Amadeus, Mozart & Music: In Conversation with Professor Simon Keefe

Simon Keefe is a Professor of Musicology in the School of Languages, Arts & Societies at The University of Sheffield, & is the President of the Royal Musical Association. Achieving his PhD in 1997, he has held lectureships at Christ Church, Oxford and Queen's University, Belfast. Keefe specialises in late 18th-century music, particularly Mozart. He is a five-time published author, including a 700-page musical biography, *Mozart in Vienna: the Final Decade*.



What was Mozart like as both an individual & as a composer?

He was an extraordinarily - gifted prodigy as a young child. And the net effect of that was that his father decided to take him all around Europe. So very often, you have to view all of his career through the prism of the fact that he had this spectacularly quick start, & that was both positive & negative, I think, in terms of his personality.

Because these tours were so often about Mozart playing for kings & queens or significant nobility, he had a lot of expectations about how he would be treated in Vienna. He went to Vienna in 1781 & these expectations were never fulfilled, because in some ways, he became just one among many composers.

He was self-evidently

outrageously talented in the way that others weren't, but whereas that may be clear to us, it was perhaps less clear to individuals at the time, or some individuals at least. So his frustration at this sometimes manifests itself as arrogance.

How well does Amadeus complement true historical accounts of Mozart & his work?

We have to remember it's a work of fiction; it's a creative work based on factual people and factual situations. But actually, it does very well. It was studiously researched by Peter Shaffer, & so it was grounded very much in fact.

But due to the film, there was a lot of emphasis on what it had got wrong. The personalities of the individuals is much more subjective because there's just a lot we can't know. But as I say, I think fundamentally the play does a very good job, even though it's not their main intention to be extremely faithful to the facts, & why should it be?

So *Amadeus* has a mix between historically-accurate & fictionalised characterisations?

Yes, it's kind of a continuum. And there's a history of talking about Salieri as a figure of conflict relative to Mozart, & that began in the 19th century. There's a well-known Pushkin play, which was very influential on Shaffer, that talks about Salieri poisoning Mozart & causing his death, so there is this tradition of seeing Salieri as this antagonistic figure.

What was the relationship between Mozart & Salieri truly like?

There were certainly testy moments. Mozart blamed Salieri for playing tricks on him at various stages, particularly the reception of his operas, so there was certainly this feeling from Mozart of resentment, which may also reflect the court hierarchy in Vienna. But it's also true that towards the end of Mozart's life, he seemed to get on well with Salieri.