

Mozart and Salieri

by Alexander Pushkin

translated into English verse by Alan Shaw

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Mozart and Salieri

SCENE I

A room

SALIERI

There is no justice on the earth, they say.
But there is none in heaven, either. To me
That is as plain as any simple scale.
My love of art has been with me since birth,
And as a child, when in our ancient church
The organ would send forth its lofty sound,
I listened and was lost in it; my tears
Involuntarily and sweetly flowed.
I turned away from idle pastimes early;
All studies alien to music I
Found hateful; stubbornly, disdainfully,
I disavowed them all and gave myself
To music alone. Hard is that first step taken,
And dull that first of roads. I overcame
My early adversities. A pedestal
To art I made out of facility,
And facile I became: my fingers gained
A dry obedient dexterity,
My ear reliability. I deadened
The sounds, dissected music like a corpse,
Proved harmony by algebra. And then,
Then only did I dare, with all my lore,
Yield to the bliss of my creative fancy.
I started to compose, but quietly,
In secret; I didn't dare yet dream of glory.

How often, after sitting days on end,
Not eating, sleepless in my silent cell,
Tasting of rapture and tears of inspiration,
I'd burn my work and look on coldly as
My thoughts, the sounds I'd fathered, rose in flames
And vanished in a little puff of smoke.
What am I saying? When great Gluck himself
Appeared, unfolding us new mysteries
(And deep enthralling mysteries they were),
Did I not give up all I'd known before,
And dearly loved and fervently believed in?
Did I not briskly follow him, without
A murmur, like a man who's lost his way,
And meets another who can set him right?
By strenuous and dogged perseverance,
I finally reached, in the infinities
Of art, a lofty level. Glory smiled
On me, and in the hearts of men I found
Some resonance to what I had created.
Yes, I was happy: quietly took joy
In my own work, success and fame, and in
The labors and successes of my friends,
Co-workers in this wondrous art of ours.
Oh, never did I know a moment's envy,
Never! Not even when Piccinni caught
The untamed ears of the Parisians,
Not even when, for the first time, I heard
The opening of *Iphigenia* played.
Who is there who can say proud Salieri
Was ever that low thing, an envious man,
That trampled snake that only lives to bite
The gravel and the dust in impotence?
Nobody!...Now, though—I myself must say it—

Now I am envious. I envy deeply;
Yes, I am wracked with envy. O heaven, where,
Where is the justice, when the holy gift,
Immortal genius, comes not as reward
For any burning love or self-denial,
Labor, diligence or prayer, but lights
Its radiance in a mad fool's head, one full
Of pure frivolity? Oh, Mozart, Mozart!

(Mozart enters)

MOZART

Aha! You saw me! I was hoping to
Surprise you with a little joke of mine.

SALIERI

You're here? When did you come?

MOZART

Just now. I had
Something to show you, and was on my way,
But passing by a tavern, suddenly
I heard a fiddle. Oh, Salieri, my friend,
You never in your life heard anything
So funny. This blind fiddler in a tavern
Playing *Voi che sapete*. Marvelous!
I had no choice, I had to bring him here
To treat you to the pleasure of his art.
In here!

(Enter a blind old man with a violin)

Play us a little Mozart, would you?

*(The old man plays an aria from
Don Giovanni. Mozart laughs loudly)*

SALIERI

And you can laugh at that?

MOZART

Oh come, Salieri,
Don't you think it's funny?

SALIERI

No, I don't.
When Raphael's madonnas are defiled
By worthless daubers, I do not find it funny.
When a contemptible buffoon dishonors
Alighieri with his parodies,
I do not find it funny. Be off, old man.

MOZART

Wait. Take this for yourself, and drink my health.

(The old man leaves)

Salieri, you seem out of sorts. I'll come
Again another time.

SALIERI

What did you bring me?

MOZART

Oh, nothing. Just a trifle. The other night,
When my insomnia was racking me,
A few ideas came into my head.
Today I jotted them down. I wanted to
Hear your opinion, but I can see
You have no time for me.

SALIERI

Oh, Mozart, Mozart,
When do I have no time for you? Sit down.
I'm listening.

MOZART (*at the piano*)

Imagine then...well, who?
Let's say myself, a little younger, maybe,
A little bit in love, but not too much,
A pretty girl or friend—yourself, let's say—
Is with me, I feel good, when all at once...
A funereal vision, sudden gloom, or something...
Here, listen.

(*plays*)

SALIERI

You were bringing this to me,
And you could stop in at a tavern to listen
To a blind man with a fiddle? God,
Mozart, you are unworthy of yourself.

MOZART

You like it, do you?

SALIERI

What profundity!
What boldness and what perfect form! Mozart,
You are a god, and do not even know it.
I know it, though.

MOZART

No! Really?...Maybe so.
But my Divinity is getting hungry.

SALIERI

Listen: let's dine together at the Golden
Lion.

MOZART

Gladly. But first let me go home
And tell my wife not to expect me there
For dinner.

(exit)

SALIERI

Mind you, I'll be waiting for you.
No, now I can resist my fate no longer.
I have been chosen: I must be the one
To stop him. Otherwise we all will perish,
All of us priests and ministers of music,
Not only I with my dull-ringing fame.
What use is it if Mozart stays alive
And reaches even newer summits yet?
Will he uplift the art by doing so?

No; it will sink again when he is gone;
He leaves us no successor. What's the use
In him? He brings us, like a cherub, certain
Songs of paradise, and afterwards,
When he has roused in us, us children of
The dust, a wingless longing...flies away!
So fly away! The sooner you do, the better.
Here's poison; it's Isora's final gift.
For eighteen years I've carried it with me,
And often in that time my life would seem
A wound not to be borne. I'd often share
A table with some careless enemy,
And never to the whisper of temptation
Did I yield, although I am no coward,
Although I feel an insult deeply and
Care little for my life. No, I held back.
When thirst for death tormented me, I thought:
Why should I die? It could be life will bring
Some sudden gifts to me, it could be too,
I will be visited by rapture, by
The night of the creator, inspiration.
It could be some new Haydn will create
Great things, and I will take delight in him.
While I was feasting with my hated guest,
I'd think: it could be I will find a worse
Enemy yet, and that a bitterer
Insult will blast me from a prouder height.
Then you will not be lost, Isora's gift.
And I was right! At last I have found both:
I've found my enemy, and a new Haydn
Has made me drink deliciously of rapture!
And now—it's time. Most cherished gift of love,
Tonight you pass into the cup of friendship.

SCENE II

*A private room in a tavern, with a piano.
Mozart and Salieri are at the table*

SALIERI

What makes you look so gloomy?

MOZART

Am I? No.

SALIERI

Mozart, you must have something on your mind.
The dinner's good, the wine is excellent,
But you frown and say nothing.

MOZART

To be frank,
This Requiem of mine is troubling me.

SALIERI

Oh, you've been writing a Requiem? Since when?

MOZART

Three weeks ago. But it's the strangest thing...
Didn't I tell you?

SALIERI

No.

MOZART

Well, listen then.

Three weeks ago, I came home rather late;
They told me that someone had been to see me.
I don't know why, but all night long I thought:
Who could it be? What does he want with me?
Next day he came and found me out again.
The third day we were playing on the floor,
Me and that kid of mine; they called for me,
I went. A man, all dressed in black, politely
Bowed, ordered a Requiem, and vanished.
I sat down right away and started writing—
And since that time my man in black has never
Come for me again. Not that I mind:
I hate the thought of parting with my work,
Although the Requiem is ready now.
But meanwhile I...

SALIERI

What?

MOZART

I'm ashamed to say.

SALIERI

Say what?

MOZART

He gives me no rest night or day,
My man in black. He's everywhere behind
Me like a shadow. Even now he seems

To sit here with us as a third.

SALIERI

Come, come!

What sort of childish fright is this? Dispel
These empty fancies. Beaumarchais would often
Say to me "Listen, Salieri, old friend,
When black thoughts come your way, uncork the
champagne
Bottle, or re-read *The Marriage of Figaro*."

MOZART

Yes, you and Beaumarchais were pals, weren't you?
It was for him you wrote *Tarare*, a lovely
Work. There is one tune in it, I always
Hum it to myself when I feel happy...
La la la la...Salieri, is it true
That Beaumarchais once poisoned somebody?

SALIERI

I don't think so. He was too droll a fellow
For such a trade.

MOZART

Besides, he was a genius,
Like you and me. And genius and villainy
Are two things incompatible, aren't they?

SALIERI

You think so?

(pours the poison into Mozart's glass)

Come, drink up now.

MOZART

To your health,
My friend, and to the loyal bond that binds
Together Mozart and Salieri, sons
Of harmony.

SALIERI

Stop, stop!...How could you drink...
Without me?

MOZART (*throwing his napkin on the table*)

Enough. I'm full.

(*goes to the piano*)

Listen, Salieri:

My Requiem.

(*plays*)

You're weeping?

SALIERI

These are tears
I've never shed before: painful but welcome,
As if I had discharged a heavy duty,
As if the healing knife had cut away
A throbbing limb. Mozart, dear friend, these tears...
Pay them no mind. Play on, play on, make haste,

And saturate my soul with sounds!

MOZART

If all
Could feel like you the power of harmony!
But no: the world could not go on then. None
Would bother with the needs of lowly life;
All would surrender to spontaneous art.
We chosen ones are few, we happy idlers,
Who care not for contemptible usefulness,
But only of the beautiful are priests.
Is that not so? But I'm not well just now.
Something oppresses me. I need to sleep.
Farewell!

SALIERI

Until we meet again.

(alone)

Your sleep
Will be a long one, Mozart. But is he right,
And I'm no genius? Genius and villainy
Are two things incompatible. Not true:
What about Buonarroti? Or is that just
A fable of the stupid, senseless crowd,
And the Vatican's creator was no murderer?

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