Letters, Riddles and Writs (1991)*

The opera contains six musical numbers: two duets between Mozart and his father and four songs (two featuring the texts of the riddles and two with fragments from the letters). All of them rely on borrowed material and its subsequent rework. For instance, the basis of the first duet is Sarastro's aria from Act II of *Die Zauberflöte* („O Isis und Osiris“). The source material for the second duet is Leporello's aria from Act I of *Don Giovanni*. The song *Dearest Papa* is based on fragments from the second movement of the Quartet KV 428, while the song *I am an unusual thing* combines fragments from the quartets KV 428 (first movement) and KV 465 (second movement). The material for the final song, *I am appointed to a situation*, is taken from an excerpt of the first movement of the Quartet KV 428.

Nyman's work with musical material is quite diverse. For example, in the first duet, Sarastro's aria, which sounds in F major as it does in Mozart's original, is used almost in its entirety. The composer excluded only a small fragment involving modulations to G minor and C major.²⁷ Everything else—harmony, melodic line, and rhythm²⁸—he left virtually unchanged, with the exception

²⁷ In Mozart's work, this excerpt is accompanied by the words: „Lasst sie der Prüfung Früchte sehen: doch sollten sie zu Grabe gehen.“

²⁸ Due to the fact that Nyman combines Sarastro's aria with a new text (fragments from Leopold's letter to his son), the rhythm undergoes slight adjustments in accordance with the rules of prosody.

of the tempo. Although Mozart's aria is written in a rather slow tempo (*Adagio*), Nyman slows it down even further, reducing it by half. The longer note values significantly alter the character of the music, imbuing it with a sense of ponderousness and heaviness that is uncharacteristic of the Viennese Classical style.

Mozart's part was composed by Nyman himself. It acts as a counterpoint to Sarastro's melody and is written in shorter note values. Its basis is the opening fourth motif of Sarastro's aria. Although the imperative intonation in this context symbolizes grumbling and resistance, its delivery in a more restless rhythm causes it to "drown" against the background of Leopold's "majestic" musical statement. This is visually emphasized by combining the faces of the father and son in a single frame, presented from different angles: frontal view (Leopold), accentuating strength and confidence, and in profile view (Mozart), reflecting secrecy and withdrawal (*Illustration 3*).



*Illustration 3. A frame from the television opera
Letters, Riddles and Writs (1991)*

The second duet is based on Leporello's "Catalogue Aria" from Act I of *Don Giovanni*. The choice of the source material is driven by ironic numerical associations: in both cases, there is an enumeration. However, while Leporello records the number of Don Giovanni's romantic conquests (640 women in Italy, 231 in Germany, 100 in France, and 1,003 in Spain), Mozart and his father are calculating earned and spent money (three concerts at the Burgtheater brought in 800 florins, the performance of *Le nozze di Figaro*—1,000, but the rent for the apartment on Schulerstrasse cost 480, the trip to Prague cost 280, and so on).

Nyman resorts not only to citation but also to self-citation, as the orchestral accompaniment is based on his earlier piece *In Re Don Giovanni* (1977). The Mozartian text (the opening 15 bars of the aria) is deconstructed by the composer into separate textural elements: Leporello's recitative melody, the bass line, imitations in the upper voices, and the middle voices performing the function of harmonic support. The disassembled music unfolds from a "reduced version to a full one" [1, p. 38]. The orchestral accompaniment includes four presentations of the Mozartian material. The first represents only the harmonic skeleton of the borrowed fragment, performed by strings; in the second, the bass line (saxophones) is added; the third presentation is supplemented by imitation in the flutes; and finally, in the concluding section, the material of Leporello's vocal part appears (horns, trumpets, and trombones). Nyman composes the melodies for the parts of Mozart and Leopold himself but essentially extracts them from the harmonic context.

Different strategies are used in the songs. The music of the song I am an unusual thing combines fragments from various Mozart compositions. Its first verse is based on the repetition of a harmonic formula borrowed from bars 75–96 of the first movement of the Quartet KV 428²⁹ (*Example 1*).

²⁹ The choice of material here is also intentional. Quartets KV 428 and KV 465 are part of the cycle of so-called "Haydn" Quartets. They were written by Mozart between 1782 and 1785 and dedicated to Haydn. Fragments from this written dedication were included in the libretto of *Letters, Riddles and Writs*: "I send my six sons to you, most celebrated and very dear friend. These children may one day prove to be a source of consolation to me. Please then, receive them kindly, and be to them father, guide and friend. From this moment I surrender to you, Haydn, my dear friend, all my rights over them." Haydn heard the quartets in early 1785 at a meeting at Mozart's home and, addressing Leopold Mozart, said of his son: "He's the greatest composer of his age" (these words were also included in the libretto).

The musical score is presented in four systems, each with four staves. The notation includes various rhythmic values, triplets, and dynamic markings. The first system begins with a piano (p) dynamic. The second system features a fortissimo (fp) dynamic. The third system continues with a piano (p) dynamic. The fourth system concludes with a piano (p) dynamic.

Example 1. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. String Quartet in E-flat Major, KV 428.
I. Allegro non troppo, bars 75–100

The cadence before the second statement is modified by Nyman in order to modulate back to the original key of C minor (*Example 2*).

First stanza



Refrain

Example 2. Michael Nyman. *Letters, Riddles and Writs*.
“I am an unusual thing” (harmonic scheme)

The soloist’s part is composed using a recombination of segments from Mozart’s theme (*Example 3*). This is followed, starting from the words “if my life is only of short duration,” by a fragment taken from bars 97–100. In the song, it functions as a refrain, as it appears in a shortened form at the conclusion. Nyman leaves the harmonic sequence unchanged, while transferring the first violin’s melody to the vocal part.

A comparison with the original source reveals that the composer borrows only the chord sequence and individual motifs. He offers a different textural solution, a “darker” orchestration (low strings and winds), and, as with Sarastro’s aria, significantly slows down the tempo. All of this affects the character of the music, imbuing it with dramatic features.

The second verse (starting from the words “And so, according to men’s caprice”) is constructed by combining two fragments from the second movement of the Quartet KV 465—bars 13–19 and bars 57–67 (*Examples 4a and 4b*).

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. String Quartet KV 428, 1st Movement

The image displays two staves of music in G major. The top staff is labeled with 'V-no 2 (т. 75)', 'V-la (т. 75)', and 'V-no 1 (т. 85)'. It contains three measures of music. The bottom staff contains two measures of music with the lyrics 'I am an un - u - su - al thing; _____' and 'I have no soul and no bo - dy; _____'. Arrows indicate the derivation of the vocal parts from the instrumental motifs: the first arrow points from the first measure of the top staff to the first measure of the bottom staff; the second arrow points from the second measure of the top staff to the second measure of the bottom staff; the third arrow points from the third measure of the top staff to the second measure of the bottom staff.

Michael Nyman. *I am an unusual thing*

Example 3. Michael Nyman. *Letters, Riddles and Writs*. “I am an unusual thing.”
Derivation of vocal part segments from the motifs of Mozart’s quartet

The image shows a musical score for Michael Nyman's 'I am an unusual thing'. It consists of four staves. The top staff is the vocal line, written in 3/4 time. The bottom three staves are the instrumental accompaniment, written in 3/4 time. The key signature is one flat (F major/D minor). The score shows the vocal line and the instrumental accompaniment, with the vocal line derived from the motifs of Mozart's quartet.

Example 4a. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Quartet KV 465.
II. Andante cantabile, bars 13–19

In the first instance, the vocal part is based on the first violin’s melody; the orchestral accompaniment relies on the same harmony, but the composer excludes the rhythmic pulsation and cello imitations from the texture, while doubling the voice with individual instruments. In the second instance,



Example 4b. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Quartet KV 465.
II. Andante cantabile, bars 57–64

Nyman's score proves closer to the original source: the vocal part is constructed from segments of the cello line and then the first violin, while the rhythmic pulsation of the texture and the imitations are preserved.

The musical text of the other numbers (*We are many sisters, Dearest Papa, I am appointed to a situation*) relies on similar techniques. On the whole, the “remaking” of Mozartian themes reveals distinct traces of deconstruction characteristic of postmodern thought: Nyman first dissects the source material, breaking it down into its constituent parts (isolating textural voices, specific harmonic progressions, and motifs), and then, through the slowing of the tempo, the renewal of texture and instrumentation, the reduction or repetition of elements, and their recombination and genre transformation, he significantly alters the perception of Mozart's music. In other words, he discovers new expressive possibilities within the borrowed material.

Conclusion

An analysis of the compositional technique allows us to conclude that intervention in the primary source is intended, on the one hand—as Cenciarelli rightly notes—to bring different stylistic codes together and present (not without a touch of irony) the great Viennese composer as a precursor to minimalism.

This is most evident in the duet based on Leporello's aria. "Through these stylistic convergences," the researcher remarks, "Nyman suggests an ideal kinship between Mozart and minimalism, a kinship centred on a constellation of aesthetic markers such as 'simplicity', 'effortlessness' and 'universality'. These markers, implicitly relying on familiar traits of Mozart's musicological and popular images, are used by Nyman to turn Mozart into the perfect partisan for his anti-modernist agenda..." [13]—an agenda that seeks to bridge the divide between academic art and mass culture. Such an approach allows the artistic text of the opera to be interpreted as a metacomposition, since both its themes and musical material are directly linked to the socio-cultural practice of creating works of art. Thus, the trial staged against Nyman forces one to reflect on the fine line between the practice of creative reinterpretation and plagiarism, which in the 20th century essentially loses its meaning, albeit for different reasons than in Mozart's era: not only due to postmodern omnivorousness but also because of the problem of recognizing an author's style among those composers who erect "insurmountable barriers between their work and the listener's perception" [17, p. 45]. In this sense, *Letters, Riddles and Writs* is music about music, music of context, and music of subtext.

On the other hand, by heightening the dramatic intensity of Mozart's music in several numbers, Nyman shatters prevailing stereotypes (primarily those regarding Mozart and his music as idealized and timeless phenomena). Appealing to psychoanalytic practice—which attempts to reduce all myths to the categorical imperative of "how it actually was"—he creates a very real and quite tragic image of an *ordinary man* with a set of psychological problems. In this case, music becomes akin to biographics, and in accordance with the traditions of "unmasking" hermeneutics [18], quite popular in Western musicology, the creative act begins to be interpreted as sublimation. Mozart's compositions are thus perceived as reflections of the composer's childhood complexes and suppressed desires (the hidden meanings lurking behind the "facade" of external elements are unmasked through the technique of deconstruction).

Both the themes and compositional techniques of *Letters, Riddles and Writs* have much in common with Nyman's first opera, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1986), based on the short story of the same title by the American neurologist and writer Oliver Sacks. In both instances, the operatic genre is transformed simultaneously into a psychological *study* of the artist's personality and a creative self-diagnosis, as Nyman attempts to assert his own aesthetic position through a virtual dialogue with tradition.

Finally, it must be noted that the opera *Letters, Riddles and Writs* is a testament to Nyman's profound knowledge in the field of Mozart studies. By denying some musicological myths while simultaneously creating others, it essentially exposes the perceptions of Mozart in the contemporary scholarly space, as well as the characteristic trends in his study determined by the features of postmodern culture. Combining seemingly incompatible elements—a striving for authenticity (reflected in the reliance on documentary material) and neo-mythologism, the high and the low, the serious and the comical, the old and the new—it simultaneously casts doubt not only on the truth but also on the adequacy of any interpretations of Mozart's personality and work, delivering a pessimistic verdict on our failed attempts to comprehend the nature of genius: *Not Mozart*.

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