Mozart After 200 Years

By PAUL HENRY LANG

THE CONSTANTLY recurring question many of us are faced with is "Who was the greatest composer?" In sophisticated circles the answer used to be unequivocal—Bach—but the recent bicentennial celebrations of Mozart added a new touch to the old controversy because the question now is modified to read: "Who was greater, Bach or Mozart?" Many persons now incline to Mozart, though those who swear by Bach are still in the majority where musical intellectuals are concerned. But on what do they base this judgment? Do we have any way of measuring the greatness of Bach as compared to Mozart, or for that matter, to Palestrina? The artistic ideas they stood for are so different that if one set is accepted the other loses its validity. Yet there is a certain similarity between these two great musicians: both were rediscovered by the 19th century, and both were fundamentally re-evaluated by the 20th.

It was the Germans who rediscovered them, and the motivating force behind the discovery was twofold: German national awakening, and Romanticism, the two often overlapping.

To the German nationalists Bach became the representative of German music as opposed to Viennese Classicism of the 18th century, for the latter's connections with Italian art, that is, with what North Germans always considered an art of an inferior sort produced by a frivolous race, lowered its value in their eyes. Bach's first biographer, Forkel, as early as 1802 offered his work to the "patriotic admirers of true music."

To the romanticists, Bach had a double attraction. The discovery and veneration of things of the past was a salient romantic trait, and to the musician of the 19th century Bach came to represent what the Gothic did to the literary man. Nevertheless, among both the nationalists and the romanticists there were some very able musical brains who soon discovered that what Hans Sachs warned against, at the end of *Die Meistersinger*—"Italian trash and tinsel"—was abundantly present in Bach's music. This had to be explained away, and Spitta performed the job very neatly by stating that the Italian elements were purified and ennobled by the spirit of German polyphony.

In spite of this nobility of German music, and the withering strictures directed against Italian opera, Mozart's Italian operas soon began to be known and liked. It was not long before the early 19th century enthroned him as the symbol of genius, like Raphael and Shakespeare, the two giants most admired by the romantics, but Mozart was seen as the genius of graciousness, a divinely innocent angel. It was inevitable that his untimely death would arouse interest in the child prodigy, and it was the precocious youngster whom they saw in everything, even in the

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great symphonies or the "Dissonance" quartet, which latter was repeatedly corrected to eliminate what were declared to be obviously erroneous harshnesses that disturbed its child-like freshness. Even Schumann heard in the G minor symphony only loveliness and merriness, and Berlioz averred that three of Mozart's symphonies are "still enjoyable." Throughout most of the 19th century Mozart remained a guileless happy cherub; for seriousness and profundity music lovers turned to Beethoven and Brahms.

Yet even in the earliest works of Mozart we often find that after a brisk and carefree beginning there is a sudden hesitation and deflection into the meditative, and after his sixteenth year Mozart's music can draw blood. In the most conventional and fluently idiomatic trifles there is something that catches the listener short. Curiously enough, while Haydn, Goethe, Schiller, Herder, E. T. A. Hoffmann, and Spohr still knew this and appreciated the profundity of his genius, with Hegel, Grillparzer, and Stifter as well as with most musicians, the evaluation changed, as they contrasted the delicate and formal Apollonian to the Titanic Beethoven. Still later the antithesis became even more pronounced as Mozart was apposed to the orgiastic Wagner. With Wyzewa, St. Foix, and Abert the appreciation once more changes and the Mozart picture gains a more nearly true perspective, though it soon again yielded to new temptations. For now the wonderful freshness of his music was minimized as the "daemonic" element gained ascendancy. It was only at the beginning of our century that these daemonic traits in Mozart were recognized, even though Mörike had already called attention to them, and Kierkegaard passionately advocated such an interpretation. Today, commentators and annotators go overboard on the subject; everyone quotes the *G* minor this, the *A* minor that, not to speak of all the *D* minor pieces, and many smile indulgently, perhaps even with some embarrassment, at the divertimentos, serenades, or *Così fan Tutte*.

"Daemonic" is the word already used by Goethe. But what does it mean? It really does not mean a sort of power which is the enemy of trusted, familiar life, rather it stands for unknown territory, for those mysterious depths filled with a peculiar fear that issues from the peripheries of life, a secret to which the artist abandons himself with that tremor that comes from the mingling of anxiety with rapture. And yet Mozart's confidence in life and his love for the living were more profound than this fear, and those who speak mysteriously about the daemonic in Mozart should never forget the intimate, the gracious, yes, even the playful in him that nothing can destroy.

No, let us not belittle the "sweetness and elegance" of Mozart's music as is done by some of the new exegetes who proceed from Goethe; it is the seeming contradiction of the child-like and the profound seriousness of expression that is so attractive in Mozart. Curiously, among the romantics—always excepting the "musicologist" Brahms—Tchaikovsky was the one who understood and appreciated this in Mozart. This playful, sweet, and delicate tone and texture was the style of the period, Mozart understood it and loved it, and it is present even in company with the highest intentions. Hence the uncomfortable feeling of the traditionalists and the daemon fanciers

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when listening to, say, the "Et incarnatus est" from the C minor Mass, or *Ave verum corpus*. Mozart can be playful in the most earnest moments and earnest in the most innocent play.

The worldly failure of Mozart lay partly in his inability to capitalize his genius and partly in the refusal of that genius to rest on its laurels and accept the emoluments of some humdrum occupation. But here, too, we must contradict certain parochial conceptions that are constantly cited even though evidence is to the contrary.

Mozart was far from being unknown or unappreciated in his lifetime. His own personality was engaging, he had many friends, and women found him attractive, a sentiment he reciprocated. Musicians were often carried away by their enthusiasm for him, a good example being found in Michael Kelly's graphic eyewitness description of the first full rehearsal of *Figaro*. After Figaro's aria, "Non più andrai," the singers and the orchestra exploded in bravos and applause and it took some time before the happy, smiling composer could continue with the rehearsal. The influential musical colony at Mannheim held him in great esteem, and in Prague there was a veritable Mozart cult which with a little public-relations skill he could have converted into a good livelihood. Even such a relatively early stage work as *The Abduction from the Seraglio* was performed in various German cities—even in faraway Warsaw—soon after its Vienna premiere. This was owing to the wandering German singspiel troupes who, and there are definite indications to this effect, liked their Mozart. *Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* also became very soon known in many places. Let us take *Don Giovanni*. It saw productions in 1788 in Leipzig, in 1789 in Mainz, Mannheim, Bonn, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Brünn; in 1790 in Berlin and Budapest, etc. The symphonies could not compete with Haydn and it was only in the 1820's that they began to be better known. The Requiem became immensely popular soon after Mozart's death and was heard from Naples to Rio de Janeiro, but of course its story had much to do with its popularity.

Needless to say, there were some dissenting voices, notably in the north of Germany. In one Berlin journal an anonymous critic stated in 1793 that "Mozart was a great genius, but he had little culture and little if any scientific taste." This is an interesting opinion because it obviously refers to Mozart's handling of polyphony, about which more presently. Mozart's musical influence, notably on opera, was far reaching and immediate. Clementi, Dittersdorf, Haydn, Schubert, Weber, Spohr, Marschner, Cherubini, Rossini, Spontini, Donizetti, and many others were greatly indebted to him and never ceased to acknowledge this indebtedness. It was especially his ensembles and his orchestral texture that fascinated them, for arias they could do themselves.

By the 1830's and 40's the world significance of his music was universally accepted even though the esthetic concepts regarding his works were colored by the prevailing romantic idealization which, by and large, lasted until the end of the century. Individual works ceased to have particular significance and, instead, general traits were attributed to his music. In the north it was regarded as Italian Rococo, in France as the example of elegance and *ésprit*, and elsewhere described by the term "cantabile." Then the serious litera-

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ture began to appear, at first, curiously enough, in foreign countries —Kierkegaard in Denmark, Holmes in England, and Ulibischeff in Russia being the first champions. Finally, with Jahn's great biography, the first modern, if romanticized, essay is before us.

Now let us examine the changing fortunes of Mozart's music. A musical score may be impervious to physical destruction if it is well preserved, just as a book in a library, but it depends far more on its spiritual condition, for it has to be recreated. In vocal music where the text has suggestive power we have a certain solid ground under our feet, but in pure instrumental music one cannot say anything wise, patriotic, or religious: experience and insight are par excellence unmusical, knowledge and world outlook are powerless, and music does not and cannot follow the intellect which attempts to judge itself and the world around it, for music expresses only itself. Such music has no ethical qualities and is essentially amoral, for its subject is always anonymous. There have been periods that found this anonymity of musical expression congenial, others have wondered whether such absolute music does not represent an insufficient, even primitive, play with tones.

The 19th century began to search for "meaning" in music, not realizing that by so doing it questioned music's artistic independence. But "meaning" such as it found in Liszt or Berlioz, it could not find in Mozart, hence his music was declared to be without originality of ideas and of application, but of consummate formal and decorative beauty. All contemporary interpretations started from such premises and the mute scores were brought to life in a manner that entirely corresponded to this view.

The late romantic era took a peculiar attitude toward music, it prized originality above anything else, and equated genius with the originality of invention. This inventiveness and originality applied to melody, harmony, and color, for conscious architectural procedures were considered inimical to this aim. To the adherents of this esthetic the late 18th-century precepts of form and continuity were unintelligible, and wherever they looked they saw only what seemed to them a uniformity of formal pattern and a similarity in melodic substance. They did not notice that far from being uniform, this music is capricious, that it abounds in asymmetric and highly original constellations, and that it often flouts what in poetry we would call the purity of rhyme and rhythm. Yet it still gives the impression of formal perfection, and even of severity of construction. But it is not the virtuoso jongleur's demonstrative perfection; rather, it might almost be likened to the fastidious attire of a gentleman who is careful in his dress not because he seeks attention but precisely because he wants to avoid it.

Not being aware of the inner life in this music, the 19th century could not realize that the same artist who expresses himself with such immediacy, with such personal warmth, can fit himself, without constraint, one might say with pleasure and without losing anything, into the forms, idioms, and conventions current in his time. What we are beginning to realize is that this "constraint," or organized order of the musical style of the 18th century, was not an inhibiting factor, that a great composer is not necessarily characterized by an individual style that is fundamentally different from that of his fellows. The great musicians are far more closely related to one another than

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are the lesser ones, for in the white light of this musical poetry the individual colors are not important.

This union of particular with universal, of genre with individual expression and representation, created that specific musical style we know as classicism. A fantasy by Schumann or a prelude by Chopin comes from distant loneliness, it is music that one would prefer to hear in intimate privacy. But Mozart we hear as members of a community. The individual listening to his music has the feeling of being personally enriched, but also made conscious of new ties that bind him to the world. But of course the very minute we pronounce the word "classic" we are in hot water. Instead of trying to find cumbersome analogies, we might simply say that so long as the composer's mind was satisfied with such a measure of musical space as it could embrace and control, so long as it did not seek the boundless and chose to forgo the overwhelming, he is said to be a "classic" composer.

Mozart did not know the world of classical antiquity but he knew a great deal of music, from old church composers to Bach and Handel, from Salzburg serenade to Italian opera. All this he embraced because he could control it. Many a thing of the past that had been abandoned returns in his music, and even the despised laws and rules of music appear in new dignity as many a dust-encumbered coin of truth is put back in circulation. For in this ever fresh and ever modern composer there is a hidden conservatism. The memories of old music studied in his childhood echo in his most advanced works, and at times we encounter forms and devices that had all but disappeared from the music of his time. This might indicate a certain diffuseness in Mozart's musical arsenal. Indeed, in one of his letters to his father he boasts that he can imitate practically every composer and every style, and the first two volumes of Wyzewa-St. Foix show an incredible array of models used by Mozart. But he was not a cosmopolitan, like Gluck, neither as a human being nor as a composer, and we must bear in mind that musical influence does not depend on the one who gives it but on the one who receives it.

Let us take the case of the influence of Bach upon Mozart, admittedly of capital importance.

Bach was an isolated phenomenon in his day. He represented the North German cantor's art at its highest in a period when this art was no longer representative of the times. Thus his musical polarity was no longer in the center of the musical world, his atmosphere was one which his listeners could no longer breathe. It was for this reason that he was soon forgotten and sadly ignored throughout the 18th century. But to Mozart, this old and forgotten polyphony came as a revelation, and we can safely say that his acquaintance with Bach's music changed his whole course. Yet how different his own use of this much admired polyphony, and how difficult for the 19th century to understand the seeming contradiction. For the 19th centry made a science out of counterpoint, and when a late romantic composer wanted to represent "Wissenschaft," like Strauss in *Zarathustra*, he composed a fugue. But all he did was to retain a many-voiced pattern, the polyphonic elements serving as an inorganic pseudo-contrapuntal fabric in which melodic rags appear as filler parts.

Mozart realized what the 19th century did not, that the fugue is not a learned dissertation but essentially dance-like music, like the old gigue.

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Indeed, Mozart still knew what contrapuntal *motion* meant, counterpoint as motion and in motion, something the Wagnerian world no longer appreciated. I think that if I refer to the overture to *The Magic Flute* I will be relieved of any further documentation, for that miraculous work is the incarnation of living polyphony in motion. But I should like to add one more observation to show Mozart's highly selective use of "influences." Although profoundly impressed with Bach's polyphony, in his choral works, notably the C minor Mass and the Requiem, he invariably follows Handel's choral writing, which was more singable—and more Italianate.

A large section of both historiography and musical opinion was long convinced that the great change, the establishment of the so-called Viennese Classical School, was a turning away from the Italians and from opera in favor of German symphony, which latter term of course is understood to include related instrumental genres as well. But this is completely untrue, for opera was still the tradition, as was concerted church music, and the great 18th century composers of Vienna placed them in the center of their activity. Mozart composed 17 Masses and much other church music while he was in the service of a court. As a free-lance artist he could not make a living by composing church music, and therefore he gave it up, but only temporarily. It is noteworthy that the great C minor Mass was not composed on commission, a fact rather unusual in those days, and it is known with what alacrity he accepted the commission for the Requiem Mass. The same is true, by the way, of the aged Haydn, an independent, well-to-do, and highly respected artist, who ended his career by composing church music. Those great Masses of his final active years are incomparable masterpieces that we are just beginning to discover and appreciate.

Much as Mozart was devoted to music of all sorts, it was man himself that fascinated him most persistently. And there have not been many men who have peered as intensely into the human soul. Even the veil of the subconscious became transparent as water before his searching eyes. The characters he created in music not only live, they grow.

Criticism still harps on the poetic-dramatic shortcomings of Mozart's librettos, though those who really understand opera will acknowledge that Da Ponte was an incomparable connoisseur of the musical stage. He knew what too few librettists and composers of more recent times have known, that when real music is combined with words, it must suck all the marrow from the words, and the text becomes pretext, the words are consumed by the music. But were these operas understood, indeed, are they understood today? Let us select *Figaro* because in purity and consistency of style, in easily flowing dramatic continuity, in richness of invention, this work has never been equaled in the operatic literature.

In the first scene of his *Les Fourchambault*, Emile Augier, perhaps the cleverest of Beaumarchais' followers, presents a family scene in which the mother opposes the children's desire to see *The Marriage of Figaro*. But the father dismisses her scruples and permits the children to attend because, as he says, "it is only the opera." Emperor Joseph II, too, prohibited the performance of the original play but gave his consent to Da Ponte and Mozart when assured that all political and social allusions had been removed from their opera.

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It was this very thing, the absence of political and topical allusions, that permitted Mozart's concentration on the characters of his figures. What emerged from this was a far more devastating—if also different—satire than Beaumarchais' original. The public of the 19th century saw in Count Almaviva only an irresponsible philandering nobleman, whereas Mozart created a figure of the decadent Ancien Régime about to totter. But this decadent, while morally questionable, still descended from ancestors who waited on great kings, and while he was denounced by Voltaireans and Encyclopaedists, they understood him and liked to correspond with him.

If the men are wonderfully realized characters, the women, whom Mozart knew and understood even better, are even more remarkable creatures of imagination. But again they have been misunderstood, for Mozart here presents the fair sex as seen through the eyes of a southern European, as delightful but unreliable playthings. The finale of the second act of this opera (and of course the whole of *Così fan Tutte*) shows this, an attitude that no German has ever taken. Susanna, a new and fiery Serva Padrona, is entirely a child of her time, which means that she is not free of frivolity. But this quality is so deftly and discreetly rendered in the music that it is often overlooked. The Countess was among the first operatic figures in Mozart whose character underwent a complete revaluation by later generations and she was made into an unapproachable prudish beauty, cold, virtuous, and merciless. This view was reinforced by the quality of her arias which are prevailingly deliberate and serious. But Mozart never forgot that the Countess Almaviva used to be plain Rosina and made it clear that while she suffered and was genuinely distraught over her husband's escapades, this does not exclude a certain amount of pleasure in, and attraction to, Cherubino. Nor does he leave us in doubt about that, but characteristically such things are not hinted at where they are easily perceived, and as usual Mozart divulges such delicate thoughts in the ensembles. Cherubino is one of the most accomplished characters ever created in music, a character that teeters on the cutting edge of a knife—so little separates him from the ridiculous. For Cherubino, who woos the Countess, Susanna, and Barberina—that is every woman in sight—is at the same time the pet stripling of the good old frivolous times.

It is interesting to note that none of Mozart's Italian operas ever became really popular in Italy. The musicians called them "bellissima, superba musica," but the public was cool and did not find them in the "gusto del paese." This is puzzling, because when listening to one of these Italian operas one is convinced that Mozart not only composed in the true Italian style but apparently found the Italian language more congenial for opera than the German. But it is not quite so, nor is it quite so seen by some who consider *The Magic Flute* a deliverance from the unwelcome fetters of Italianism. Any comparison with Rossini—a favorite manner of praising Mozart ever since the writings of Schumann—will show not only the fallacy of trying to debunk this authentic genius of the 19th-century operatic stage, but the essential difference in the two musicians' methods. Where Rossini improvises with sovereign ease, Mozart plans and builds. This is not readily apparent because the instinctive and the planned are so closely in unison. But when we listen to the choruses

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in the Masses and to the development sections in the symphonies, quartets and sonatas, we realize that this southerner owes a great deal to the north.

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As we contemplate the whole of Mozart's art we obtain an entirely fresh picture of the composer. This profile does not fit the composer ideal of the 19th century, an ideal not a few of our conductors, performers, critics, writers—and unfortunately teachers—still subscribe to. The Wagnerian era created the picture of the composer who is superior to everyone, or worse than the worst, a god or a devil. But the ideal was the artist who can be measured by no standard because his domain is not the domain of logic and consciousness in which measurements are feasible and common denominators imaginable. Intellect and logic can proceed along the same path, but the true composer's path is lonely and lost in the irrational which is not subject to calculation. At least until fairly recently this was the way we liked our composers, and the one we revered most was he who claimed neither ancestors nor relatives.

Mozart is undoubtedly entirely different from this concept. His music is accompanied and governed by the rays of a lucid intellect and these clear rays illuminate the dark recesses of the irrational and the subconscious where the flora of poetic imagination grow. This intellect knows, and knows well, the shapeless secrets of instinct and the labyrinth of passions, it knows them but it coerces them into order and harmony. In our more recent appraisal of Mozart's music we find indeed that what dominates it is neither imagery nor color but ideas, musical ideas, which in turn are governed by logic, musical logic, for Mozart's music always concentrates on the essence. And yet how far is this music from intellectualism. Only the uninitiated could miss the pure and profound musicality of this logical and sharply intellectual music. It is known that there are many secret connections between mathematics and music, and there is in Mozart something of the musical mathematician. This does not mean mere adeptness in canonic and other artifices, for this musical mathematician faces life, his own life and life around him, and it was the illogical matter of this life from which he had to create logic and harmony. I suppose that the logic I profess to see in Mozart was the last thing the 19th century would have accorded to his music, yet the romantic apologists should have known that the goddess of logic is enthroned among the muses, for logic and humor are sisters, and laughter is perhaps the sound made by the clash of logic with reality.

The epithet "naive" used to be constantly applied to Mozart, yet his music, where it is most profound, is really pure logic—in musical terms, of course. His eye is fixed on man as tenaciously as the mathematician's is on an abstract figure, and he laughs. He laughs because the application of mathematics to life is very comical, it creates incredible dissonances, and all the paradoxes of life are unveiled. Mozart laughs, but his laughter preserves the cruelty of logic, its strength, and its seriousness, for this laughter is both indictment and verdict, and the edge of his logic always touches life itself. We had better examine now the nature of this musical logic.

The romantic symphonist always wanted a full-length protrait of a melody, all dressed up in its Sunday best, with rings on its fingers, large watch chain dangling, walking cane

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in hand, etc. To the classic symphonist a theme was like a well-known face. Most of the time we recognize it by getting a glimpse of a characteristic nose, the angle of the chin, but we can recognize a man by much less well-defined traits, such as by his stride, and even recognize him without knowing how and why. Now the interesting musical analogy is that such recognition does not depend on an integral rendering of the melody, not even on its beginning; one salient interval, one peculiar harmonic turn, one characteristic rhythm can invoke it. This renders the elaborate full-length portrait not only superfluous but useless; the classic symphonic theme, though not necessarily devoid of expressiveness, served a larger purpose than immediate pleasure. Actually, and this was utterly beyond the understanding of the late romantic era, according to the classic sonata ideal, thematic invention in a symphony or quartet is of secondary importance—many of the greatest symphonies and other sonata constructions of the era open with clichés from the public domain. What mattered was the presence of one or the other of those salient features that have the power to recall the face under any and all circumstances. From here on it is the composer's imaginative use of thematic and tonal logic that governs the work.

Curious, is it not, that Mozart, one of the greatest melodists of all times, should be hailed as one of the greatest exponents of this terse, concise, and promissory melody of the symphony, the complete antithesis of the soaring melodies in his operas. But here we are again in the domain of the mathematician, because mathematics is the science of possibilities as opposed to every other science which seeks reality. Mozart sees music—as he sees the world—from the point of view of possibilities, even reality he likes to characterize by contrasting it with possibility. This is what carried him to the fantastic world of his operas, but also to the fantastic possibilities and contrasts of the abstract sonata.

Indeed, it was this infinite perspective of possibilities that made the classic sonata structure so attractive, so full of variety as compared to the lyric effusion and the piling up of climax upon climax of the romantic species. Take the beginning of the development section of a Mozartean sonata structure. There is nothing palpable before us as yet, and we are far, very far from any notion of the objectively formal; only the first act of differentiation has been introduced, and the first stabs have been made in the direction of the coming struggle. Yet what tension, what fascination, and above all, what expectation fills the listener, for he senses that the success of this development will be inversely proportional to the elaborateness of the original material. He will also realize that "development" does not mean the creation of a whole by the piling up of the sum total of the parts, rather it means the revelation of a whole that in some way already existed qualitatively, if in latent form. Naturally enough, the word "development" is insufficient to express a musical phenomenon, it is crudely materialistic, spatial, and quantitative. Nevertheless, it emphasizes the essential principles: that nothing accidental coming from without is being added, that everything is being unfolded from within, from the whole. This is what we call musical logic, and this is what Mozart, as we see him today, possessed to a degree that made it the dominating element in his incredible musicality.

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