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Painting for a Requiem: Mihály Munkácsy's *The last moments of Mozart*  
(1885)

Someone should have painted the dying Mozart, the score of the Requiem in his hand.<sup>1</sup> Georg Nikolaus von Nissen (1828).

The study of Mozart's reception in the nineteenth century is tantamount to a search for lost images, an activity that may ultimately lead us to reconsider our own assumptions about the composer and his works.<sup>2</sup> J. Daverio (2003).

Rather surprisingly, artists were a little slow to take up Georg Nikolaus von Nissen's suggestion in his 1828 biography of Mozart that the dying composer working on his Requiem would make an ideal subject for a painting. Mozart had been dead for over half a century before the first deathbed pictures appear, but as if to make up for lost time such scenes of the stricken composer became almost a genre in their own right during the second half of the nineteenth century and beyond. Paintings or prints depicting the dying composer connected in some way to his Requiem include examples by Franz Schramm (c. 1850), William James Grant (1854), Henry Nelson O'Neill (1862), Hermann Kaulbach (1873), Thomas Shields (1882), Mihály Munkácsy (1885), Francois-Charles Baude (1914) and Charles Chambers (1919).<sup>3</sup> Most of this imagery strikes scholarly sensibilities as barely rising above the kitsch, and with so much value now placed on identifying authentic likenesses of composers, it is hardly surprising that they have received scant attention from musicologists.<sup>4</sup>

This article revisits Mozart's last hours as represented in iconography from the second half of the nineteenth century. Building upon penetrating observations by Cliff Eisen, and a valuable study by David Carlson, I will argue that deathbed images of Mozart are illuminating manifestations of deep undercurrents in the composer's reception in the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth.<sup>5</sup> The focus here will be on the grandest of all of these images: a large-scale canvas by the once-renowned Hungarian artist Mihály Munkácsy (1844–1900), *The last moments of Mozart*.<sup>6</sup> In this painting Mozart is shown rehearsing his Requiem despite his impending death, with musicians gathered around a keyboard, his wife Constanze and one of his sons to his right, and a small cluster of figures in the background (illus.1). Mozart appears as a brooding figure quite dissimilar in mood or even physical appearance to other images of him from the nineteenth century. Munkácsy's painting is one of the most dramatic transfigurations to have occurred in Mozart's imagery over the last two hundred years, and it stands as a testament to deeply-rooted beliefs regarding genius and creative destiny. It will also reveal itself to be a compelling example of how history has struggled to give meaning to Mozart's early death.

Paintings such as Munkácsy's should of course be considered in tandem with biographical themes in nineteenth-century sources in order to relate them to prevailing assumptions surrounding the composer.<sup>7</sup> Because Mozart's reception during the nineteenth century was multifarious, trying to find a fixed point of reference against which to situate his iconography from this time is fraught with difficulties.<sup>8</sup> Despite this challenge, it is important for contextualising the imagery to consider the Romantic 'Dionysian' construction of Mozart that rose up against the prevailing classicising or 'Apollonian' vision of the composer. William Stafford identifies the former as an attempt, especially in Germany, to 'reconstruct [Mozart] as a

Romantic'.<sup>9</sup> The result was 'a conception of Mozart as a Romantic composer whose music at its greatest expresses dark, demonic inner impulses and forces...'.<sup>10</sup> Thus two views of Mozart competed with each other in the nineteenth century, despite neither having any basis in biographical fact, with the Dionysian version emphasising the darker minor-mode music and aspects of Mozart's biography that could be read in terms of 'death-seeking ... forces.'<sup>11</sup>

This Dionysian current in Mozart biography continued well in to the twentieth century, even as more and more critical scholarly apparatus were being used to strip away 'mythology' from historical accounts of his life. For example, Hermann Abert's *W. A. Mozart* of 1923-4 (based itself upon Otto Jahn's monumental biography) on the one hand rejected the 'Romantics' theory that there is a close link between an artist's work and the outward circumstances of his life', but on the other argued that: For a genius like Mozart ... artistic creativity was the most basic expression of existence. ... his works are not simply expressions of, or reflections on, his life, but the very meaning of that life. ... The same daemon that inspired his works guided him on his journey through life to its grim and sombre ending.<sup>12</sup>

Fuelling this view of Mozart was the link forged in the Romantic imagination between his death and the Requiem. When deathbed iconography of Mozart began appearing in the middle of the nineteenth century, the story of his last days and the unfinished state of the Requiem had been widely disseminated.<sup>13</sup> In the first half of the century the Requiem had not only received many public performances, it had also in many ways become 'secularised' through these performances as well.<sup>14</sup> The work was also widely available for music lovers through piano transcriptions such as that by Czerny of 1827, and so it was also domesticated.<sup>15</sup> Eisen notes that the shifts from private to public, and from vocal to absolute music, are mirrored in the deathbed iconography.<sup>16</sup> The Requiem had, in addition, become inextricably linked to

interpretations of the significance of Mozart's death, as Eisen, Thomas Bauman and others have argued. One of the focal points of discussions surrounding Mozart's death was the unfinished state of the work. Bauman notes that, even with the eventual recognition of the role of Mozart's friend and student Franz Xaver Süssmayr in completing the work, he 'was regarded as little more than a medium receptive to the dictates of his master's voice.'<sup>17</sup> The composer's authorial ownership over the Requiem will emerge as a crucial issue for the interpretation of the iconography of Mozart's last days.<sup>18</sup> Bauman argues that the historical and aesthetic construction of Mozart in the nineteenth century was powerfully linked to his death and the Requiem. He suggests that:

the urge to interpret a death mass cut short by death in personal rather than liturgical terms was irresistible. As the secular practice of art became a kind of religion, the Requiem no longer simply inspired meditation on mortality – it came to thematize both its creator's death and, through the miraculous integrity and power of its completion, his transfiguration.<sup>19</sup>

Amongst the various mythologies surrounding Mozart's death is one that William Stafford names as 'a theodicy': a view justifying Mozart's life as one justifies the ways of God to man.<sup>20</sup> Within this model, Mozart's death was not premature, as 'he belonged to that ardent race whose very breath devours them.'<sup>21</sup> Stafford notes that soon after Mozart's death Johann Friedrich Rochlitz's writings in particular stressed the parallel with Raphael, as both geniuses supposedly sensed their impending death, and 'in a heightened mood poured their last forces into works of otherworldly significance.'<sup>22</sup> Nissen's influential biography of Mozart built upon this theme and even quoted approvingly a passage from the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*: 'that Mozart when working on his Requiem was already no longer alive, that his soul already was largely separated from his body, and that he worked here on

earth as one half-transfigured.’<sup>23</sup> The Hegelian evolution of Mozart was already well underway.

Whatever the philosophical or aesthetic beliefs of any given biographer or artist, however, the basic material for the visual reconstruction of Mozart’s last hours relied on by nineteenth-century artists was provided in an obituary published in 1827 for Benedikt Schack, singer, minor composer and friend of Mozart. The scene described by Schack became widely known through Jahn’s biography of 1856, which incorporates Schack’s account. The obituary, published on 25 July 1827 in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* includes the following description of Mozart’s last moments:

One the very eve of his death he had the score of the Requiem brought to his bed, and himself (it was two o’clock in the afternoon) sang the alto part. Schack, the family friend, sang the soprano line, as he had always done, Hofer, Mozart’s brother-in-law, took the tenor, Gerle, later bass singer at the Mannheim Theatre, the bass. They were at the first bars of the Lacrimosa when Mozart began to weep bitterly, laid the score on one side, and eleven hours later, at one o’clock in the morning ... departed this life.<sup>24</sup>

With this description (or variants of it) as their documentary basis, deathbed images of Mozart over the years can be thought of as partly ‘circumpolar’: that is, they will not only have been visually influenced by precursors, but there was also a stable source describing the scene that might have been taken as a point of renewed departure. In other words, an artist may have chosen to develop a visual theme that was presented prior to their own, or they may reconfigure the primary source material that gave rise to the image in the first place.

While typical deathbed scenes from this period show the unfortunate soul surrounded by family, associates and perhaps a doctor,<sup>25</sup> Mozart was frequently shown with or alongside other musicians performing his Requiem, as the following

examples show. There would have been several challenges facing artists, including how to convincingly show both musicians and mourners if they were not one and the same. In short, how to marry death and music-making, mourners and performers. From early on in the Mozart deathbed tradition, artists were also keen to show Süßmayr's role as the faithful scribe and passive vehicle for Mozart's genius. Franz Schramm's lithograph *Ein Moment aus den letzten Tagen Mozart*, from c. 1850, shows the composer's friend attentively leaning over the ailing Mozart while the great man's hand points to the score.<sup>26</sup> Schramm's recreation of the scene is not based on Schack's or Jahn's account, as he only shows Mozart, Constanze, Süßmayr and the 'grey messenger'.

The Victorian genre painter Henry Nelson O'Neill has musicians and mourners gathered around a strikingly fair Mozart on his deathbed (see illus.2). Notably, O'Neill also painted *The last moments of Raphael* (1866), showing his interest in the premature deaths of geniuses. The musicians in his painting of Mozart are apparently in mixed states of engagement with the music and concern for the dying composer. Mozart's wife and sister-in-law provide comfort, and Süßmayr sits attentively, quill in hand, presumably having received instructions up to the last moment.

Hermann Kaulbach – son of the famous painter Wilhelm von Kaulbach – isolated the mourners and musicians into two groups, in effect creating two scenes within the picture (illus.3). Music forms the background, with the composer and his entourage creating a triangular group of death and mourners in the left foreground. One adult figure does bridge the gap somewhat, perhaps both listening to the music and witnessing Mozart's death, while Mozart's son has turned to listen to the music

and has missed his father's passing. Nonetheless, music has been more-or-less inoculated from death here.

The American artist Thomas Shields's *Mozart singing his Requiem* of 1882 also has two clearly separate groups, one with the instrumentalists, the other with Mozart – himself singing, but with his wife Constanze leaning over him (illus.4). Mozart does not appear near death, but simply has his eyes down on the manuscript. Constanze appears concerned at his health, with a pitcher of water and a glass nearby. Apart from his wife, the musicians appear engaged with the music-making, and the sentiment is one of finding comfort in music.<sup>27</sup>

Munkácsy's *The last moments of Mozart* (illus.1) is both representative of the sub-genre of Mozart deathbed iconography in that it shows essentially the same scene, and yet is the most strikingly original and ambitious. As a painter, Munkácsy's reputation in the latter part of his lifetime was enormous, being one of the most famous and sought-after artists in Europe and America, with his often monumental canvases commanding remarkably high prices. Munkácsy's career was one of initial struggle before breaking into the Paris art scene with dazzling and dramatic paintings such as *Milton dictating 'Paradise Lost' to his daughters* (1878) and the even more successful *Christ before Pilate* (1881). Other than the many thousands of people who saw his paintings in the context of an exhibition, it is estimated that millions would have seen his works as they toured in travelling shows arranged by his art dealer Charles Sedelmeyer (1837-1925).<sup>28</sup> The rapidity of Munkácsy's rise to popularity is more than equalled by his reputation's demise after his death. He has been largely unknown for best part of a century now outside of his native Hungary. Even there, his reputation was linked to the imposed political propaganda of the regime for many years.<sup>29</sup> Outside Hungary, with the favouring of the avant-garde, his realist but

frequently sentimental pictures lost their lustre. Notable amongst his output are large-scale religious scenes (such as *Christ before Pilate*) and richly coloured interiors (*The music room*, 1878), yet his landscapes were remarkable for their impressionistic handling. Scholarship in English on Munkácsy is sparse, but there have been some important recent additions.<sup>30</sup>

Munkácsy's great success in his lifetime was in good part due to Sedelmeyer. The art dealer played a crucial role in the success and selection of the artist's works, as explained by Sármany-Parsons:

For ten years from 1878, Sedelmeyer had exclusive rights to sell Munkácsy's paintings and organised the exhibition-tours of the painter's most monumental compositions, the subjects of which had usually been suggested by the dealer in the first place. These giant historical canvases had to have well known historical themes that were readily accessible for the majority of the educated middle class. The subjects of the paintings therefore had to be well known beyond their own native shores, which meant that internationally celebrated historical personalities were considered the most suitable, those who belonged to the collective memory of European (or, more generally, Western) culture.<sup>31</sup>

Evidently, Sedelmeyer and Munkácsy thought that the topic of Mozart's death would also appealed to such collective memory.

Both men had an interest in innovative and theatrical displays of large-scale canvases, as demonstrated by such strategies as positioning viewers so that they formed a seamless connection with crowds shown in the painting itself.<sup>32</sup> This blurring of life and art was exemplified with the initial display of *The last moments of Mozart*, which was publicly shown with musicians playing excerpts from the Requiem from behind the painting. A contemporary reviewer even noted that the 'chairs for the spectators are placed as for a concert.'<sup>33</sup>



Munkácsy's *The last moments of Mozart* (approximately 264 cm by 381 cm) was painted from 1884–5, and exhibited by Sedelmeyer in his own gallery in Paris in February 1886.<sup>34</sup> The painting was purchased, by arrangement through Sedelmeyer, by Russell Alger I (former Governor of the state of Michigan) in 1887 for an impressive US \$50,000.<sup>35</sup> *The New York Times* reported that it was presented to the (then) Detroit Art Museum,<sup>36</sup> but it was apparently later held in the Alger family's home until 1919 when it was offered to the Detroit Institute of Arts, where it remains.<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, the painting has deteriorated and is in need of repair, and it has not been on display for many years.<sup>38</sup>

In a translated letter signed by the artist, Munkácsy himself left a description of the scene that shows the degree of historical detail that he strived for:

The man sitting at the harpsichord is *Süssmayr*, a friend and pupil of Mozart, the same who terminated [*sic*] the '*Requiem*,' which was left unfinished at Mozart's death.

Standing behind him are 3 singers, members of the Imperial Vienna Opera house. The one on the left in a suit of lilac silk is *Hofer*, singing the part of the tenor, next to him, taking the part of the bass is *Gerl*, clad in a black habit, and the third singer, in the background, singing the soprano voice, is *Benedickt Schack*, brother-in-law of Hofer.

The Gentleman leaning over the harpsichord represents *Roser*, Mozart's pupil and best friend. In the background are seen 2 other friends, *Van Swieten* and *Schikaneder* and also the doctor, who attended Mozart during his illness. The lady on the right is *Mrs. Mozart* and the boy next to her, Mozart's eldest son *Charles*.

The harpsichord represents Mozart's own which he used when he was composing. Munkácsy painted it from the original now in the Mozart Museum as Salzburg in Austria.<sup>39</sup>

Carlson argues convincingly that Munkácsy has used Otto Jahn's description of this event as the basis, but adding in figures to create a larger group than mentioned by the biographer.<sup>40</sup> The 'harpsichord' appears to be Mozart's Walter fortepiano. The

painting never achieved the same success as some of his other paintings, and confusion over who the figures were and what they were doing was evident from the start.<sup>41</sup> More than anything, the painting's enigmatic emotional tenor proved a challenge and appears to have caused some puzzlement over its meaning. I do not believe that Munkácsy was aiming for opaqueness of purpose at all, but the confusion of contemporary observers reflects the fact that his vision of Mozart's impending death was far in advance of previous visual conceptualisations.

A review sent from Paris and printed in *The New York Times* dated 8 March 1886, shows the ambiguous response of a contemporary critic.<sup>42</sup> The piece astutely picks up on some puzzling aspects of the painting, and it is worth quoting at some length for it provides us with an excellent description of what an intelligent viewer of the day might have made of the painting. Headed 'Parisian art themes: points about Munkacsy's new Mozart picture', the report gets straight down to passing judgment: I think no tax of exaggeration can be attributed to a verdict of its being inferior to previous efforts in the same scale and train of thought by the same artist. Its great fault, and of necessity it is a grave one when the subject chosen is one of such extreme pathos and tender suggestion, is that in M. Munkacsy's work there is no trace of emotion... .

At this point the reviewer leads the reader through an account of the painting's placement within the gallery (noted earlier), before embarking on a careful description of the figures and objects in the centre and left of the canvas. This is largely positive, and takes particular note of the expressions and relationship between the figures. It is evident that the reviewer does not know who these figures are, and even refers to the keyboard player, Süssmayr, as being merely 'the accompanist'.

When moving to the remaining part of the picture, the review takes a more critical turn, noting that Constanze's 'attitude bespeaks humility more than grief, and yet it does not look like the effect of her husband's music. In her hand she crushes up

a handkerchief, but in her eyes there is no trace of tears. The boy is simply insignificant.’ The reviewer shows his frustration at what he takes to be the redundant and unconvincing role of Mozart’s wife and son, but he reserves his greatest criticism for the main figure of the composer, who he finds far from satisfying:

The chief interest is brought, as it should be, to Mozart himself, who sits in a large arm-chair in the foreground; his attitude is very much like the one of the famous statue of Napoleon I. This is, in fact, so striking that the most heedless lounge notices the resemblance at once, but it is none the less felicitous.<sup>43</sup>

The reviewer continues with the description of Mozart:

The sharp-cut features of extreme pallor are left clearly defined by the long flowing dark hair; the face shows fatigue; recent illness rather than approaching death. In short, Mozart does not seem to be dying. His very hands, although white and emaciated, are not trembling as indicative of pain or agony. One it [*sic*] raised up towards the singers as if to sustain a deminuendo [*sic*], while the left one, holding a sheet of music, falls over the arm of the chair.

The reviewer’s dissatisfaction with the painting is more than just a consequence of not knowing the precise historical details from which the artist was working from. He has, in fact, picked up on several anomalous aspects of the scene that stand out irrespective of Munkácsy’s apparently meticulous historical reconstruction.

This review, then, is perceptive even in its very puzzlement. It highlights some unusual features of Munkácsy’s painting, especially when it is taken alongside prior depictions of the same scene. Most notably, there is a lack of ‘sentiment’; that is, of figures overtly overcome with emotion – even Mozart himself. It will be recalled that Schack’s account – the widely-known basis of the scene – stated that when the first bars of the *Lacrimosa* were played, Mozart ‘began to weep bitterly, [and] laid the score aside.’ It could be added that it is unclear what Mozart is even supposed to be

indicating through his dramatically raised arm. Carlson, in his study on the painting, discounts the idea that Mozart is shown conducting the rehearsal, and instead believes it accurately reflects Jahn's account by showing 'a weeping participant unable to continue.'<sup>44</sup>

The problem here is that Mozart's demeanor in no way suggests a weeping or dying man, as our contemporary reviewer has already noted. Munkácsy has certainly used the biographical source as his point of departure, but the anomalies contained within the painting simply do not mesh with the traditional understanding of the events as represented in other paintings of the same scene. It is also clear that Munkácsy has steered well away from showing Mozart in the throes of emotional despair, as the romanticized accounts of this scene propagated. This dichotomy – even dialectic – of authenticity and apparent willful artistic freedom is a compelling issue here. Fortunately, there is some further suggestive material to consider before tackling the apparently enigmatic nature of *The last moments of Mozart*.

A preparatory study for the painting (illus.5) shows that Munkácsy added to an earlier conception of the scene with the essential groupings and gestures worked out, but with fewer figures. Mozart's son is absent, as are two figures from the middle, but the basic grouping so admired by *The New York Times* critic is already present. Mozart's head, although larger in proportion than the final version, shows a deathly pallor, and his outstretched hand and downward gaze are already established. Constanze has her almost perfunctory presence predetermined, and we can clearly make out a bed on the far right of the picture. One subtle but possibly important detail in the study is that Mozart's hand-shape seems more obviously like a pointing gesture – one that relates him more immediately with direction of the ensemble – with his index finger outstretched distinctly beyond the other fingers. In the final version, this

gesture is less suggestive of a simple directive, and so the emphasis of Mozart's pose and expression remains focused upon internal events. We can see in this study that both the doctor and Mozart's wife are only just emerging from the shadows. It is precisely this 'backgrounding' of what might be seen as human concern, or the 'deplorable lack of sincere sentiment', that was *The New York Times* review's most stringent criticism. Emotional 'dissonance' has been distanced from the creative act, rather than combined as in paintings such as O'Neill's (illus.3).

Another study for the painting (illus.6) shows that Munkácsy carefully modeled the decidedly 'modern' face he provided for Mozart. Here it can be seen that the composer's face, while pallid, is highly animated and intense – certainly not that of a man near death. What is most striking, and all the more so considering the artist's efforts at historical legitimacy, is the utter unlikeness of the seated figure to known portraits of Mozart. Munkácsy's own claim to have attempted to depict the composer accurately does not sit easily with the result.<sup>45</sup> Carlson notes the bizarre fact that 'Munkácsy's Mozart is dark-haired, with large hands and long fingers. His head is small in relation to his body and it is amusing to imagine how Mozart would tower over the others if he stood up.'<sup>46</sup> Munkácsy created a vision of Mozart that seems not only diametrically opposed to the Apollonian figure seen in most nineteenth-century portraits, but also to the well-known 'authentic' likenesses that were readily available.

Several of Munkácsy's other paintings of interior scenes apply a similar set of compositional techniques to that seen in *The last moments of Mozart*, especially in his arrangement and handling of groups within the picture. The depiction of a seated figure separated from a larger group recurs several times in Munkácsy's interior scenes, such as *Baby's visitors* (1879) and *Milton dictating 'Paradise Lost' to his daughters*, and it naturally leads the viewer's eye to the seated figure and his or her

reaction to (or involvement in) the events unfolding in the picture more generally. The seated figure is typically framed by a square-shaped backdrop, such as a folding screen or cabinet. Such figures stand out because of an orientation that leads the viewer's eye towards them, and projects them in a different pictorial plane from the others. The result is a scene within a scene; of us looking at the connection between the figures, and the responses – or actions – between the seated figure and others present.

While some of Munkácsy's pictures are compositionally close to his *Mozart*, the closest in mood is undoubtedly his famous canvas of *Milton dictating 'Paradise Lost' to his daughters* (illus.7). Firstly, the similarity of the central figures' physical appearance and attitude is striking: Milton blind but burning with creative fire, head bowed in his creative exertions, his hands animated; Mozart's inward gaze (blind to his surroundings) and raised arm, also 'dictating' his masterpiece. Even their slightly dishevelled hair is similar. Just as Milton – the 'blind seer' – is bestowing authority on his great work, even if not in his own hand, so Mozart is bestowing his authorial intention onto Süßmayr and his musician colleagues with the Requiem. Süßmayr is indeed 'a medium receptive to the dictates of his master's voice' as Bauman phrased it. The problem of authorship is thus neatly circumvented, not by showing Süßmayr as a mere scribe dutifully writing down Mozart's instructions, but by showing him as a direct extension of his master's Will.

If the similarity of purpose between Munkácsy's *Milton* and *Mozart* has been correctly identified, then the painting has indeed reinterpreted the received wisdom of the nature of Mozart's last moments. The raised hand is neither the fearful recognition of impending death nor the composer overcome with emotion – it is Mozart in the throes of a creative vision. Likewise, the score held to one side does not appear to be

about to drop from feeble hands; quite the contrary, it has been laid aside as it is no longer being referred to. Instead, Mozart's demeanor perhaps suggests that his musical outpourings are being channeled into the musicians directly. The historical source for the gesture may have been the biographical accounts of Mozart's emotional collapse, but he shows no signs of this in Munkácsy's bold reformulation.

Recognition of the connection between Munkácsy's *Milton* and *Mozart* is not new, and – appropriately enough – comes from an artist. Charles Chambers, a well-known early twentieth-century American illustrator, produced a thoroughly melodramatic version of Mozart listening to his Requiem, commissioned by Steinway & Sons in the USA in 1919 (illus.8). Chambers clearly draws from both of Munkácsy's paintings. Although the arrangement of figures is rather different, and there is a dramatic use of perspective, individual elements are indisputably modeled on Munkácsy's paintings. Chambers has Mozart sitting with both a remarkably similar pose and expression to Munkácsy's *Milton*, right down to the hand gestures. Also borrowed from *Milton* is the profile of the woman (Mozart's sister-in-law) on the left in Chambers's work, similar to Milton's daughter Eve. The connection to Munkácsy's *Mozart* is further reinforced – other than the same historical scene and underlying Dionysian mood – by Mozart's son, an almost identical (but mirror) image. Chambers has fused Munkácsy's two works, understanding their inherent connection and similar message. Through Chambers's *The death of Mozart*, Munkácsy's dramatic and challenging vision of the musical genius was carried into new visual styles, even as the Hungarian artist's own reputation slid into obscurity.

Munkácsy has done what other artists had avoided or struggled with, fully synthesising Mozart's death with the Requiem – his life with his work. The avoidance of the sentimental in *The last moments of Mozart*, a feature of several previous

deathbed paintings, is core to the painting's message; the elevation of Mozart's last moments to something beyond the earthly. Mozart is presented here as transfigured according to the theodicy described by Stafford earlier, and he is a striking visual precursor to Abert's Dionysian genius and Alfred Einstein's later Hegelian formulation that 'Mozart the man was only the earthly vessel of his art; indeed that the man was sacrificed to the musician. But every great artist obsessed with his art is sacrificed, as a person, to that art.'<sup>47</sup> Given this striking correspondence between *The last moments of Mozart* and various biographical writings that grappled with the significance of his death, such 'kitsch' and neglected paintings may yet help us reflect upon the place of imagery in our own inherited, and inevitably contingent, conceptions of the composer.

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<sup>1</sup> Georg Nikolaus von Nissen, *Biographie W. A. Mozarts* (Leipzig, 1828), p. 564; quotation translated in C. Eisen, 'Mozart's leap in the dark', *Mozart Studies* ed. S. P. Keefe (Cambridge, 2006), pp.1–19, at p.3.

<sup>2</sup> J. Daverio, 'Mozart in the nineteenth century', in *The Cambridge Companion to Mozart* ed. S. P. Keefe (Cambridge, 2003), pp.171–184, at p.171.

<sup>3</sup> Most of the paintings referred to here would have been widely known as prints. Some even adorn popular biographies, with Kaulbach's painting used in *Among the great masters of music* (1900), and Shields's in *Great men and famous women* (1894).

<sup>4</sup> The generally dismal view of such imagery amongst scholars is not recent, being linked naturally enough to the increasingly scholarly efforts of music historians and biographers in



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the latter part of the nineteenth century. Gustav Kobbé summed up the perceived worth of such imagery as long ago as 1910 with obvious contempt:

Many a so-called ‘portrait’ of some great composer is not a portrait at all, but merely a fancy picture – some modern artist’s idealization of a famous person long dead. Such things as pretty pictures of Bach ... representations of Mozart as a second Apollo, or of Beethoven in the role of a premeditated bear, are modern, absolutely worthless as portraiture and, like the feeble attempts that have been made to describe heaven, quite unattractive to persons of cultivated taste.

‘A collection of musical portraits’, *The Lotus*, i/2 (1910), pp.7–24, at p.8. Kobbé may well be absolutely correct in most of what is said here: such images may indeed be worthless as portraiture in a certain strict sense, but they might yet be valuable as a special type of reception document. It is precisely this ‘idealization’ – that is, the ideals and assumptions that form the background to ‘fancy’ portraits, rather than their value as patently inauthentic artefacts – that is of interest here.

<sup>5</sup> Eisen, ‘Mozart’s leap in the dark’; and D. Carlson, “‘The last moments of Mozart’ by Mihály Munkácsy (1844–1900): fact, fantasy, and fate’, *Journal of Musicological Research*, ii/3-4 (1978), pp.285–296.

<sup>6</sup> All these images have an underlying similarity in showing essentially the same scene: Mozart near death, or having just died, while his Requiem is being composed or rehearsed. On the face of it, the pictures share an apparent purpose of fulfilling the public’s need to see a dramatic historical scene that had been widely recounted in biographical sources throughout the nineteenth century, and some artists went to considerable efforts to achieve what they may well have considered to be authentic settings. Each image can be approached as both idiosyncratic and representative of the various currents in Romantic thought and reception of Mozart. None of these images are authentic in even a loose sense of the word, but they have brought concrete form to any number of deep assumptions and beliefs that may not be evident in other sources.

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<sup>7</sup> Having said that, it would be presumptuous to assume that images are merely passively reflective of non-visual trends, for there is no reason to discount the possibility that they may in fact be at the forefront of opinion and influence. Two invaluable overviews of Mozart reception and biography in the nineteenth century can be found in *The Cambridge Companion to Mozart* ed. C. Eisen (Cambridge, 2003): Daverio, ‘Mozart in the nineteenth century’; and W. Stafford, ‘The evolution of Mozartian biography’, pp.200–211.

<sup>8</sup> Daverio wrote perceptively on biographical themes in Mozart reception in the nineteenth century, and two of his points are worth keeping in mind as cautionary markers when interpreting Mozart iconography: firstly, seeking a single stable literary image of Mozart “is futile” due to the complexity and confusion of sources; and secondly, there were unusually permeable boundaries between factual and fictional portrayals of Mozart and his time. Daverio, ‘Mozart in the nineteenth century’, pp.173–174.

<sup>9</sup> See Stafford, ‘Evolution of Mozartian biography’, especially pp.207–208.

<sup>10</sup> Stafford, ‘Evolution of Mozartian biography’, p.207.

<sup>11</sup> Stafford, ‘Evolution of Mozartian biography’, p.208.

<sup>12</sup> Hermann Abert, *W. A. Mozart*, trans. Stewart Spencer (New Haven, 2007), pp.xix–xx. My thanks to Cliff Eisen for pointing out that the Dionysian interpretation of Mozart’s life culminated in Abert’s biography.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Eisen’s ‘Mozart’s leap in the dark’. The deathbed images postdate a variety of significant biographical publications on or relating to Mozart, such as writings by Johann Freidrich Rochlitz (from 1798 to 1825), E. T. A. Hoffmann (1813), Nissen (1828), J. A. Schlosser (1828), Alexander Ulibishev (1843), Søren Kiekegaard (1843) and Edward Holmes (1845), by which time several key elements of Mozart mythology were well in place. They also come from after the ‘Requiem Streit’ controversy of 1825–39. On the latter point, see Cristoph Wolff, *Mozart’s Requiem: historical and analytical studies, documents, score* (Berkeley, 1998), p.7.

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- <sup>14</sup> See T. Bauman, 'Requiem, but no piece', *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Music*, xv/2 (1991), pp.151–161, especially pp.156–158.
- <sup>15</sup> See B. Ebiswa, 'The Requiem: mirror of Mozart performance history', *Early Music*, xx/2, Performing Mozart's music III (1992), pp.279–294.
- <sup>16</sup> Eisen, 'Mozart's leap in the dark', pp.3-5.
- <sup>17</sup> Bauman, 'Requiem, but no piece', p.157.
- <sup>18</sup> A detailed recent study of Süssmayr's involvement can be found in Simon P. Keefe, "'Die oxsen am berge': Franz Xaver Süssmayr and the orchestration of Mozart's Requiem, K. 626", *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, lxi/1 (2008), pp.1–66.
- <sup>19</sup> Bauman, 'Requiem, but no piece', p.158.
- <sup>20</sup> William Stafford, *Mozart's death: a corrective survey of the legends* (London, 1991), p.211.
- <sup>21</sup> Stafford, *Mozart's death*, p.207.
- <sup>22</sup> Stafford, *Mozart's death*, p.212.
- <sup>23</sup> Quoted in Stafford, *Mozart's death*, p.213.
- <sup>24</sup> Translated in Otto Erich Deutsch, *Mozart: A Documentary Biography*, trans. E. Bloom, P. Branscombe & J. Noble, (London, 1965), pp.536–7.
- <sup>25</sup> A now-classic study that describes the essential features of late eighteenth-century deathbed scenes – that can be seen to continue well into the following century – is Robert Rosenblum's *Transformations in late eighteenth century art* (New Jersey, 1967), pp.28–39.
- <sup>26</sup> Schramm's print was published in *Wiener Künstleralbum* (1857), a collection of lithographs showing historical and landscape scenes. Reproduced in Eisen, 'Mozart's leap in the dark', p.3. Eisen has described this scene perceptively:

It shows Mozart with the score of the Requiem open on his lap; Süssmayr receives last-minute instructions from the composer on how to complete the work; Constanze prays at the foot of a crucifix in a room off to the side; and an unidentified stranger – no doubt the 'grey messenger' who brought the Requiem commission to Mozart in

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the first place – appears to be leaving through the main door. It is an intensely private scene, inhabited only by the composer, those closest to him and the spirit of death itself who, presumably having delivered his message, takes an unsympathetic leave.

Eisen, ‘Mozart’s Leap in the Dark’, pp.3–4. The candle beneath the crucifix is nearly extinguished, suggesting the end is near. Schramm also provides the best likeness of the composer, judged according to the images that would have been available at the time.

<sup>27</sup> Intriguingly, Shields claimed to have been a student of Munkácsy, and accused the Hungarian of copying his version of *Mozart*, according to a piece in the *New York Times*, 26 March, 1906. The headline exclaims ‘Shields’s Work to Hang Beside Munkacsy’s Copy’, and ‘Tardy Justice to be Done’.

<sup>28</sup> L. Morowitz, ‘A passion for business: Wanamaker’s, Munkácsy, and the depiction of Christ’, *The Art Bulletin*, xci/2 (2009), pp.184–206, at p.184.

<sup>29</sup> I. Sármany-Parsons, ‘A melancholy colourist’, *The Hungarian Quarterly*, xlvi (2006), pp.85–96.

<sup>30</sup> A most useful recent introduction to Munkácsy in English is Sármany-Parsons, ‘A melancholy colourist’. Morowitz’s ‘A passion for business’ is of particular value for its concentration on Munkácsy’s reception in America. The most comprehensive source in English is the collection of essays in the bilingual Hungarian/English catalogue that accompanied a recent major retrospective exhibition in his home country: *Munkácsy in the world: Mihály Munkácsy’s works in private and public collections at home and abroad* (Budapest, 2005).

<sup>31</sup> Sármany-Parsons, ‘A Melancholy Colourist’, p.92.

<sup>32</sup> A study of the manner in which Munkácsy’s paintings were displayed is Katalin Sinkó’s ‘Mihály Munkácsy’s wide-screen canvases’, *The Hungarian Quarterly*, xxxv (1994), pp.188–125.

<sup>33</sup> Review in *The New York Times* of 21 March 1886. The live music was criticised in a short note in *The New York Times*, 26 February 1886.

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<sup>34</sup> The only prior study of the painting is Carlson's "The last moments of Mozart". This study refers to many valuable sources relating to the painting, including documents in The Detroit Institute of Arts.

<sup>35</sup> Carlson, "The last moments of Mozart", p.291.

<sup>36</sup> *The New York Times*, 13 May 1887.

<sup>37</sup> Carlson, "The last moments of Mozart", p.292.

<sup>38</sup> Detroit Institute of Arts inventory for item 19.153, dated 1999. My thanks to Iva Lisikewycz, Detroit Institute of Arts, for this information.

<sup>39</sup> Carlson reports as follows:

The two-page letter is found in the Register's file at the Detroit Institute of Arts. The first page is handwritten by Munkácsy in French and says he is sending the requested description of the painting. The second page (quoted above) is written in English in another hand, but signed by Munkácsy. (Carlson, "The last moments of Mozart", n.16, p.295.)

<sup>40</sup> Carlson, "The last moments of Mozart", pp.289.

<sup>41</sup> Carlson, "The last moments of Mozart", pp.287–8.

<sup>42</sup> *The New York Times*, 21 March 1886. The review is signed 'L. K.'.

<sup>43</sup> This would be the Swiss sculptor Vincenzo Vela's well-known *The last days of Napoleon* (1866), displayed with great success at the Exposition Universelle of 1867 in Paris – the same year Munkácsy arrived in the city. The author of the review has picked up on the similarity, but the real resemblance lies between Vela's work and Munkácsy's *Milton* (discussed later).

<sup>44</sup> Carlson, "The last moments of Mozart", pp.289.

<sup>45</sup> Carlson cites a letter by Munkácsy written in French sent to Alger claiming this, in the Detroit Institute of Arts register's files. (n. 24, p.295.)

<sup>46</sup> Carlson, "The last moments of Mozart" p.291. He concludes: 'in the Mozart painting, greater freedom was taken in depicting the master', and astutely notes that each age has

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created its own image of the composer. However, as a result of this rationale Carlson does not pursue the intriguing matter of the un-likeness of the composer any further.

<sup>47</sup> A. Einstein, *Mozart: his character, his work* (London, 1962), p.92.