

## Amadeus: A Brief Synopsis

The first act opens in 1823 with the citizens of Vienna whispering “Salieri” and “assassin” as Antonio Salieri himself appears, a sick old man in a wheelchair. The Venticelli, (“little winds”) who serve as the gossipy narrators throughout the play, explain that Salieri has just confessed to poisoning his rival Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart some 32 years ago. Salieri then makes his confession to the audience, and explains how his lifelong desire for musical greatness led to his hatred and jealousy of Mozart.

Flashing back to 1781, the play introduces Salieri’s younger self, his wife Teresa, and his pupil Katherina. At this time, Salieri’s goal was to become “First Royal *Kappellmeister*,” the music master to the Austrian court, but the *Kappellmeister* at the time, *Kapellmeister* Bonno, was seventy years old and “apparently immortal.” Soon after, we are introduced to Mozart and his wife-to-be, Constanze. When Mozart mentions marriage, Constanze says that Mozart’s father will never agree to the match. He asks her to defy his father and marry him anyway.

Shortly afterward, the Austrian Emperor excitedly awaits Mozart’s arrival at the palace. Salieri asks permission to play a March of Welcome that he has composed in Mozart’s honor, and the Emperor agrees. Mozart’s overly effusive, hand-kissing greeting of the Emperor only confirms Salieri’s suspicions about his character. When the two men are left alone, Mozart tells Salieri that he plans to cast Katherina as the lead in the opera which the Emperor has commissioned from him, and Salieri seethes at the thought of his pupil being stolen from him. Unwittingly, Mozart rubs more salt in the wound, calling Salieri’s march a “jolly little thing,” then sitting down and playing it from memory, adding improvements and flourishes of his own on the spot.

The new opera, *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, fails to please the taste of the Emperor and his officials, and Mozart finds himself forced to awkwardly (and rudely) seek Salieri’s advice. While acting as Mozart’s friend, Salieri begins to maneuver behind the scenes to hold the young composer back. Having married Constanze, Mozart finds himself in dire financial straits, with a wife to support and very little money coming in as no one will trust him with young female students from good families.

At a musical evening, an argument erupts between Mozart comes in and Constanze, with each accusing the other of infidelity. Although they make up, when Mozart leaves the room, Constanze tells Salieri that she and Mozart are desperate for money, and asks him to help get Mozart a job at court. Salieri, hoping to pay Mozart back for wooing Katherina away from him, asks Constanze to meet with him alone at his home the next day.

Although Constanze refuses and runs away, the next day she shows up at Salieri’s apartment to show him some of Mozart’s manuscripts in hopes of convincing him that Mozart’s talents merit a “royal appointment.” He asks Constanze for a kiss as recompense for his assistance, but when she realizes his true objective, the seduction falls apart. Salieri realizes that far from remaining a virtuous man of God, he has nearly turned into an adulterer because of his envy of Mozart. After Constanze leaves, Salieri tears open the scores and leafs through them, realizing to his dismay that they are “perfect,” far beyond his own ability. Collapsing, he curses God for choosing Mozart, “a giggling child,” to be his divine mouthpiece, and declares war on God in the person of his messenger, Mozart.

As act two begins, in 1823 yet again, the elderly Salieri describes the

opening salvo of his war on God. When Constanze returns ready to sleep with him if it will get her husband a job, he pushes her from the apartment. Instead, as he reveals, he seduces Katherina and has her as his mistress for several years, even as he thwarts Mozart’s career by spreading the rumor that Mozart cannot be left alone with young women.

Mozart has begun work on a new Italian opera, *The Marriage of Figaro*, based on a French stage comedy. Salieri secretly teams up with Orsini-Rosenberg, the director of the Viennese Royal Opera, to prevent the “vulgar farce” from being produced. Although Salieri recognizes it as a masterpiece, he eventually gets it cancelled, telling Mozart that the public response was poor.

A despairing Mozart plans to leave Vienna for England, but is unable to get his father to agree to support his family while he is abroad. Soon after, the Venticelli arrive with the news that Mozart’s father has died, further devastating the composer. Even as Mozart sinks into illness and poverty, Salieri rises (despite his malicious deeds), achieving his long-desired post as *Kapellmeister*.

Meeting Salieri on the street, Mozart tells him he can’t sleep at night because he has nightmares of a mysterious ghostly figure in a grey cloak who has commissioned him to write a requiem (funeral) mass. The Venticelli comment that Mozart’s sanity seems to be failing. While he frantically composes, Constanze leaves with their children and his health continues to deteriorate. Salieri resolves to steer Mozart into offending the powerful social organization, the Masons, by writing an opera that includes secret Masonic rituals.

As Salieri suspects, *The Magic Flute* infuriates the Masons. The Imperial librarian (and censor) Van Swieten tells Mozart that his career is now ruined. Salieri resolves to push Mozart over the brink of madness, disguising himself as the “figure in grey,” and visiting Mozart’s house, urging the exhausted composer to finish his requiem while he still has time. At last, with Mozart on the point of collapse, Salieri reveals himself, and the desperately ill Mozart dies, bewildered that his “friend” has betrayed him.

The elderly Salieri reveals that he lived on for 32 years and experienced God’s revenge, as Mozart’s growing fame slowly but steadily pushed him into obscurity. Even in claiming to have poisoned Mozart, he has failed to achieve the fame he always wanted, for no one believes him. In the end, he is nothing but “Antonio Salieri, patron saint of Mediocrities,” and in that bitter knowledge, he “blesses” the audience before his death: “mediocrities everywhere — now and to come — I absolve you all. Amen!”