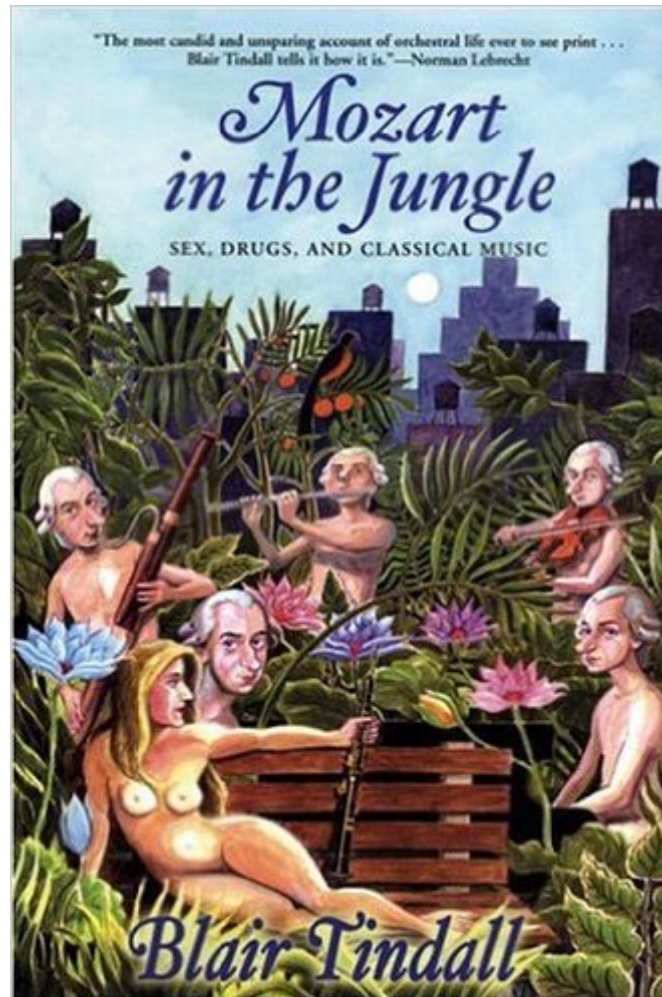


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# Mozart In The Jungle: Sex, Drugs, And Classical Music



## Synopsis

In the tradition of Anthony Bourdain's *Kitchen Confidential* and Gelsey Kirkland's *Dancing on My Grave*, *Mozart in the Jungle* delves into the lives of the musicians and conductors who inhabit the insular world of classical music. In a book that inspired the *Original* series starring Gael García Bernal and Malcolm McDowell, oboist Blair Tindall recounts her decades-long professional career as a classical musician—from the recitals and Broadway orchestra performances to the secret life of musicians who survive hand to mouth in the backbiting New York classical music scene, where musicians trade sexual favors for plum jobs and assignments in orchestras across the city. Tindall and her fellow journeymen musicians often play drunk, high, or hopelessly hungover, live in decrepit apartments, and perform in hazardous conditions; working-class musicians who schlep across the city between low-paying gigs, without health-care benefits or retirement plans, a stark contrast to the rarefied experiences of overpaid classical musician superstars. An incisive, no-holds-barred account, *Mozart in the Jungle* is the first true, behind-the-scenes look at what goes on backstage and in the Broadway pit.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

As I write this, there are some 54 other reviews of this book on , some quite supportive, some vitriolic, some in-between. Ms. Tindall has clearly touched a nerve (or two) in a number of us, no doubt reflecting the importance of classical music to many of us, but also reflecting the disappointment of the realities of career-making in the field for a fair number of us that make the attempt. I went to music school in the 70's (a few years before Tindall), but gave it up, professionally,

not long thereafter. In a word, there were too many talented players, and too few jobs. But I've stayed involved with it since, and some of my closest friends are (or were) musicians. Tindall seems to have been among that too-large group of players who were very, very good, but not so outstanding as to knock down all doors in her way. As a result, she had a tough experience. She made mistakes. She let professional relationships become personal and sexual, quickly. She engaged in a certain amount of "self-medicating" (mainly with alcohol, as far as I could tell). It took her a long time to realize that she had to pull out of a self-destructive spiral. But then she did it, and lived to write about it. It's a very human story, and I'm glad she had the courage to tell it. A real resonance in this book, for me, and I think for a number of others, was how deeply one can dig oneself into the notion that "I must live as an artist/bohemian," in almost complete ignorance of there being many other potentially-satisfying worlds out there. Certainly for me, giving up on the idea of living life as a musician involved many sleepless nights. Then, trying to take on the world of suits and ties and commutes downtown was like learning to live in a foreign country. At least for this reader, Tindall touches some very sympathetic nerves in describing her own journey. But Tindall steps on some toes in the process of telling her story. She names names, for one, which is going to make some people mad, and strike others as being in bad taste. She spends a fair amount of space detailing what some perceive as the "fall" of classical music in America, which is interesting, but too easy to view as coming from bitterness. (She is also repetitious on this point, which makes it worse, not to mention tedious.) She can be seen as casting too much blame for her predicament on the system that educated her (although it deserves some of it, without a doubt, from this reader's perspective). And, finally, she describes a fair amount of her musical experiences as being, well, just plain dull, which will probably irritate some readers...although some music-making IS dull. So, this is an imperfect book, that will step on some toes, but it deals with a very human story, that will be of particular interest to those of us for whom music (particularly classical music) is an essential part of life. It's not the only story of a musical life to be told, by any means, but you can look through a batch of the 54 other reviews and see that it resonates with a number of us.

About ten years ago, I watched a PBS nature program about a unique tribe of chimpanzees that besides eating plants, also hunts and eats monkeys. Monkey meat is rare and precious to the chimps. A chimp who manages to catch a monkey can't eat it all, and shares the meat with a few other chimps. The distribution of monkey meat always follows a distinct pattern. Meat is given to relatives, political supporters and sexually available young females. All the other chimps get none. This pattern sounded awfully familiar... what did it remind me of? Jobs in freelance classical music,

of course! The fact that *Mozart in the Jungle* provoked such passionate, articulate and conflicted reviews speaks volumes about its powerful effects on its readers. IMHO, the people who gave low ratings did so for questionable reasons (solipsism, hurt feelings, personal issues, denial, etc.), unrelated to the quality of Tindall's writing. Winning a couple of orchestra auditions straight out of Juilliard spared me from having to live in the vipers' pit of freelancing described in the book, but I saw enough to recognize it anyway. You can't make this stuff up. The narrative is captivating; I could hardly put the book down. Obviously, not all musicians live this way or have such extreme histories; you wouldn't want to read mine, for example, unless a soporific was indicated. This memoir is well worth reading; not necessarily for the juicy gossip, but for the human story and the larger issues it touches upon.

I attended both schools with Blair Tindall and witnessed much of what she described in this book. I can corroborate much that occurred at both NCSA (North Carolina School of the Arts) and MSM (Manhattan School of Music). Her experience was not unique at all, but was the norm for students attending a performing arts high school (which also happened to have a college department where college students and teachers would prey on high school students, both female and male). My only criticism of this book is that she is actually TOO EASY on some of the teachers she mentions. Blair is actually quite charitable to them considering the appalling behavior we all endured on a day to day basis! She could have really raked them over the coals, but she chose to play nice, contrary to what some other reviewers have said. Blair must have suffered from having been a whistle-blower, but I applaud her bravery. It's also a really well-written book and I found it hard to put down.

I want to make it clear for once and for all. Of the three oboe students of Mr. Robinson I remember, the least talented became a principal oboist of one of the top five orchestras. And Blair was by far the most talented of the three. Blair was that good. She was exceptional, golden, sparkling. She had star quality in spades. The next-best oboist I met has been with the Cleveland Orchestra for years. She was good enough to play in a top orchestra. She did not lack in musicality, tone quality, inspiration, personality or anything else. Chalk it up to misfortune or politics that she did not get such a position. Do not carp about her talent or try to minimize it. It is a great loss to music that she went on into other fields, but creative people may do that. In that scene, many musicians were craven, most were desperate to get ahead no matter what, and there were no real moral standards at that time. One group was known to have had more or less of an orgy, which I believe made it into her book. The times were wild, free sex, drugs, alcohol. Not that everyone participated. And there was a

tremendous amount of empty showing off, arrogance, egotism, manipulation, conspiracy, just about everything you could think of and then some. In many ways, New York in the 1980s was a reprehensible place.

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