

Why Is Mozart Great?

by [Mark Alexander](#) (June 2026)



The Orchestra (Raoul Dufy, 1942)

In art there is Leonardo da Vinci, in literature there is Shakespeare, in music there is Mozart. –Itzhak Perlman

Why is Mozart great?

Louis Armstrong was once asked, “What is jazz?”

He answered, "Man, if you have to ask what it is, you'll never know."

Perhaps he would have said something similar about Mozart. But I think we can attempt a partial answer.

Violinist Itzhak Perlman puts Mozart in the company of Shakespeare and Leonardo da Vinci. And with good reason. Let's look at Shakespeare and da Vinci.

Shakespeare seems to have surveyed the entire human experience, emotional and intellectual, in his drama and poetry. Later writers see Shakespeare as the banquet of writing in the English language, and they are left taking mere crumbs from his table.

One academic, Harold Bloom in his book *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, goes so far as to claim that, in Western culture, Shakespeare has created humans as we know them today.

Da Vinci is the polymath who makes other polymaths appear normal. He transcends as a painter, sculptor, architect, mathematician, engineer, inventor, anatomist, geologist, cartographer, botanist, and writer. He climbed several artistic peaks.

Mozart climbed a musical peak during the Classical era (1730-1820). Unlike many artists today, he was not much interested in charting out his own territory. Like Shakespeare before him, he took what already existed and refined it into greatness. And those who follow feel like there is little left for them.

That's why beginning in the Romantic era (1780-1910) we begin seeing composers shift into approaching art as self-expression, trying to chart out new territory that has not been conquered.

The end-result in the twentieth century includes works like John Cage's classical work 4:33 in which four members of a quartet come on stage and sit, playing nothing, for four minutes and thirty-three seconds. Or extremely dissonant atonal music that requires educated listeners for full appreciation.

All three—Mozart, Shakespeare, and Da Vinci—are singular in their respective arts. To others they appear more than human.

As American biographer Robert Gutman says of Mozart, "Like all geniuses of his rank, he stands as a law to himself: incommensurable, incalculable, sublime."

But why Mozart?

Perhaps the only way to get at the answer in words is to see how various musicians, composers, conductors, biographers, and philosophers have attempted to explain Mozart. No other composer generates the kinds of responses that Mozart did.

Two words keep coming up when people speak of Mozart. The first word is some form of the word *perfect*.

*"There is nothing **perfect** in this world except Mozart's music."* –Thomas Love Peacock, English novelist and poet

*"Mozart tapped the source from which all music flows, expressing himself with a spontaneity and refinement and breathtaking rightness. What we expect to find in Mozart is **perfection** in whatever medium he chose to work."* –Aaron Copland, American composer and conductor

*"Mozart's music is on the one hand so accessible, so beautiful and so apparently simple that it can be grasped. But at the same time and enjoyed on its first hearing, it is so deep, so profound, so **perfect** that one can spend a lifetime in it and continue to be fascinated with it, even*

if it's the hundredth time you've performed it." –James Conlon, American conductor

*"He is up to the present the most **perfect** manifestation of musical talent ... His sense of form is almost superhuman. Like a masterpiece of sculpture or art, his art, viewed from any side, is a **perfect** picture."* –Ferruccio Busoni, Italian composer

*"When it comes to Mozart, you're speaking of the most extraordinary **perfection** that exists. There isn't anything that is more **perfect** in music. And then on top of it the music is so complete; there is never a piece of music by Mozart, it doesn't make any difference if he is 4, 5, 6, or 26, it's **perfect**, totally **perfect**."* –Pinchas Zukerman, Israeli Violinist and conductor

*"It is hard to think of another composer who so **perfectly** marries form and passion."* –Leonard Bernstein, American composer and conductor

*"As an artist, as a musician, Mozart was not a man of this world. To a certain part of the 19th century his work seemed to possess so pure, so formally rounded, so 'godlike' a **perfection** that Richard Wagner, the most violent spokesman of the Romantic Period, could call him 'music's genius of light and love.'" –Alfred Einstein, German-American biographer*

The second word that keeps coming up when people speak of Mozart is some form of the word *beauty*. Not just that the music he writes is beautiful, but also that the music itself somehow embodies the ideal of beauty, the thing itself.

*"Mozart's music is so **beautiful** as to entice angels down to*

earth.”—Franz Alexander von Kleist, German poet

*“Mozart is the greatest composer of all. Beethoven created his music, but the music of Mozart is of such purity and **beauty** that one feels he merely found it—that it has always existed as part of the inner **beauty** of the universe waiting to be revealed.”* —Albert Einstein, German-born physicist and violinist

*“Mozart does not give the listener time to catch his breath, for no sooner is one inclined to reflect upon a **beautiful** inspiration than another appears, even more splendid, which drives away the first, and this continues on and on, so that in the end one is unable to retain any of these **beauties** in the memory.”* —Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf, Austrian composer and violinist

*“He is the most generous composer who ever lived. He showered upon us melody after melody, character upon character, **beauty**, upon **beauty**.”* —Robert Harris, English music critic

*“What was evident was that Mozart was simply transcribing music completely finished in his head. And finished as most music is never finished. Displace one note and there would be diminishment. Displace one phrase and structure would fall. I was staring through the cage of those meticulous ink strokes at Absolute **Beauty**.”* —Peter Shaffer, English playwright (Amadeus)

*“In Mozart’s music, all intensity is crystallized in the clearest, the most **beautifully** balanced and proportioned, and altogether flawless musical forms.”* —Phil Goulding, American classical music journalist

*“Mozart’s mature instrumental music represents our civilization’s sign for the **beautiful**. We cannot think of him without thinking of **beauty**; we cannot refer to **beauty** without recalling his music. I believe this is so, not*

*necessarily because his works are more **beautiful** than those of other composers, though this may well be true, but because he created—or, at least, brought into the forefront of aesthetic consciousness—a special kind of **beauty**, one that thenceforth came to exemplify the idea of superlative **beauty** itself.”* –Maynard Solomon, American musicologist and biographer

*“If we cannot write with the **beauty** of Mozart, let us at least try to write with his purity.”* –Johannes Brahms, German composer

But there's more. When speaking of Mozart, more than any other composer, people are likely to invoke heaven, the divine, God, miracles, or some other reference to, or experience of, the ultimate.

“Mozart has reached the boundary gate of music and leaped over it, leaving behind the old masters and moderns, and posterity itself.” –Alexander Hyatt King, English Mozart scholar

□ *“The Mozartian legacy, in brief, is as good an excuse for mankind's existence as we shall ever encounter and is perhaps, after all, a still small hope for our ultimate survival.”* –H. C. Robbins Landon, American musicologist

“Mozart's music is the mysterious language of a distant spiritual kingdom, whose marvelous accents echo in our inner being and arouse a higher, intensive life.” –E.T.A. Hoffmann, German author, composer, music critic

“The most tremendous genius raised Mozart above all masters, in all centuries and in all arts.” –Richard Wagner, German composer

“Mozart is an utterly unique phenomenon, indisputably and forever on the credit side of life’s ledger, so sovereign and omnipresent that he reconciles us somewhat to the debit side. Indeed, Mozart seems to be reconciliation itself, a kind of redeeming miracle.” –Wolfgang Hildesheimer, German biographer

“Mozart resolved his emotions on a level that transformed them into moods uncontaminated by mortal anguish, enabling him to express the angelic anguish that is so peculiarly his own.” –Yehudi Menuhin, American-born violinist and conductor

“In Bach, Beethoven and Wagner we admire principally the depth and energy of the human mind; in Mozart, the divine instinct.” –Edvard Grieg, Norwegian composer

“Mozart exists, and will exist, eternally; divine Mozart—less a name, more a soul descending to us from the heavens.” –Charles Gounod, French composer

“Mozart makes you believe in God because it cannot be by chance that such a phenomenon arrives into this world and leaves such an unbounded number of unparalleled masterpieces.” –Georg Solti, Hungarian conductor

“It is thanks to Mozart that I have devoted my life to music ... Mozart is the highest, the culminating point that beauty has attained in the sphere of music. Mozart is the musical Christ.” –Piotr Tchaikovsky, Russian composer

“This is the music that they are going to play for me when I enter heaven, or wherever Mozart may be.” –Marcel Maurice, French clarinetist on Mozart’s Quintet for Clarinet in A

“The angels, left to themselves, play Mozart, and the dear Lord likes especially to listen to them then.” –Karl Barth, Swiss philosopher

"Others may reach heaven with their works. But Mozart, he comes from there." –Joseph Krips, Austrian conductor and violinist

"Once, when filling out an application for a summer job, on that line next to 'other' under the heading of Religion, I wrote Mozart. The personnel officer was not amused, but then, I hadn't intended it as a joke. For there was a time when I was convinced that Mozart was at least as divinely inspired as Moses, Christ, the Buddha, Lao-tzu, or Mohammed, and I suppose I still am. For in no other works of the human imagination can the divine spirit be heard more distinctly than in the miraculous music this often vulgar, unpleasant, and difficult man produced during his pathetically brief thirty-five years. Were this book to do him justice, the section devoted to Mozart's music would take up more than half the total pages." –Jim Svejda, American music critic, in the 3rd edition of *The Record Shelf Guide to the Classical Repertoire*

Are these writers over the top in their praise? Perhaps. But there is something about Mozart's music, given enough time and exposure, that elicits such intense reactions. In the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, there is a scene where an innocent man convicted of his wife's murder goes into the warden's office and locks everyone out. Why? To play a Mozart *duettino* (a song with two singers) for himself, and eventually, to play it for the entire prison population.

Watch what happens:

Mozart, when conveyed through inspired performances, is capable of a kind of transport, a sublime movement, into a heavenly experience that transcends physical, emotional, and

mental limitations. Where others are loved for the mental and emotional craft of their music, with occasional passages and moments that arrive in heaven, Mozart appears to naturally dwell there. Mozart does not take one on a journey to heaven as much as he is already resident there at the start, unlike so many of his fellow musical composers.

And thus, Mozart is unique among musical artists. He is the Shakespeare, the Michelangelo, the Da Vinci of music.

Perhaps there is no way to explain Mozart. Perhaps all we can do is accept the inevitable, as expressed by one Japanese classical pianist and conductor:

“Mozart is inexplicable.” –Mitsuko Uchida

If you want to listen to some of the greatest performances of Mozart’s music, as well as some great commentary, enjoy my page [“One Click to Mozart.”](#) You will find playlists as well as the complete Köchel catalogue available on YouTube. Start with Playlist 12: Mozart’s Heavenly Mansion.

Enjoy Mozart’s Divine Voice!

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being present. He believes the purpose of life is to learn how to give and receive divine love.

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