

NANNERL MOZART FICTIONALIZED

The Secret Wish of Nannerl Mozart. Barbara Kathleen Nickel. Second Story Press, 1996. 195 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 0-929005-89-9.

Where, after all, is the nation of readers who prefer scholarly monographs to pleasurable literature?
Susan Layton

This is a fictional account of an important period in the life of Nannerl Mozart, one of the two “wunderkinder” of Leopold Mozart. Using the actual facts of the concert tours of Nannerl and her brother Wolfi to the courts of Europe, the author has imagined the interior life of the young girl, including her jealousy of the attention afforded her younger brother and her secret desire to write a symphony. While the book is primarily an exciting story to be enjoyed purely as literature, it does present a historical setting reasonably accurately and is therefore doubly interesting. Outlines of handy facts are placed at the end of the book: the pertinent chronology, a brief glossary, a list of sources for the research on Nannerl’s biography and on social customs in the late eighteenth century. In addition, there is an Author’s Note which discusses the various sources briefly and points out where facts end and imagination begins.

Any fictional account of the life of a famous person raises the issue of imagination versus authenticity. Many recent movies, whether about musicians (*Amadeus* and *Immortal Beloved*) or political figures (*Gandhi*, *JFK*, *Nixon*, *Braveheart*), have elicited varied responses, with the specialists in the field generally bemoaning the dissemination of factual errors and the “laymen” celebrating the entertainment value. The bottom line of many a discussion has been that a film (or novel) is not a documentary and must be judged as fiction rather than as history. Its creator has the duty to interest the audience and has freedom to make his or her own statement concerning the themes raised by the subject. The problem that the specialist sees is that the general reader will take entertainment as fact.

So it is with this treatment of Nannerl Mozart. The author’s use of a historical figure to present an interesting story, to illustrate the life of a female musician in the eighteenth century, and to provide a role model for a young musician of today are intertwined in this satisfying children’s novel. Sometimes these goals are in conflict. It seems improbable that the historical Nannerl, given the personalities of the important people in her life, would have formed the ambition to write a symphony, and even more so that she could have managed to get it performed, but this is nevertheless the central source of the mystery and tension that keeps the interest of the reader engaged from beginning to end. The mysterious figure of Sopherl, sister of the Elector of Bavaria, is also a key component in presenting the encouraging sub-text of the book: that women can rise above oppressive circumstances to achieve their goals if they support each other. Just as the fictional Nannerl’s success vindicates Sopherl’s unfulfilled promise, the young female musician today might feel a particular thrill in achieving the victories denied the historical Maria Anna Mozart. The book gives permission to dream the big dream, and rewards the persistence and faith of the

young protagonist. It is also an exciting and colourful story, in which the portrayal of images and feelings allows for easy identification with the heroine.

Although one is willing to allow anachronisms of psychological make-up (after all, who knows what Nannerl really thought at this time of her life) we expect that the description of social conditions will be accurate. Here the author succeeds in portraying the social mores according to which women musicians might play and even compose (although this was not encouraged) for domestic situations but not for professional ones. Without belabouring the point, she shows the necessity to the composer, whether male or female, of the feedback provided by hearing actual performances of his or her music and the difficulty that presented to a woman. The primary place of domestic work in the lives of women, the absence of composition and instrumental lessons (aside from keyboard and voice), and, most devastating, the belief that women could not and *should* not create music either by improvisation or more formal written composition, complete the picture of obstacles to the female composer. Although there were, of course, woman musicians — primarily opera singers — the eighteenth-century German family might feel that this was not an entirely respectable profession.

A few details jar ever so slightly, especially since the reader has come to trust the accuracy of the social and performance framework. The idea of Nannerl playing a violin duet part in her symphony after one evening's instruction and a little practice on her own, the idea that she could copy the orchestral parts overnight and still play a concert the next day, one can put down to fantasy necessary to the build-up of the climax of the book. But the tiny detail of the conductor using a baton, when at this time he would have led his group from the keyboard, is an anachronism. It also seems unlikely that Nannerl, with all the musical experience that her family life afforded, would have included an organ part in her symphony. One wonders, too, about the accuracy of the place descriptions when Notre Dame Cathedral has "spires [that] reach into the mist like slender fingers."

The hope of the specialist is that the young reader or film-goer (and their parents) will be entranced enough by the fictional treatment to follow up on the story, either now or later. The information provided by the author will help with this; also available are two recent books about Wolfgang Mozart that throw some light on Nannerl's circumstances: Harrison Wignall's *In Mozart's Footsteps* (New York: Ha'penny Press, 1991) and Maynard Solomon's *Mozart: A Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995). The former gives details of the early concert tours that would have applied equally to Nannerl, and the latter gives a portrait of Leopold's incredibly selfish and dictatorial behaviour with both children. The historical Anna Maria married a man chosen by her father and actually gave over her eldest son for him to raise; to defy him was to be disowned, as her brother was to discover. No wonder Nannerl never wrote a symphony. No wonder one is rooting for her to do so in this wonderful story.

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