

UNDERSTANDING CLASSICAL MUSIC – Report by Ian Royston

In our first meeting of 2026, somewhat unexpectedly back in Startforth Community Centre we started with the first part of the BBC 'drama documentary' on the "Rise of a Genius – Mozart"

This series co-produced by The Open University was first aired in September 2024 alongside those of literary greats of Jane Austen and William Shakespeare and explored the life of one of the greatest composers in history, his early emergence as 'the musical genius', examining how his relationships and experiences influenced his work.

Mozart was born into a musical family, his father Leopold being a violinist and composer and as a toddler Wolfgang at first tried to copy the piano lessons of his elder sister, Maria Anna but soon eclipsed her despite being five years younger. Leopold saw the opportunity to exploit the child prodigy and before long had him appearing in court throughout Europe where he entranced and was called a fraud in equal measure. Nevertheless, through the careful curation of his father he played to all strata of society, even composing his first symphony at the tender age of eight years.

However, as he grew older Wolfgang sought escape from his controlling father and after failing to make headway in career progression or in love in his native Salzburg he embarked on a European tour which left him destitute, his mother dead and his first love, Aloysia Weber married. Nevertheless, his twenties saw Mozart steadily grow in respect, reputation and in financial security. He married Aloysia's younger sister, Constanze and in Vienna Mozart proved most productive in terms of all types of orchestral and operatic work as well as producing a wide repertoire of work for the relatively new pianoforte.

Part two of the BBC series will explore this middle part of Mozart's short life.

In the second part of our meeting, and mercifully free from interruptive advertisements we watched a YouTube video looking at the development of the violin. We learned that the design of the 'modern' violin hails from Cremona in the late 17 Century which fixed the basic dimensions of the viol family as well as setting a standard which arguably has never been bettered. The narrator despaired that the value of say a Stradivarius violin is now praised more as an investment than for the quality of its tone.

The next meeting is at 10:00 on Friday 27 February at Startforth Community Centre.