

■ THE MAGIC FLUTE: a Taste of the Epoch

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At school in the 1950s and 60s I took classes in a bit of everything, some I liked and was good at, some I didn't and was dismal. Came the time to choose subjects to prepare for my final exams I wanted to do chemistry, physics and art. No chance. I had to be a scientist or an artist, not both. I chose science-persuaded that my country and thus the job market needed scientists more than artists. But it was hard to let go and I found myself in a no-man's land between arts and sciences: my tutors at university thought my delight in the beauty of chemical reactions or the elegance of crystal field theory odd. They could not understand why an essay on "*Photography: science or art?*", intended to "round out" my education, caused me such pain.

In Europe of Mozart's time, mineralogy, as well as other natural sciences, was on the rise and, if one can say so, in fashion among the enlightened public. True, Mozart himself moved a lot among vivid personalities, including famous scientists. Possibly, an impression remained that, in his childhood, he got from his meeting with F.A. Mesmer, famous for the discovery of "animal magnetism"; but "mesmerism" itself never awoke his interest (Osborne, 1986). Having found himself in Vienna amongst bright enlighteners and intellectuals, Mozart felt the taste of creative freedom and profound sympathy for his new acquaintances.

For several years thereafter I worked in the dyestuffs industry, trouble-shooting tainted products resulting from reactions gone wrong, running a model sewage farm and poisoning trout in an effluent testing biochemistry lab. It didn't suit me. After numerous other odd jobs I ended up selling art, ceramics and jewellery in a small commercial gallery and a few years later almost by accident I found myself cataloguing insects and plants in a natural history museum. By this time I had also taught myself close-up photography specialising in plants and minerals-a combination of art and science that brought me back full circle. I also discovered a love for the stuff of history and an ability to string words together that others seemed to enjoy reading. My old teachers would've wondered what had happened: English language and history were among my worst subjects when a schoolboy. Now I still work in a museum service, as head of documentation, and have a finger in every museum pie, from minerals to ceramics, from archaeology to industrial history, from taxidermy to fine art, and am grateful for the opportunity this gives me to usefully exercise my varied interests in the service of access to our wide ranging collections.

Why am I rambling on like this? Well, reading this fascinating story of the personalities within and around the music of Mozart (Boris Z. Kantor *The Magic Flute...* pp. 48–60) got me thinking. Which is easier: to move from art to science or the other way round? Does the one serve the other best? Is there a continuum as some believe or is there a divide, an unbridgeable gap? I still find my grounding in scientific method remains a useful foundation for thoughts and work, from the creation of databases to the analysis of information. How would my approach have differed had I been an artist first? I don't suppose I'll never know, but it's been interesting revisiting these old thoughts.

The men in this tale lived multiple lives with apparent ease, combining arts and sciences in ways that seemed so much more natural then than it does now, almost an accepted way of life. And they had opportunities to make serious contributions to their chosen subjects and to be at the forefront of them. In their period, and for many decades beyond, it was possible and acceptable to master multiple disciplines: the subjects were leaner then, and there was less of the stigma of dilettantism now associated with such approaches to the world. The mineral collector Francis Greville (1749–1809) even made a virtue of it, as a member of the Society of Dilettanti (a group of collectors and patrons of the arts) as well as a patron of science almost on a par with Joseph Banks. He was a founder of the Royal Horticultural Society, successively a member of the Board of Trade (where he helped the mineral dealer Henry Heuland import Russian specimens into England) and a Lord of the Admiralty. His mineral collection, founded in 1773 on one of Ignaz von Born (another name in this tale of *The Magic Flute*), was the finest private collection in the world at the time of his death. It was bought for the nation by special Act of Parliament.

Even in the late 19th century it was possible to shift from subject to subject in similar ways—the famous mineral dealer Francis H. Butler (1849–1935) trained as a mining engineer and a doctor, and practised both; he was an essayist, poet, and editor of no mean ability, as well as one of the most respected dealers in minerals and other natural history objects. But the increasing professionalization of science, and the explosive escalation in complexity of the various scientific disciplines, have made his way of life almost a thing of the past. And don't get me started on the changes in art and artists since Mozart's time. Nowadays it's hard to see an actor becoming a famous scientist, though you could become President of United States...

But back to the main subject of this article: Karl Ludwig Giesecke who, born Johann Georg Metzler in Augsburg, Bavaria, moved from singer and actor via librettist of *The Magic Flute* to “*Imperial and Royal private dealer in minerals*,” pioneer geologist, and finally to Professor of Mineralogy in Dublin, Ireland, though at the time he could barely speak English. A remarkable life—or lives, as his mysterious change of name suggests. And his is not the only fascinating personality to engage in some way with this tale of Mozart's last opera. From Born to Raspe (another writer-mineralogist on the run from his past), and eventually to Ludwig von Köchel, the eponym of the famous “K” catalogue of Mozart's oeuvre. How fitting that the 200th anniversary of Mozart's death saw moztartite named in commemoration of this young genius. Did the authors of this species realize how embedded mineralogists were in this story? I suppose not, but it is tempting to think that some echo of their lives was heard down the centuries.