The film *Amadeus* was warmly received by critics following its release in September 1984 and it remains adored 34 years later. Rotten Tomatoes, the common-denominator register of cinematic popularity, currently scores it at 95 percent in the esteem of both critics and audiences (a high rating indeed, although until recently it had been holding fast at 97 percent, along with *Schindler’s List*, *Notorious*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Casablanca*). It was nominated for 11 Academy Awards and received 8, including for Best Picture.

In *The New York Times*, Vincent Canby hailed the movie as “a major achievement, especially in films where genius is usually represented and dramatized as some kind of ill-humored, social eccentricity.” He was impressed by how the script had been adapted from Peter Shaffer’s play *Amadeus*, introduced in 1979 at London’s National Theatre (with Simon Callow, who plays Schikaneder in the film, as Mozart, and Paul Scofield as Salieri) and brought to Broadway the following year (with Tim Curry as Mozart and Ian McKellan as Salieri). Canby observed:

Having been shot entirely in and around Prague — which stands in for Emperor Joseph II’s Vienna — the movie looks wonderfully authentic. A centerpiece of the musical sequence is Prague’s jewel-like Tyl Theater, where Mozart actually conducted the first performance of *Don Giovanni*. Never for a minute does this *Amadeus* seem like a filmed play.

The film, and the play from which Shaffer adapted it, deals with the unfairness of how nature — or, perhaps, God — distributes genius, and how that might be reflected in the relationship between two composers, in this case, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and An-

---

**In Short**

- **Director:** Miloš Forman (born February 18, 1932, in Čáslav, Czechoslovakia — now the Czech Republic)
- **Screenplay:** Peter Shaffer (1926–2016), adapted from his 1979 play
- **Music:** Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–91); with interpolations by Antonio Salieri (1750–1825), and Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (1710–36)
- **World Premiere:** September 6, 1984, in Los Angeles, California
- **New York Philharmonic premiere:** these performances, which mark the New York Premiere of the score performed live to the complete film
- **Estimated duration:** ca. 160 minutes
tonio Salieri. Mozart aspired to musical glory in Vienna from the time he moved there in 1781 until his death a decade later, while Salieri was the kingpin of the city’s musical political scene, thanks to his positions as Court Chamber Composer (beginning in 1774) and then Court Kapellmeister (a post he held from 1788 until his retirement in 1824). Salieri was no slouch as a composer, being particularly active in the areas of opera and sacred music, although his operas were not consistently applauded. He worked with some of the same singers as Mozart did and even collaborated with the librettist Lorenzo da Ponte — the Da Ponte who today is remembered as the librettist of Mozart’s Don Giovanni, The Marriage of Figaro, and Così fan tutte, and not at all for Salieri’s Il ricco d’un giorno, Axur re d’Ormus, or Il pastor fido.

Uncertainty still surrounds the cause of Mozart’s death, at the age of 35. He fell ill around November 20, 1791, and his condition grew increasingly grave until he died in the early morning of December 5. Franz Niemetschek’s biography of the composer, published in 1798, included a tale of how Mozart had premonitions of death earlier that autumn and suspected that he was being poisoned — a story Mozart’s widow, Constanze, later seemed to both uphold and abjure. By 1819 the tale had evolved to pin Mozart’s supposed murder on a cabal of Italian musicians in the Viennese court. That theory was compounded by Salieri’s own decline. In 1823 he sustained a head injury in a fall, was committed to a hospital, and may have attempted suicide. Rumors began circulating claiming that he had confessed to poisoning Mozart.

Who Really Killed Mozart?

Sorry, conspiracy theorists, but the most likely answer is no one. While the exact cause of Mozart’s death has been an off and on parlor game since 1791, signs point to natural causes. Based on reports that Mozart suffered from fever, swollen limbs and joints, back pain and rashes, ideas have been put forward for tuberculosis, pneumonia, typhoid fever, rheumatic fever, a strep infection contributing to kidney failure, infection from overzealous bloodletting or gum disease, and even trichinosis from tainted pork.

As for the depiction of Mozart’s burial in a pauper’s grave, historians blame a misunderstanding of terminology. Records indicate that Mozart was buried in a common grave, which referred not to a mass grave, but to burial of a “common” person outside the aristocracy. It was accepted practice of the time to inter more than one body in a plot, and common graves could eventually be dug up and reused, with bones of the deceased relocated to smaller plots. Thus the confusion over the location of Mozart’s grave, although it is known that he was buried somewhere in Vienna’s St. Marx Cemetery.

— The Editors

Mozart (Tom Hulce) at work on his Requiem
The whole thing seems supremely illogical and unlikely — and it was not the only rumor that swirled around Mozart’s death — but it made for good drama. Alexander Pushkin seized on the story for his one-act play *Mozart and Salieri* in 1830. In 1898 Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov turned that play into an opera, and the idea also begat Shaffer’s play and Miloš Forman’s film. Many musicologists berated the dramatized versions of *Amadeus* for historical inaccuracy, and doubtless the play and the film did feed a sensationalizing tendency in the popular imagination. But *Amadeus* never pretended to be a history lesson. It is a fictionalized drama, an elegantly realized one that reaches to the heart of the creative soul.

---

**The Work at a Glance**

*Amadeus* includes 35 music cues, some of which range through more than a single piece. Devoted Mozartsians may refer to this guide. All works are by Mozart unless otherwise noted:

1. Opening scene — Overture to *Don Giovanni*, K.527
2. Title credits — Symphony No. 25 in G minor, K.183 / 173dB
3. Soprano Katerina Cavalieri sings — Salieri: *Axur re d’Ormus*; young Mozart plays harpsichord — Klavierstück in F major, K.33b
4. Salieri prays — Pergolesi: *Stabat Mater*
5. First encounter — Traditional Hungarian and 18th-century Romany music
6. Concert for the Archbishop — Serenade in B-flat major, *Gran Partita*, K.361 / 370a
7. The voice of God — Serenade in B-flat major
8. Katerina Cavalieri sings again — *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, K.384
9. Janissary chorus — *The Abduction from the Seraglio*
10. The wedding — Mass in C minor, K.427 / 417a
11. An absolute beauty — Concerto for Flute and Harp, K.299 / 297c; Symphony No. 29, K.201 / 186a; Concerto for Two Pianos, K.365 / 316a; Sinfonia concertante for Violin and Viola, K.364 / 320d; Mass in C minor
12. Leopold’s arrival — Piano Concerto in B-flat major, K.450, and *Don Giovanni*
13. Masquerade ball — *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, and song “Ein deutsches Kriegslied” (a.k.a “Ich möchte wohl der Kaiser sein”), K.539
15. Mozart composes II — *The Marriage of Figaro*

*From top: Mozart emitting his trademark laugh; Constanze [Elizabeth Berridge]*
The Work at a Glance (continued)

16. Outdoor concert — Piano Concerto in E-flat major, K.482, and The Marriage of Figaro
17. Figaro rehearsal — The Marriage of Figaro
18. The Marriage of Figaro I — The Marriage of Figaro
19. The Marriage of Figaro II — The Marriage of Figaro
20. Salieri’s triumph — Salieri: Axur re d’Ormus
21. Leopold is dead — Don Giovanni
22. The messenger arrives — Piano Concerto in D minor, K.466; Overture to Don Giovanni
23. The messenger departs — Requiem, K.626
25. Opera parody — Don Giovanni, The Abduction from the Seraglio, and The Marriage of Figaro
26. Mozart composes the Requiem — Requiem
27. Lorl is frightened — Overture to The Magic Flute, K.620; Overture to Don Giovanni
28. Mozart sneaks out — Requiem
29. Queen of the Night — The Magic Flute
30. Papageno-Papagena — The Magic Flute
31. Constanze leaves the spa — Deutsche Tänze, K.509
32. Mozart dictates — Requiem
33. Constanze comes home — Requiem
34. Mozart’s death — Requiem
35. End credits — Piano Concerto in D minor

From top: Salieri (F. Murray Abraham) listening to music by his nemesis; Mozart conducting an opera rehearsal