"I will tell you of Salieri's cabals": Conspiratorial Thought and the Intriguing Afterlives of Antonio Salieri

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Antonio Salieri (1750–1825) occupies a strange place in historical, biographical, and popular understandings of late eighteenth-century European art music. Despite a lengthy and successful career as a composer of large-scale theatrical and sacred works, teacher of composition and voice, and administrator in the vast Habsburg musical bureaucracy, he is undoubtedly best known for his dubious status as Mozart's rival. Indeed, in the decades immediately following his death, Salieri quickly became a highly contested fictionalized character in the international literature, with plays, operas, and short fiction dramatizing his relationship with Mozart and arguing for or against his place in music history.

Within musicology, reception histories tend to focus on changing views of particular musical works in different historical and cultural settings. How, then, can one speak of the reception of a composer more remembered for debunked gossip around murder and envy than for his actual compositions? Since the 1970s, much musicological ink has been spilled attempting reassessing Salieri's musical contributions and broader impact.[1] My paper for the Eighteenth-Century Afterlives Spring Workshop does not aim to relitigate the truth or falsehood of the many conflicting claims surrounding Salieri's career. Rather, I more closely examine how the meanings attached to Salieri's alleged "intrigues" or "cabals" have shifted over time and in subsequent fictional retellings. The allegation originated in the Mozart family letters, wherein both Mozart and his father Leopold occasionally mention plots against Mozart's operas supposedly led by the far more established Salieri.[2] In the context of the 1780s and 1790s, however, the terms clearly referred to the normal politicking and networking involved with the business of opera in Vienna, which could involve collaboration and competition across a vast array of composers, poets, singers, theater managers, censors, and other professionals.[3] During the decades following Mozart's death, however, biographers and critics attempting to make sense of Mozart's life and early death increasingly saw his rivalry with Salieri in terms of an aesthetic dispute, whether between Italian- and German-language opera (as in Albert Lortzing's 1834 opera *Szenen aus Mozarts Leben*) or between Salieri's professional successes during his lifetime and the emergent

[1] Examples of this approach to Salieri scholarship include Rudolph Angermüller's three-volume documentary biography (published by E. Katzbichler from 1971-1974 and further updated and expanded in 1985 and 2000), Volkmar Braunbehrens's *Salieri, ein Musiker im Schatten Mozarts* (Piper, 1989), John Rice's *Antonio Salieri in Viennese Opera* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), Elena Biggi Parodi's thematic catalogue of Salieri's theatrical works (LIM, 2005), Jane Schatkin Hettrick's extensive work on Salieri's sacred music (beginning with Doblinger, 1981 and ongoing), and recent and in-progress dissertations by Jessica Abbazio (University of Maryland, 2016) and Ellen Stokes (University of Huddersfield, forthcoming).

[2] See, for example, Mozart's letter to Michael Puchberg of December 1789, wherein he claims "Person-to-person I will tell you of Salieri's cabals" (*Cabalen von Salieri* in the original, sometimes also translated into English as "intrigues" or "plots." No. 1113. Digital Mozart Edition (accessed January 28, 2025): https://dme.mozarteum.at/DME/briefe/letter.php?mid=1683

[3] While not explicitly about Salieri as such, Ian Woodfield's *Cabals and Satires: Mozart's Comic Operas in Vienna* (Oxford University Press, 2018) unpacks contemporary newspaper and magazine sources to demonstrate close entanglements between the Viennese theatrical business and broader court, political, and military concerns throughout the 1780s.

notions of transcendent genius attached to Mozart's posthumous recognition (as in both Alexander Pushkin's 1830 "little tragedy" *Motsart i Salyeri* and Gustav Nicolai's 1835 novella *Der Musikfeind*).

Today, most popular discussions of Salieri center around his most famous fictional depiction—Miloš Forman's 1984 film adaptation of Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus*—which won eight Academy Awards and has been recognized by musicologists as sparking increased popular interest in Mozart's life and music (not to mention some revivals of Salieri's work).[4] My workshop paper focuses on lesser-known examples of 20th-century Salieri fictions to consider the increased place of conspiratorial thought in this mythmaking, further contextualize Shaffer's initial plans for the play, and explore the story's continued appeal. While 19th-century fictions on Mozart and Salieri shifted away from mundane theatrical politics towards reflections on the place of the artist in society, 20th-century media increasingly drew from the world of contemporary politics to blend stories of personal enmity with ideas of some broader conspiracy. Franz Farga's 1937 novel *Salieri und Mozart* attributed nationalist motives to Salieri's interactions with Mozart. The film *The Mozart Story*, a 1948 American recut of the post-Anschluss Mozart biopic *Wen die Götter lieben* (1942), interpolated wholly new scenes with Haydn and Salieri to minimize the original film's fascist subtext, instead pitting nationalism (as suggested by Salieri's promotion of his Italian colleagues at Mozart's expense) against democracy (as embodied by Haydn's anachronistic speeches about musical universalism). Reacting to media coverage of several high-profile political assassinations and rumored conspiracy theories circulating in 1960s America, David Weiss's 1970 novel *The Assassination of Mozart* depicted the Habsburgs and their secret police protecting an obviously murderous Salieri for political reasons. Even Shaffer's original script for *Amadeus* (1979) imagined Salieri's enmity of Mozart intersecting with other plots involving court politics, international affairs, and Freemasonry.

Drawing on recent theoretical approaches to misinformation and conspiratorial thought from rhetoric and information studies, a close reading of depictions of Salieri in twentieth-century Mozartian fictions, and archival research conducted in Weiss's and Shaffer's personal papers, I demonstrate how specific anecdotes of cabals originating during Salieri's lifetime are continually reframed and reinterpreted for new audiences.[5] I also look at the use of more recent discourses from the so-called "post-truth era" to conclude with some thoughts on how and why Salieri's "intriguing afterlives" persist to this day.

[4] For more on the cultural impact of *Amadeus*, see Robert Marshall, "Film as Musicology: *Amadeus*," *The Musical Quarterly* 81, no. 2 (1997): 173–9; and Simon Keefe, "Beyond Fact and Fiction, Scholarly and Popular: Peter Shaffer and Milos Forman's *Amadeus* at 25," The *Musical Times* 150 (2009): 45–53.

[5] The theories I draw from here include those developed by Jenny Rice in *Awful Archives: Conspiracy Theory, Rhetoric, and Acts of Evidence* (Ohio State University, 2020) and the ongoing work on rumors and misinformation conducted by Kate Starbird and Stephen Prochaska at the University of Washington's Center for an Informed Public.