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Mozart is writing an opera for the visit of Grand Duke Paul (15 Sep 1781)

Dexter Edge

***Staats- und gelehrte Zeitung des Hamburgischen unpartheyischen Correspondenten*, no. 153, Tue, 25 Sep 1781, [3]**

[3]

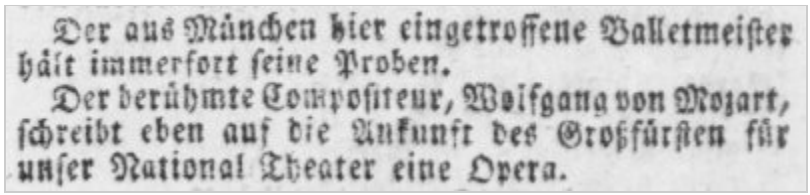
Schreiben aus Wien, den 15 September.


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[...]

Der aus München hier eingetroffene Balletmeister hält immerfort seine Proben.

Der berühmte Compositeur, Wolfgang von Mozart, schreibt eben auf die Ankunft des Großfürsten für unser National Theater eine Opera.


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[translation:]

[3]

Letters from Vienna, 15 September.

[...]

The ballet master who arrived here from Munich is holding continual rehearsals.

The famous composer Wolfgang von Mozart is

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currently writing an opera for our National Theater
in honor of the Grand Duke’s arrival.

Commentary

On Wed, 1 Aug 1781, Mozart wrote from Vienna to his father Leopold in Salzburg:

> Nun hat mir vorgestern der Junge Stephani ein Buch zu schreiben gegeben. *[...]* — das Buch ist ganz gut. das Sujet ist türkisch und heist; *Bellmont* und *konstanze*. oder *die verführung aus dem Serail.* —
> *[...]*
> die zeit ist kurz, das ist wahr; denn im halben 7:ber soll es schon ausgeführt werden; — allein — die umstände, die zu der zeit da es aufgeführt wird, dabey verknüpfet sind, und überhaubts — alle andere absichten — erhielten meinen Geist dergestalten, daß ich mit der grösten Begierde zu meinem schriebtisch *[sic]* eile, und mit gröster freude dabey sitzen bleibe.
> der Groß=fürst von Russland wird hieher kommen; und da bat mich Stephani ich sollte, wenn es möglich wäre, in dieser kurzen zeit die opera schreiben. denn, der kayser und graf Rosenberg werden izt bald kommen, und da wird gleich gefragt werden, ob nichts neues in Bereitschaft seye? — da wird er dann mit vergnügen sagen können, daß der umlauf mit seiner opera |: die er schon lange hat :| fertig werden wird, und daß ich extra eine dafür schreibe — und er wird mir gewis einen verdienst daraus machen, daß ich sie, aus dieser ursache, in dieser kurzen zeit zuschreiben, übernommen habe. — es weis es noch niemand als der adamberger und fischer, denn der Stephani bat uns nichts zu sagen *[...]*
> [*Briefe*, iii:143–44]

> Now the day before yesterday Stephanie the Younger gave me a libretto to compose *[...]* — the libretto is quite good. The subject is Turkish and it’s called *Belmont und Konstanze, oder Die Verführung aus dem Serail.*
> *[...]*
> The time is short, that is true, for it is supposed to be performed already in mid September; — but — the circumstances connected with the time when it will be performed, and — anyway — all else aside — my spirit gains so much by it that I hurry to my desk with the greatest eagerness and remain seated there with the greatest joy.
>
> The Grand Duke of Russia will come here; and so Stephanie asked me, if possible, to compose an opera in this short time. For the emperor and Count Rosenberg will soon come, and it will be asked right away whether anything new might be ready? — Then he will be able to answer with pleasure, that Umlauf will be finished with his opera (which he has already had for a long time), and that I am writing an extra one for the occasion — and he will certainly regard it as a service on my part, that I have for this reason undertaken to write it in this short time. — No one knows about it yet except Adamberger and Fischer, for Stephanie asked us not to say anything. *[...]*

This was the opera that was to become *Die Entführung aus dem Serail,* Mozart's setting of Johann Gottlieb Stephanie's unauthorized revision of a libretto by Christoph Friedrich Bretzner. The "Grand Duke of Russia" was Grand Duke Paul, son and heir of Catherine the Great.

Although the project was supposed to be a secret, Leopold could not help mentioning it in a letter to Breitkopf in Leipzig on 10 Aug:

> *[...]* auch hat man ihn ersucht eine operette, die schon den halben des Septembers solle aufgeführt werden, noch anzunehmen, und er hat sie noch zu Komponieren angenohmen, weil solche für die Ankunft des GrossFürsten von Russland bestimmet ist. [*Briefe*, iii:148–49]

> *[...]* [Wolfgang] has also been asked to take on an opera that is supposed to be performed already in mid September, and he has indeed undertaken to compose it, because it is intended for the arrival of the Grand Duke of Russia.

Mozart wrote to his father on 22 Aug 1781, just over three weeks from the day that Stephanie had given him the libretto, that "der erste Ackt von der opera ist nun fertig" ("the first act of the opera is now finished"; *Briefe*, iii:152). A week later, however, Mozart wrote: "der großfürst von Russland kommt erst im November; also kann ich meine opera mit mehr überlegung schreiben" ("The Grand Duke of Russia is not coming until November; so I can write my opera with more deliberation"; *Briefe*, iii:153).

The one-sentence report transcribed at the top of this page, from the *Staats- und gelehrte Zeitung des Hamburgischen unpartheyischen Correspondenten* in Hamburg, is the only known reference in the press to Mozart's work on the opera in 1781, and it is the earliest known public reference to *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* over all. The sentence on Mozart and the opera comes at the end of a longer report from one or more correspondents in Vienna under the dateline 15 September. In an earlier paragraph, the report states:

> Die neuesten Berichte aus Petersburg versichern
> uns noch immer, daß gedachte Kayersl. Hoheiten den
> 11ten oder 12ten November hier einzutreffen, und
> Ihre Reise über Lemberg, Troppau und Brünn
> *[...]* zu uns zu machen
> gedenken.
> [*Staats- und gelehrte Zeitung*, no. 153, Tue, 25 Sep 1781, 3]

> The most recent reports from Petersburg still assure
> us that the aforementioned Imperial Highnesses intend
> to arrive here on the 11th or 12th of November, and to
> make their journey to us by way of Lemberg [Lviv],
> Troppau [Opava] and Brünn [Brno].

The plural "Hoheiten" refers to the fact that Grand Duke Paul was making the journey with his wife, Grand Duchess Maria Fyodorovna, *née* Princess Sophie Dorothea of Württemberg. In the

event, the Grand Duke and Duchess arrived in Vienna on 21 Nov 1781. (On the two Viennese sojourns of the Grand Duke and Duchess, see our entry for 8 Oct 1782.)

In order to understand why Mozart and Stephanie initially believed that the Grand Duke and Duchess would arrive in Vienna in mid September 1781, and why those plans changed, it is necessary to dig more deeply into the context of Austrian-Russian relations at the time.

In the late spring of 1780, Emperor Joseph II travelled to Russia to meet Empress Catherine. Their first meeting took place in Mohilev (now Mogilev in Belarus) on 4 Jun 1780 (24 May Old Style). The two hit it off extremely well, so much so that Joseph extended his trip to include a longer visit with Catherine in St. Petersburg—not part of his original itinerary—from 28 Jun to 18 Jul. (On Joseph's journey to Russia, see Beales 1987, 435ff.) During his time in St. Petersburg, Joseph also met Grand Duke Paul and his wife. After Joseph's departure, he and Catherine struck up a warm and frequent correspondence, addressing each other "brother" and "sister" ("frère" and "sœur"; for their correspondence, see Arneth 1869).

When Joseph's mother and co-ruler Maria Theresia died on 29 Nov 1780, Joseph quickly began working on establishing an alliance with Russia, something that he had long desired but his mother had blocked, owing to her disapproval of Catherine. For his part, Joseph sought an ally for Austria against possible attacks by Prussia (Austria's nominal ally France was embroiled in a war with England), while Catherine sought Austria's defensive support against treaty violations by the Ottoman Turks.

Negotiations, mainly secret, between Joseph and Catherine and their ministers occupied the first months of 1781 (on these negotiations, see Beales 2009, chapter 3, 104–32). Joseph had also hit upon the idea of cementing the relationship by arranging a marriage between his nephew Archduke Franz, the oldest son of Joseph's brother Leopold, and Princess Elisabeth of Württemberg, younger sister of Catherine's daughter-in-law, the Grand Duchess Maria Fyodorovna. Negotiations over the proposed marriage went on at the same time as those over the alliance. The marriage negotiations were tricky: although Catherine clearly liked the idea, it needed the approval of the parents on both sides, and Joseph and Catherine had also to take into account the complication that Princess Elisabeth seems to have been promised to Friedrich Wilhelm of Prussia, nephew and intended heir of Frederick the Great.

Negotiations for the Austrian-Russian alliance came to a successful, albeit entirely secret conclusion by the end of May. There was no formal treaty, rather an exchange of letters. Each monarch wrote a pair of top secret personal letters, one dealing with mutual defense in Europe, and the other with Austrian support for Russia against the Ottoman Turks. Joseph's pair of letters are dated 18 May 1781 (see Beales 2009, 119n44), and Catherine's are dated 24 May (4 Jun New Style), the first anniversary of their meeting in Mohilev. With the alliance resolved, Joseph left Vienna on 22 May for an extended visit to his domains in the Austrian Netherlands (Belgium), returning to Vienna on 14 Aug 1781. By the time of his departure, his brother Leopold had agreed to Joseph's plan for a marriage between Franz and Elisabeth, and Catherine

had written to Elisabeth's father, Prince (later Duke) Friedrich Eugen of Württemberg, hoping for his approval. At that point, the plan was not quite yet fully resolved.

At the beginning of 1781 the German and Italian press were already reporting on Grand Duke Paul's intention to travel to Rome by way of Vienna. On 26 Jan 1781, for example, the *Staats- und gelehrte Zeitung* reported, under the dateline "Rom, den 6 Januar" ("Rome, 6 January"):

> Nach Briefen aus Wien, wird der Großfürst von Rußland daselbst erwartet. Se. Kayserl. Hoheit wer= den sich von da nach Italien begeben, und auch Nea= polis und diese Stadt mit Ihrer Gegenwart beehren.
>
> According to letters from Vienna, the Grand Duke of Russia is expected there. His Imperial Highness will travel from there to Italy, and also honor Naples and this city with His presence.

Nothing immediately came of this rumor. By the end of July, however, it was reported with more confidence that the Grand Duke and Duchess would soon depart St. Petersburg for Vienna, before traveling on to Italy:

> Petersburg, vom 13 Julii.
> Die Reise Ihrer Kayserl. Hoheiten, des Großfürsten und seiner Gemahlin, der Großfürstin, soll nun gewiß beschlossen seyn. Ihre Majestät, die Kayserin, haben Ihren Kayserl. Hoheiten zu dieser Reise, welche ein Jahr dauern dürfte, ausser ihren gewöhnlichen jährlichen Einkünften, 1 Million Rubel zugestanden. Der General en Chef, Graf von Soltikoff, wird Ihre Kayserl. Hoheiten auf dieser Reise begleiten, die über Kiow und Cracau nach Wien, und von dort nach Italien gehn wird.
> [*Altonaischer Mercurius*,Tue, 31 Jul 1781, [1]]
>
> Petersburg, from 13 July.
> The journey of His Imperial Highness, the Grand Duke and his spouse, the Grand Duchess, is said now to be certainly decided. Her Majesty the Empress has granted to Their Imperial Highnesses for this journey, which is expected to last a year, 1 million rubles, in addition to their usual yearly income. The General in Chief, Count von Soltikoff, will accompany Their Imperial Highnesses on this journey, which will go by way of Kiev and Kraków to Vienna, and from there to Italy.

A report from Vienna dated 28 Jul 1781, printed in the *Staats- und gelehrte Zeitung* on 7 Aug, placed the planned arrival of the Grand Duke and Duchess in September, just as Stephanie had told Mozart:

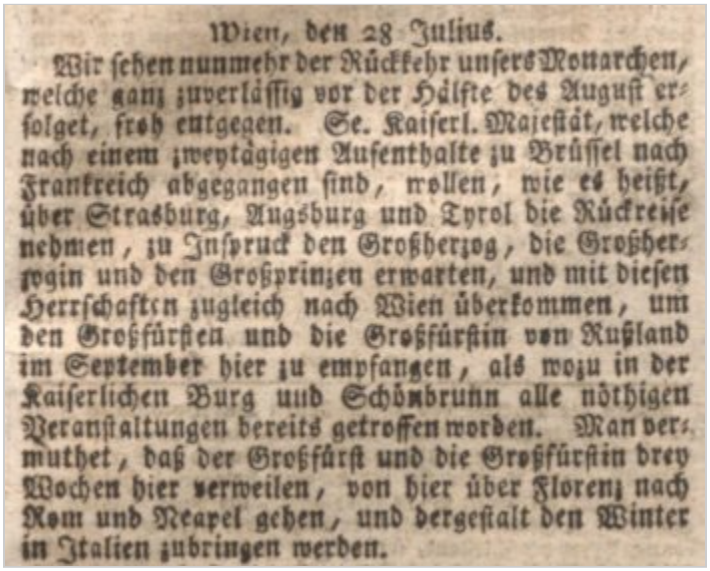
> Wien, den 28 Julii.
>
> Man versichert jetzt für zuverlässig, daß wir im be= vorstehenden Herbstmonat den Großfürsten und die Großfürstinn aus Rußland in unserer Hauptstadt sehen werden. Höchstdieselben werden sich nur acht Tage hier aufhalten, und alsdenn ihre Reise nach Italien fortsetzen. Auf der Rückreise aber werden wir alsdenn diese hohe Herrschaften auf mehrere Wochen in unsern Ringmauern zu verehren die Ehre haben. Für selbige, heißt es, gehet die prächtige Meublirung einiger Kayserl. Zimmer in der Burg vor sich.
>
> [*Staats- und gelehrte Zeitung*, Tue, 7 Aug 1781, [4]]

> Vienna, 28 July.
>
> We are now reliably assured that we will see the Grand Duke and Duchess from Russia in our capital this coming September. Their Highnesses will stay here only eight days, and then continue their journey to Italy. On their return journey, however, we will then have the honor to host these high princes inside our ring walls for several weeks. It is said that the magnificent furnishing of some imperial rooms in the palace is being carried out for them.

("Herbstmonat" is an older German word for "September," now obsolete.) That same day, another Hamburg paper published an independent report from Vienna with the same dateline:

> Wien, den 28 Julius.
>
> Wir sehen nunmehr der Rückkehr unsers Monarchen, welche ganz zuverlässig vor der Hälfte des August er= folget, froh entgegen. Se. Kaiserl. Majestät, welche nach einem zweytägigen Aufenthalte zu Brüssel nach Frankreich abgegangen sind, wollen, wie es heißt, über Strasbourg, Augsburg und Tyrol die Rückreise nehmen, zu Inspruck den Großherzog, die Großher= zogin und den Großprinzen erwarten, und mit diesen Herrschaften zugleich nach Wien überkommen, um den Großfürsten und die Großfürstin von Rußland im September hier zu empfangen, als wozu in der Kaiserlichen Burg und Schönbrunn alle nöthigen Veranstaltungen bereits getroffen worden. Man ver= muthet, daß der Großfürst und die Großfürstin drey

Wochen hier verweilen, und hier über Florenz nach Rom und Neapel gehen, und dergestalt den Winter in Italien zubringen werden.
[*Kaiserlich privilegirte Hamburgische neue Zeitung*, no. 125, Beylage, Tue, 7 Aug 1781, [5]]



Wien, den 28 Julius.

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Vienna, den 28 July.

We now look forward to the return of our Monarch, which will quite reliably take place before the middle of August. His Imperial Majesty, who departed for France after a two-day stay in Brussels, will, it is said, travel back by way of Strasbourg, Augsburg, and Tyrol to await the Grand Duke, Grand Duchess, and Grand Prince in Innsbruck, and then immediately travel on to Vienna with these princes, in order to receive the Grand Duke and Grand Duchess of Russia here in September, to which end all necessary preparations are already being made in the imperial palace and Schönbrunn. It is believed that the Grand Duke and Grand Duchess will remain here for three weeks, and go from here by way of Florence to Rome and Naples, and thereby spend the winter in Italy.

Both reports agree that Grand Duke Paul and his wife would visit Vienna in September. Oddly, none of this was reported in the Viennese press, but the Hamburg reports from Vienna show that the rumors were circulating there. They were evidently the rumors that led Stephanie to give Bretzner's libretto to Mozart on 30 Jul 1781, just two days after the datelines of these reports, asking him to complete an opera by the middle of September.

The second report seems to be one of the earliest references in the press to Joseph's dealings with the Württembergs—here the "Großherzog, die Großherzogin und den Großprinzen," referring to Prince Friedrich Eugen, his wife Friederike of Brandenburg-Schwedt, and their son, Prince Ferdinand Frederick Augustus, who ultimately made the trip to Vienna with his parents in November (see our entry for 8 Oct 1782). Princess Elisabeth is not mentioned, probably because the planned marriage was not yet public knowledge. Catherine had conveyed Friedrich Eugen's approval to Joseph in a letter dated 2 Jun 1781 (13 Jun New Style), and Joseph had immediately written directly to Friedrich Eugen asking for his consent, but there had been no public announcement, perhaps to avoid political repercussions. The report from Vienna dated 28 Jul seems to imply that Joseph would meet the Württembergs in Innsbruck on his way home from his tour of the Low Countries, and that they would travel on together to Vienna to await the arrival of the Grand Duke and Duchess of Russia in mid September.

This is not what happened. In the event, Joseph paid a quick visit to the Württembergs at their castle in Montbéliard (Mömpelgard) on 7 Aug 1781. (This visit, but not the reason for it, was reported in the *Wiener Zeitung* on 22 Aug.) The Württembergs did not accompany him back to Vienna, where he arrived on 14 Aug (*WZ*, no. 65, Wed, 15 Aug 1781 [6]). Nor did Grand Duke Paul and his wife depart St. Petersburg on a schedule that would have brought them to Vienna by mid September. If that had indeed been their original plan (as rumor and the press suggested), their departure was considerably delayed.

In a letter to Joseph dated 4 Jul 1781 (15 Jul New Style), Empress Catherine wrote:

> Monsieur mon frère. Je prends la liberté d'entretenir aujourd'hui V. M. I. d'une affaire qui me regarde de près. Tel est l'effet d'un grand exemple. Il y a quelque temps que mon fils m'a témoigné son désir de voir les pays étrangers et particulièrement l'Italie. Je n'ai pu que consentir à un désir si propre à augmenter ses connaissances. J'ose solliciter pour lui l'agrément de V. M. I. de passer par les Etats de V. M. I. et d'oser, accompagné de son épouse, Lui faire sa cour à Vienne cet hiver. Ils ne partiront d'ici à vue de pays que vers a fin de septembre, parce que l'inoculation de mes petits-fils doit précéder ce voyage. Depuis Mohilew et Kiovie jusqu'à Brody la route tracée l'année passée par M. le comte de Falkenstein leur servira de règle. C'est avec un vrai plaisir que je le remettrai entre Ses mains. [Arneth 1869, 96–97]
>
> Monsieur my brother. I take the liberty to discuss with Your Imperial Majesty today a matter that directly concerns me. Such is the effect of a great example. Some time ago my son informed me of his desire to see foreign countries and particularly Italy. I could only

> consent to such a suitable wish to increase his knowledge. I dare to ask for Your Imperial Majesty's approval that he may pass through Your Imperial Majesty's lands, and that he may dare, accompanied by his wife, to pay his court to you in Vienna this winter. They will not leave here to see other countries until the end of September, because the inoculation of my grandchildren must precede this trip. From Mohilev to Kiev until Brody—the route taken last year by Monsieur Count von Falkenstein—will serve as their guide. It is with true pleasure that I will commit them to Your hands.

"Count Falkenstein" is the "incognito" name that Joseph used during his travels in order to avoid undue ceremony and to be able to stay in inns and hotels, rather than palaces and official residences. He had traveled as Count Falkenstein to Russia in 1780. "Inoculation" refers to the impending visit to Russia of the English doctor and vigorous proponent of smallpox vaccination Thomas Dimsdale (1712–1800). Dimsdale had first traveled to Russia with his son Nathaniel in 1768 to vaccinate Catherine, Grand Duke Paul, and many members of the court. Catherine had called Dimsdale back to Russia in 1781 to vaccinate her grandchildren (two by that point), the children of Grand Duke Paul and his wife: Alexander (b. 1777, later to become Tsar Alexander I) and Constantine (b. 1779). As the procedure was not regarded as certain of success, it was felt that the parents ought not to leave until the outcome was known. Catherine alludes to this uncertainty in a letter to Joseph on 8 Aug 1781 (19 Aug New Style), but she is able to report in a letter to Joseph on 16 Sep (27 Sep New Style) that the vaccinations had "taken." In a postscript to a letter to Joseph on 5 Oct (16 Oct New Style), Catherine confirms that the Grand Duke and Duchess finally left St. Petersburg on 19 Sep (30 Sep New Style). They arrived in Vienna on 21 Nov 1781, eleven days after the Württembergs (see our entry for 8 Oct 1782).

As we have seen, Mozart received Bretzner's libretto from Stephanie on 30 Jul 1781, when both Stephanie and Mozart were under the impression that the Grand Duke and Duchess would arrive in Vienna in mid September. Mozart set to work initially with the aim of finishing the opera by the time of their arrival. By 22 Aug he reported to his father that the first act was finished, but a week later he wrote that the Grand Duke and Duchess were now not expected until November (he says nothing about the Württembergs).

For his part, Joseph arranged to receive the Württembergs and Grand Duke Paul and his wife in Vienna at the same time for a family reunion and a celebration of the successfully negotiated alliance between families (and at least implicitly, countries). By way of suitably impressive entertainment for the distinguished guests, Joseph decided, among other things, to stage what amounted to a Gluck revival (Gluck was still alive and living in Vienna), which ended up including performances of *Iphigénie en Tauride* (in German), *Alceste*, *Orfeo ed Euridice*, and *Die Pilgrimme von Mekka* (a German adaptation of *La rencontre imprévue*), supplemented by a performance by Johann Heinrich Friedrich Müller's Kinder-Institut on 7 Dec of *Der letzte Rausch* (a German adaptation of Gluck's *L'Ivrogne corrigé*). During his stopover in Munich on

his return journey from Belgium, Joseph had also engaged a ballet company under the direction of Peter Crux, the "Balletmeister" mentioned in the sentence preceding the reference to Mozart in the report transcribed at the top of this page. The report shows that Crux and his company were already in Vienna and rehearsing daily by the date of the report, 15 Sep 1781.

There was no more talk of a potential premiere of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* during the first visit of the Grand Duke and Duchess of Russia, and the opera was in fact not completed until the following year, premiering on 16 Jul 1782. The Grand Duke and Duchess finally saw the opera during their return visit to Vienna, on 8 Oct 1782. (For details on the entertainments during both visits of the Grand Duke and Duchess, see our entry for 8 Oct 1782, as well our entry on the keyboard "duel" between Clementi and Mozart on 24 Dec 1781.) Nor was any new opera by Umlauf (or any other composer) premiered during the visit of the Grand Duke and Duchess, even though Umlauf had, according to Mozart's letter of 1 Aug 1781, been working on one for a long time. Umlauf's next premiere by the court theater in Vienna was *Das Irrlicht* on 17 Jan 1782. Grand Duke Paul and his wife had left Vienna on 4 Jan, and the Württembergs on 9 Jan.

***

The report from the *Staats- und gelehrte Zeitung* transcribed at the top of this page refers to the composer as "Wolfgang von Mozart." Mozart had been awarded the Order of the Golden Spur by Pope Clement XIV in 1770, and Mozart's use of the noble "von" would have been legitimate for that reason. As Michael Lorenz (2013) has shown, Mozart sometimes incorporated the initials "ca" (Cavaliere) into his signature, and he is occasionally referred to as "von Mozart" in official Viennese documents from the 1780s. References in print to him as "von Mozart" are rare, but not unknown; see, for example, the listing in the *Augsburgisches Intelligenz-Blatt* on 1 Nov 1790 of Mozart's arrival in Augsburg on his way back to Vienna from the coronation in Frankfurt (*Dokumente*, 333, "Hr. v. Mozart").

Notes (⇧)

In German writings at this time, Empress Catherine's son Paul is usually referred to as "Großfürst," usually translated into English as "Grand Duke." Occasionally this translation can lead to ambiguity, as in the report transcribed above from the *Kaiserlich privilegirte Hamburgische neue Zeitung* on 7 Aug 1781, which refers both to "Großfürst" Paul and to "Großherzog" Friedrich Eugen of Württemberg, also usually translated as "Grand Duke." "Herzog" literally means duke, whereas "Fürst" has no precise equivalent in the English system of noble titles. It is often loosely translated as "prince," but that word is also ambiguous in this context, as "prince" is used more precisely to refer to the offspring of a ruler. In the report from the *Kaiserlich privilegirte Hamburgische neue Zeitung*, "Prinz" is used in this way to refer to Friedrich Eugen's son. "Großherzog" is also used loosely in this report, as Friedrich Eugen had not yet acceded to the title; he became Duke of Württemberg only after the deaths of his older brothers in 1793 and 1795. More precisely, Friedrich Eugen himself was still "Prinz" in 1781.

The abbreviation “V. M. I.” in Catherine’s letters to Joseph stands for “Votre Majesté Impériale.”

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