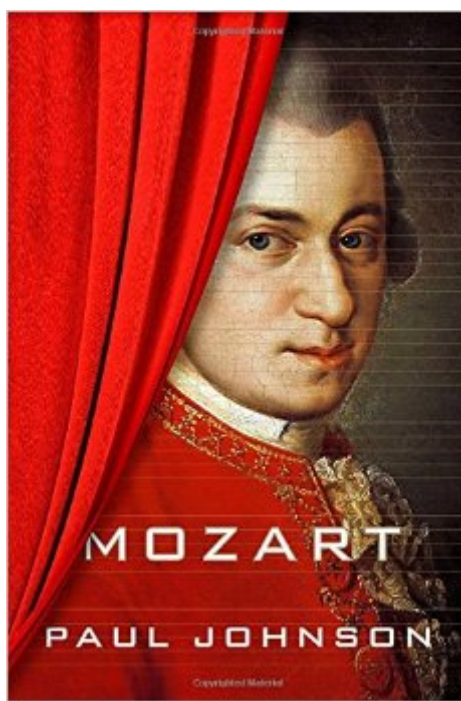


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Mozart: A Life



Synopsis

Eminent historian Paul Johnson dazzles with a rich, succinct portrait of Mozart and his music. As he has done in Napoleon, Churchill, Jesus, and Darwin, acclaimed historian and author Paul Johnson here offers a concise, illuminating biography of Mozart. Johnson's focus is on the music—Mozart's wondrous output of composition and his uncanny gift for instrumentation. Liszt once said that Mozart composed more bars than a trained copyist could write in a lifetime. Mozart's gift and skill with instruments was also remarkable as he mastered all of them except the harp. For example, no sooner had the clarinet been invented and introduced than Mozart began playing and composing for it. In addition to his many insights into Mozart's music, Johnson also challenges the many myths that have followed Mozart, including those about the composer's health, wealth, religion, and relationships. Always engaging, Johnson offers readers and music lovers a superb examination of Mozart and his glorious music, which is still performed every day in concert halls and opera houses around the world.

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Customer Reviews

It was interesting to see Tony Skelton's mention of "a few errors". (UK) There are many, many more throughout this very sloppily researched book. It gives a strong impression of an experienced writer resting on his laurels. There are some schoolboy howlers - "Kegelstaff trio of works ..." (- it should be Kegelstatt, and it's a single trio, not a trio of works - two of the four errors squeezed into a single sentence!), reference to Mozart's use of the harp in addition to the Flute and Harp Concerto (he never used the harp in any other piece), the assertion that Haydn never used muffled drums

and muted trumpets (listen to the slow movement from Symphony No 102), the confusion of JS Bach with JC Bach (page 111) - all these and others are unforgivable. Johnson also asserts that "worry about what he had written was unknown to him" (page 43), but he needs to read of Mozart's struggles with his six so-called "Haydn" string quartets (Mozart confessed that they had cost him "long and arduous work") Also Johnson elsewhere refers to these same quartets as K. 168-73, but these are Mozart's earliest quartets, not the great works dedicated to Haydn - K 387, 421, 428, 458, 464 and 465. There are also many crass, unsupported opinions and an increasingly self-indulgent, cosy feeling, as though a self-satisfied uncle is generously sharing his knowledge and preferences with the reader. I am absolutely amazed that this book has been well received in America, so I am particularly keen to say that Paul Johnson (and his editors, who were perhaps out to lunch at the time) should not be allowed to get away with this ! How can so many (experienced?) reviewers have failed to spot the errors? This is an annoyingly bad book which should never have seen the light of day. To be avoided! Philip Borg-Wheeler

It's a familiar maxim that "context is everything," and that often holds true for established authors who spend their lives intentionally carving out and filling up very specific niches in the realm of human knowledge. British historian and global political analyst Paul Johnson is a brilliant and popular example. Over a career spanning more than half a century of incisive topical journalism and definitive academic work, Johnson has memorably illuminated a host of critical issues and titans of leadership, from ancient times to our own. And now, out of the intellectual blue it seems, along comes MOZART: A LIFE. Nowhere in Johnson's prolific bibliography (or biography for that matter) could I find any overt reference to musical issues or a personal musical passion of any kind. Friends of mine who have studied political science, military history, economics and journalism have nearly all heard of him, read him and praised him. But music students and my fellow instrumental amateurs? Not a one! So it's no exaggeration to say that this month's release of Johnson's latest achievement in the art of the biographer is more than the real deal; it's a potential game-changer, one that could well knock many a dull or poorly researched precursor on the famous composer right into the dustbin. As someone who has spent all of my conscious life deeply connected with music, I know that it takes years of study and discipline to develop an expert's affinity for any particular composer. It's much more than simply liking what one hears --- and who is easier to like among the icons of western classical music than the tragically short-lived Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)? In this slim but intensely absorbing volume, Johnson explores far beyond and beneath the popular film imagery

of Amadeus and the unfortunate reduction of masterworks like Eine Kleine Nachtmusik to aural wallpaper in elevators. With an economy and elegance of phrase that I'm sure would impress Mozart himself, the composer's life unfolds in pristine detail (warts and all) like a finely crafted orchestral score where all the instruments and voices receive their due. No cacophony of unrelated facts, biased suppositions, or unfounded hearsay is allowed to blur the colour and timbre of Johnson's own accomplished literary counterpoint. You never lose the tune, so to speak. Even the regular outcropping of lists (you really can't avoid them in any biography or history worthy of the name; the Bible itself is laden with them) is elevated to an almost melodic charm. I've never read sequences of compositions, places, dates, relationships, family members, jobs, even wardrobe items, connected and contextualized with such polished skill. As any leading historian should be, Johnson is also a proven myth-buster, focusing on negative traditions unworthy of Mozart and his legacy. The supposed rivalry with Antonio Salieri? Forget it. The two were not only well respected in their respective musical milieus, they also respected one another. Mozart's wife, Constanze, as a whining hypochondriac or widowed she-wolf? Forget that one too. For most of their marriage, she was either pregnant or recovering from pregnancy. Only two of the couple's six children survived into adulthood, and she bore up under all of it --- including (how ever did she do it?) maintaining her career as a highly regarded singer. Constanze lived to be more than twice her husband's age and continued singing and caring for his legacy until well into the 19th century. Johnson deflates a cluster of other myths and misconceptions as well, handling them with entertaining ease and the revealing authority of a social historian who knows period customs and attitudes a good deal better than many musicologists. And it's that effortless cross-disciplined mastery of a complex and wonderful artistic life that truly brings Paul Johnson's MOZART: A LIFE to the fore. Like any of Mozart's more than 600 works --- including the flute sonata on my stand, which is calling me to stop writing now and start practicing --- there isn't a single wasted word or nuance. Read, play, learn, enjoy, repeat infinitely; that's the Mozart Effect. Paul Johnson has achieved it down to the last deftly executed trill. Bravo!- Pauline Finch

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