

Meet Mozart Jnr

Few people have heard of 'Wolfi' Mozart. But although he will always remain in the shadow of his genius father, his elusive, haunting music is deserving of a revival

By Jessica Duchen

Published: 06 December 2005

Pop Barbara Bonney's new CD, *The Other Mozart*, into the slot, and what you hear is perhaps not what you might expect. The songs - 27 of them - are often brief to the point of fragmentation; slivers of ideas, underdeveloped shadows of what might have been, reaching a beautiful if brief fulfilment in the later works. Franz Xaver Mozart clearly didn't possess his father's genius, but he does have a peculiar little sound world of his own: frequently emulating Dad and occasionally akin to Schubert, his contemporary, but infused with an elusive, personal mixture of childlike innocence and haunting melancholy.

Franz Xaver Mozart was born in 1791, less than five months before the premature death of his father, Wolfgang Amadeus. He, his mother Constanze decided, should carry his father's musical mantle from then on. Wolfgang's death left the family all but destitute; Constanze had only Mozart's name with which to feed her children. Pictures show that Franz Xaver was the image of his father: the same deep, perceptive eyes, the strong, level brows, the determined chin. He was the last of six children, only the second to survive infancy and, since his elder brother, Carl Thomas, showed no signs of musical talent, his mother's hopes and ambitions focused upon on him. She promptly changed his name to Wolfgang Amadeus. "He was known," Barbara Bonney recounts, "as Mozart the Son."

Bonney's CD has brought Franz Xaver's songs into the spotlight for the first time. She came across them completely by chance last year. Convinced that Mozart's sister, Nannerl, must have written music of her own, the versatile American soprano had been searching for her compositions, but found nothing. "I started looking at the music of their father, Leopold, instead," she says. "Then suddenly I found Franz Xaver. I'd never heard of him before, so I started researching in the Mozarteum in Salzburg, where I'd been a student, and in Vienna, at the library of the Musikverein, and I found a whole pile of art songs for soprano. They made up the perfect CD length and there were only two that I couldn't trace. So we recorded all of them. His piano concerti have been played, but nobody has ever done these songs before. I feel as if I've discovered a new species!"

It's hard to think of anything more psychologically daunting for a would-be musician than having the ghost of Mozart for a father. Franz Xaver, with his mother proudly calling him "Wolfi", had every musical, if not material, advantage as a child; his teachers included the pianist-composer Johann Nepomuk Hummel, who had been a pupil of Mozart senior, and even Mozart's supposed arch-rival Salieri, who taught him singing. The boy made his public debut in Prague at the age of five, singing Papageno's aria from *Die Zauberflöte* in a memorial concert for his father. After moving to the somewhat remote town of

Lemberg (later Lvov, in today's Ukraine) as a private music tutor in 1807, he managed to build up some measure of a career as a pianist, enjoying a concert tour that lasted for several years from 1819. The songs make evident Franz Xaver's pianistic accomplishment: the piano parts are extremely demanding. Bonney's accompanist, Malcolm Martineau, plays them wonderfully. "Sometimes the piano has almost more to say than the voice," Bonney points out.

Perhaps Franz Xaver's professional mistake, after his years of touring, was that he wouldn't leave Lemberg - whether to be near someone he loved or to stay a safe distance from his pushy mother isn't clear. Constanze had remarried - her second husband was a Danish businessman, Georg Nikolaus Nissen, who subsequently wrote a diligent if domestically censored biography of his wife's first husband. Franz Xaver only moved back to Vienna in 1838 to attempt to break into the musical world there. "But everyone laughed at him," says Bonney, "and said that he wasn't as good as his father. It must have depressed him no end."

Nor was that the only tragedy in his life. "Many of these songs seem to have been inspired by his passion for a married woman whom he was never able successfully to pursue," Bonney adds. The texts he chose to set, including poems by Schiller, Rousseau, Grillparzer and Byron, as well as "Anon" (perhaps Franz Xaver himself?), speak time and again of unattainable love and unfulfilled longing. Admittedly, such emotions were in vogue in the poetry of the day and featured heavily in Schubert's songs as well.

Bonney suggests that, besides certain similarities to early Schubert as well as the inevitable influence of Mozart himself, Franz Xaver's music shows occasional futuristic flashes. "He started writing songs when he was 17," she says, "and the later you go, the more sophisticated they become. Some moments point towards Weber and even Verdi. The songs that appeal most to me are the ones written in 1820. One of the Op 27 Drei Deutsche Lieder, 'Berthe's Lied in der Nacht', is one of the most beautiful songs I've ever heard. It's almost like Wagner: all of a sudden you're thinking of Wolfram's aria in *Tannhäuser*." Another song from the same group - the most substantial on the CD - is called, like Wolfram's aria, "An den Abendstern" (To the Evening Star).

With the 250th anniversary of Mozart's birth looming next year, Franz Xaver seems likely to enjoy some sort of renaissance in the wake of his father. As ever, though, that glory is largely reflected. It's sad to reflect that this music, had it been written by a composer of any other name, would probably have remained buried in the archives, even though the three Op 27 songs at least are deserving of an enduring life.

"It's not earth-shattering," Bonney agrees. "But it's good music." Unfortunately, for a Mozart, "good" could never be enough. Franz Xaver died in 1844 at the age of 53; neither he nor his brother married or produced heirs. Mozart's name died out with them. In Byron's words, closing the final song: "As my hope faded for ever, memory became eternity."

'The Other Mozart', with Barbara Bonney and Malcolm Martineau, is out now on Decca.