



[The Height of Professional Jealousy](#)

Written by Paul Hansen



Was Mozart murdered? This question was of course addressed in the famous Peter Shaffer play, *Amadeus*, which opened on Broadway in 1980.

The film version of *Amadeus* won the 1984 Oscar award for Best Picture. F. Murray Abraham received the Best Actor Oscar for his portrayal of Mozart's supposed nemesis, Antonio Salieri.



While most people are familiar with the Shaffer play, few probably realize that there are two earlier works that address similar mysterious rumors surrounding Mozart's demise. As early as 1830 the great Russian writer Alexander Pushkin wrote a short play entitled "Mozart and Salieri" that was adapted into an opera by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov in the late 1890's.

Last week, Rimsky-Korsakov's *Mozart and Salieri* was given several performances by The Little Opera Theatre of New York (LOTNY) at the Hudson Guild Theatre on West 26th St. The company's web site states that its mission is, in part, to "seek out lesser known works by major and under-appreciated composers." LOTNY certainly fulfilled this goal with its recent concerts. The rarely performed *Mozart and Salieri* was paired with another little known opera, *A Feast in the Time of Plague*. The latter work was composed by virtually forgotten composer Cesar Cui (1835-1918). Both operas are based almost verbatim on Pushkin texts taken from his collection of plays known as *The Little Tragedies*.

Antonio Salieri (1750-1825) was an Italian composer who worked with Mozart in many of the same eighteenth century Viennese musical circles. Although Salieri enjoyed tremendous prominence during his lifetime, his compositions have largely faded into obscurity. One suspects that any lingering interest in his music is a result of the posthumous publicity the composer received in Shaffer's play and film.

Feedback *Mozart and Salieri* opens with the latter character uttering the rather optimistic words, "Men say there is no vice in the world." Salieri continues in a long monologue describing his envy of Mozart's genius. The play is made even more poisonous by Salieri's belief that he has been vigilant in the pursuit of his musical goals while he perceives Mozart as flippant and juvenile. Salieri decides to calm his bitterness by inviting Mozart to dinner and poisoning his drink. Interestingly, as in *Amadeus*, the opera has the same morbid emphasis on a mysterious stranger who has commissioned Mozart to write a Requiem, which Mozart in fact did not live to complete.

Most serious scholars discount the legend that Salieri was responsible for Mozart's death. The legend functions more on a symbolic level, that no amount of diligence and technique can replace the mysterious, Promethean spark that separates mere talent with true genius. The story speaks to those who recognize brilliance but sadly and frustratingly realize that their own output will not ascend to that level.

Cesar Cui's *A Feast in the Time of the Plague* made up the second half of LOTNY's double-bill. *A Feast* takes place at a wake that has assembled to honor the departure of a friend who has been felled by the disease. The work deals with the ambivalent situation of the appropriateness of merriment in a desolate environment. Although composed over a hundred years ago, LOTNY's presentation of *A Feast* constituted its American premiere.

Cui was a member of a group known as *The Five*, a small assembly of nineteenth century composers dedicated to infusing their music with a sense of Russian nativism and nationalism. (Other members of the

group were Mily Balakirev, Modest Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Alexander Borodin). Prior to A Feast, LOTNY performed several of Cui's smaller works. These pieces and the opera itself were infused with romanticism reminiscent of Chopin's works. One of Cui's first teachers was Polish composer Stanislaw Moniuszko, which may in part explain the stylistic similarity.

Both of the operas were performed in English translations with chamber orchestra arrangements ably led by Marcus J. Parris. Bass-Baritone Matthew Yohn was a particular standout in the casts. He performed both Salieri and a Priest in A Feast and has a clear, commanding voice with excellent diction.

The concert was a reminder that it is regrettable that the music of The Five is not performed more often. Whenever I have encountered them, I have always found the works of these composers colorful and galvanizing. Those with an interest in the more remote pieces of the operatic repertoire should keep their eye on The Little Opera Theatre of New York. Check out their [official website](#).

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