

## REFLECTIONS

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# Mozart and the Wolf Gang

This past December marked the 200th anniversary of the death of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–91). Here, novelist and sometime composer Anthony Burgess offers a tribute to a musical genius whose work all but defies description.

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by Anthony Burgess

**W**hat can a mere writer say about Mozart? Music is the art that takes over from words when words prove inadequate, and I've spent much of this bicentennial year trying to devise a verbal approach to Mozart which should not abet this inadequacy. A mere

writer can deal only with the externals or superficialities of a musician's achievement. The *Life of Mozart* has been delineated far too often, sometimes with melodramatic falsehoods. The truth is mostly banal and has a great deal to do with money. I set up for myself a dialogue between Woflerl and his father Leopold which portrays how shameful this banality is:

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LEOPOLD: A born musician should also be a born mathematician. The two faculties, for some reason that no doubt Pythagoras has explained somewhere, spring from an innate numeracy, notes themselves being vibrations that obey strict mathematical laws.

WOFERL: But what has mathematics to do with money?

LEOPOLD: Little perhaps except counting. You have still to get it into your thick skull that 10 Viennese *gulden*, or *florins* as they should rightly be, are worth 12 Salzburg *gulden*. When you are offered sums of money for performances, you should know precisely what you are getting. A *thaler*, which the Americans call a dollar, is two *gulden*.

WOFERL: That I knew.

LEOPOLD: That you knew. But do not confuse a *speziesthaler* or common *thaler* with a *reichsthaler*. One *reichsthaler* is worth only one and a half *gulden*. Three *reichsthaler* are one *ducat* and amount to four and a half *gulden*. And, as you should have remembered from Paris, a *Louis d'Or* or *pistole* is worth seven and a half *gulden*. You have to know these things.

WOFERL: And if I go to Venice?

LEOPOLD: One Venetian *zecchino* will be what you will get for five *gulden*. But you will not be going to Venice. Nor, I think, to London, where they will give you two English shillings for a *gulden*.



*Mozart sits at the keyboard with his sister Nannerl in this 1780 portrait. His father Leopold, holding the violin, exerted a strong influence throughout the composer's life.*

WOFERL: Money is complicated. Music is simple.

LEOPOLD: Yes, music is the simple sauce to the garmy meat of a noble or royal or imperial court. And simple servants of the court must provide it. Break out on your own and you will be cheated. A regular salary, however modest, is to be preferred to the hazards of the itinerant musician's life. As you ought to know.

This is shameful. It answers no purpose. I wondered what purpose would be served by setting Mozart's life to his own music. I received, very belatedly, a commission from Salzburg itself, asking me to provide a

libretto for such a setting. At least I could present Mozart caught in a net of musical rhythms, even if they were not his own. Let us imagine the set-up. (Needless to say, nothing has come of the proposal.)

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**ACT I**

*The scene is an indeterminate hall in the Vienna palace of the Prince Archbishop Hieronymus Colloredo of Salzburg. Male and female servants scrub, polish, bring logs for the huge ornate fireplace. Mozart, as court musician, warms himself gloomily. The servants sing in a minor key.*

SERVANTS:

Humble humble humble humble  
 Servants of his princely grace,  
 Fashed and fagged we groan and grumble,  
 Outcasts of the human race.  
 Humble humble humble humble  
 Burdened boasts that know their place.  
 See us fumble, see us stumble,  
 See the bitter bread we crumble  
 And the skilly that we mumble.  
 Dare to look us in the face,  
 Helots of his high disgrace.  
 Hear our empty bellies rumble  
 Treble Alto Tenor Bass.

*Mozart sings. He is a tenor.*

MOZART:

Slavishly begot,  
 Slavery's your lot.  
 Luggers in of logs,  
 You are less than dogs.  
 Dogs at least are fed  
 Bones as well as bread.  
 Lowly born,  
 Accept my scorn.

SERVANTS:

Humbly humbly humbly humbly  
 May we ask if it's a crime  
 Dumbly dumbly dumbly dumbly  
 (Yes, we know that doesn't rhyme)  
 To be born beneath a star  
 Burning with malignant fire?  
 Humbly dumbly we enquire  
 Who the hell you think you are.

MOZART:

I was not born beneath a star. I  
 Am a star.  
 Leaning across the heavenly bar, I  
 Fell too far.  
 The crown of music on my head was  
 Knocked awry.  
 Fingering keys to earn my bread was  
 By and by  
 Ordained to be the life I led and  
 Still must lead.  
 So will it go till I am dead and  
 Dead indeed.

SERVANTS:

Humbly humbly humbly humbly  
 May we ask you what you mean?  
 All you said was soft and crumbly;

Words should cut as keen and clean  
 As the whip the gruff and grumbly  
 Major domo, rough and rumbly,  
 Lays on us to vent his spleen.

MOZART:

I played the harpsichord at four  
 And scribbled symphonies at five.  
 I played and played from shore to shore.  
 I labored—never bee in hive  
 Buzzed harder at its sticky store—  
 To keep the family alive.  
 For Leopold my father swore  
 I'd fiddle, tinkle, sweat, and strive  
 Until the name the family bore  
 Should gather honor and survive  
 Two centuries and even more.  
 But infant prodigies arrive  
 At puberty. Must we deplore  
 Our beards and balls, though noses dive  
 And patrons stay away or snore?  
 I serve his highness now, contrive  
 To play the postures of a whore.  
 Too meanly paid to woo or wive,  
 I sink and sink who used to soar.  
 Grant me your pity, friends, for I've  
 Heard slam that ever open door,  
 Been forced to kiss the nether floor,  
 Who once kissed queens—

SERVANTS:

Kissed queens?

MOZART:

Kissed queens. Not any more, not any  
 more. My scullion companions, I've run  
 out of hope. Also rhymes. To work. I hear  
 steel heels and the crack of a whip.

*The major domo enters, also the Prince  
 Archbishop's private secretary.*

SERVANTS:

Humble humble humble humble  
 Servants of his princely grace,  
 Hear our empty bellies rumble  
 Treble Alto Tenor Bass.

MAJOR DOMO:

Scum. Go on. Hard at it.

SECRETARY:

Mozart, fifty new contredances were ordered for the next court ball. Fifteen only have been delivered. The *Te Deum* for the

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*Anthony Burgess is the author of more than 50 works of fiction and nonfiction. He delivered a version of this essay at the Wilson Center's Mozart Symposium. Copyright © 1992 by Anthony Burgess.*

impending return to Salzburg of His Grace has still to be composed. And the flute exercises for His Grace's nephew are awaited with impatience.

MOZART:

Surely you mean His Grace's eldest bastard.

SECRETARY:

Insolence, insolence.

MOZART:

Perhaps, but I know that His Grace is an only child. His mother's womb bore once and once only. To have produced siblings to compete with His Holy Uniqueness would have been the true insolence.

SECRETARY:

I let that float past me like flatulent air. If you seek dismissal through my mediacy you will not get it. You have been paid for work not yet done. Do it.

MOZART:

Music cannot be ordered like a pound of tripe. But it will be done. It is being done now. In my head. But I hope the *Te Deum* can be postponed a month or more. Why will he not stay in Vienna?

And now, of course, they sing opposed words in a duet. This I cannot present in written form. But I'm reminded of what the writer most envies the musician. We're limited to the monodic, while the composer has polyphony to play with. I think it was the rage of this envy that drove James Joyce

SECRETARY:

His responsibility is in Salzburg.

MOZART:

There is no place like Vienna.

The dust of Vienna,  
The lust of Vienna  
Swirls round my brain.  
Erotic phantasmas  
And putrid miasmas  
That rise from each drain.  
Its filth is creative.  
The stink of each native  
Olfactory song.  
So I wish to stay here  
And I wish to play here.  
It's where I belong.

SECRETARY (who is a baritone):

But Salzburg is pretty  
And it is no pity  
There's little to do.  
A munch at an apple,  
A prayer in the chapel  
Should satisfy you.  
Erotic temptation  
And free fornication  
Pass everyone by,  
And it is no wonder  
For everyone's under  
His Highness's eye.

to compose *Finnegans Wake*, where there is the illusion of several strands of dream-melody proceeding at the same time. Perhaps the best tribute to Mozart that a writer can make is, if not to achieve his harmony and counterpoint, at least to learn something from his form.

This year I've been trying to write a novel entitled *K. 550*. If, like myself, you have difficulty remembering what Köchel number applies to which work, I'll decode this into the Symphony no. 40 in G Minor. Here is how the first movement started:

The squarecut pattern of the carpet. Squarecut the carpet's pattern. Pattern the cut square carpet. Stretching from open doors to windows. Soon, if not burned, ripped, merely purloined, as was all too likely, other feet other feet other feet would. Tread. He himself he himself he

himself trod in the glum morning. From shut casement to open door and back, to and to and back. Wig fresh powdered, brocade unspotted, patch on cheek new pimple in decorum and decency hiding, stockings silk most lustrous, hands behind folded unfolded refolded as he trod on squarecut pattern's softness. Russet the hue, the hue russet. Past bust of Plato, of Aristotle's bust, Thucydides, Xenophon. Foreign voices trapped in print (he himself he himself he himself read) and print in leather, behind glass new polished, ranged, ranged, ranged, the silent army spoke in silence of certain truths, of above

all the truth of the eternal stasis. Stasis stasis stasis. The squarecut pattern of the carpet. He trod.

Towards window, casement, treading back observed (he himself he himself he himself did) ranged gardens, stasis, walk with: poplars, secular elms elms, under grim sky. But suddenly sun broke, squeezed out brief lemon juice, confirmed stasis, a future founded on past stasis, asphodels seen by Xenophon, rhododendra of Thucydides. The mobs would not come, the gates would rest not submitting to mob's fury. He himself he himself he himself smiled.

Triumph of unassailable order. Everything in its everybody in his place. Place. Place. Plate ranged catching sun's silver. That other triumph then possible? But no,

what triumph in right assertion of right? Church rite, bed rite. This much delayed. He himself he himself he himself did. Not assert. Not assert. Not assert. Yet in moment when sun broke salutary to assert. Hurt, no. Assert, yes. Brief hurt ineluct ineluctable in assert, yes, in assert.

Out of door. Wide hall. Two powdered heads bow. Wide stairs. High stairs. And yet (magic of right, of rite, of lawful assert?) no passage noted, he himself he himself he himself stands by her door by her door by her door. Assert assert insert key. By foul magic wrong key. Not his key. Yes, his key. But lock blocked. Billet doux spiltled pulped thrust (not trust lust, though right, rite) in lock, in lock? Anger hurled from sky? But no. Watery sun smiles still . . .



A facsimile of the original manuscript to Symphony no. 40 (K. 550).

Let me now throw away these masks and speak in my own voice. Let me talk of Mozart and myself.

When we were young, a lot of us were rather sour about Mozart. We were jealous about his having so much talent and disclosing it at so early an age. Ordinary young

people care little for infant prodigies. We were told that his ear was so sensitive that he fainted at the sound of a trumpet, and that his sense of pitch was so acute that he could distinguish a fifth from a sixth of a tone. He composed pretty little things at the age of four and played like an angel on

the harpsichord. Complimented by the Empress Maria Theresa, he leapt onto her lap and kissed her. So charming, with his little wig and his brocade and silk stockings. A milksop.

Even as a young man, I found it difficult to fit Mozart into my sonic universe. I was not alone in that. The reputation of Mozart is now at its highest and will presently suffer a reaction, but he was no demi-god in the 1930s. Musicians like Edward Dent and Sir Thomas Beecham had much to do with the promotion of a periwigged historical figure into the voice of a Western civilization that was under threat from the very race of which Mozart was a member. (Salzburg, his birthplace, was an independent city-state; he never saw himself as an Austrian national.) To appreciate him, it was necessary to hear a good deal of Mozart, and this was not easy. One could, of course, play the keyboard pieces, but, to a piano pupil or a self-taught pianist like myself, there was little that was attractive in the scale passages one fumbled over, or in the conventional tonic-dominant cadences. A boy born into the age of Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912) and Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1913)—I was born five years after the first, four years after the other—found it hard to be tolerant of the Mozartian blandness.

One great war and the threat of another justified barbaric dissonance and slate-pencil-screaming atonality. I needed the music of my own time—Hindemith, Honegger, Bartók. In the Soviet Union, Alexander Mosolov produced his *Factory* (1926–28) and *Dnieper Power Station*, and those banal chunks of onomatopoeia at least spoke of the modern world. The symphony orchestra had, following Richard Wagner and Richard Strauss, evolved into a virtuoso complex capable of anything. Mozart had been unlucky with his valveless horns and trumpets: He had been enclosed by the technically primitive. So, anyway, it seemed.

I wanted modernity, but where did modernity begin? Probably with Debussy's *L'Après-Midi d'un Faune* (1894), which had entranced my ear when, as a boy of 13, I had fiddled with the cat's whisker on my homemade crystal set, heard a silence punctuated by a cough or two, and then

was overwhelmed by that opening flute descending a whole tritone. This was as much the new age as Mosolov's machine music: It denied the hegemony of tonic and dominant, exalted color, wallowed in sensuality. Debussy promised a full meal, well-sauced. Mozart offered only bread and water.

The appetite for the modern did not exclude the ancient. I read Peter Warlock's study of Cecil Gray and Philip Heseltine's *Carlo Gesualdo, Prince of Venosa, Musician and Murderer* (1926), and was led to the perusal of madrigals I was not yet permitted to hear. The harmonic sequences looked hair-raising. The 17th century was closer to my own epoch than the ages in between. Henry Purcell broke the rules that the textbooks were eventually to make petrific. The baroque was acceptable if it meant Bach and Handel. Ezra Pound was yet to resurrect Vivaldi. Stravinsky had sounded the "Back to Bach" call, and the composer of *Le Sacre* could do no wrong. But this was, as Constant Lambert was to point out in *Music Ho* (1967), sheer evasion. Stravinsky was a "time traveler," prepared to go anywhere so long as it was not in the direction of neo-romanticism. To Stravinsky there was something salutary in clockwork rhythms, the inexpressive deadpan, an eschewing of the dynamic. But true baroque was something different.

Its charm lay in its exaggeration, and Bach's counterpoint went too far. It imposed on the listener the task of hearing many voices at the same time. The effect was of intellectual rigor, and intellectual rigor was, in a curious way, analogous to physical shock. The approach to both the baroque and the modern was not by way of the emotions. Romantic music, reaching its apogee in Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* (1865), depended on its capacity to rend the heart. Young people distrust emotion, indeed are hardly capable of it unless it takes the form of self-pity. Sir Thomas Beecham promoted English composer Frederick Delius as much as Mozart, and the death-wish element in *The Walk to the Paradise Gardens* (1900–01) was acceptable to the misunderstood young.

But why this rejection of Mozart, the charming but unromantic, the restrained, the formal? He seemed too simple, too scared of the complex. He made neither an

intellectual nor a physical impact. Bach, after a day's slaving at six-part counterpoint, would say: "Let's go and hear the pretty tunes." He meant plain sweet melody with a chordal accompaniment. He was not disparaging such art, but he recognized that it was diversion more than serious musical engagement. It was an art waiting to be turned into Mozart.

Looming behind modernism, but in a sense its father, was the personality of Ludwig van Beethoven. My benighted age-group accepted the Beethoven symphony as a kind of musical ultimate, something that the composers of our own age could not aspire to because they had been forced into abandoning the key-system on which it was based. The key-system was worn out; it could linger in the dance or music hall, but modernity meant either a return to the Greek or folk modes, as with Bartók or Vaughan Williams, or the total explosion of tonality. Atonalism recognized no note of the chromatic scale as being more important than any other, but the diatonic scale that was good enough for Beethoven had a hierarchical basis: No. 1 of the scale, the tonic, was king; No. 5, the dominant, was queen; No. 4, the subdominant, was jack or knave. It spoke of a settled past, but Beethoven was not always easy in it. His sonatas and symphonies were dramas, storm-and-stress revelations of personal struggle and triumph. The Messiah from Bonn, of whom Joseph Haydn, not Mozart, was the prophet, belonged to a world striving to make itself modern. Beethoven moved forward; Mozart stayed where he was.

The term *rococo* got itself applied to Mozart's music, and the associations were of prettiness, sugary decorativeness, a dead end of diversion. We were not listening carefully enough to his Symphony no. 40 in G minor. We heard pleasing sounds, but we were not conscious of a language. If we talk of a musical language at all, it must be only in a metaphorical sense, but there was an assumption that Beethoven and his successors were sending messages while Mozart was merely spinning notes.

Music can properly have meaning only when language is imposed upon it, as in song, opera, oratorio, or other vocal genres, or when language is applied laterally—in the form of a literary program, as

in Strauss's tone poems. And yet we assume that instrumental music has meaning: It is organized, as language can be, to an end that, if not semantic, is certainly aesthetic, and it produces mental effects as language does. It differs from the other arts, and spectacularly from literature, in being non-representational. Limited to metaphorical statements of a sort, it can have only a semantic content through analogy.

As Ezra Pound pointed out, poetry decays when it moves too far away from song, and music decays when it forgets the dance. In the music of the 18th century, it may be said, the spirit of the dance was raised to its highest level. That spirit progressively deteriorated in the 19th century, and in the music drama of Wagner it may be said to have yielded to the rhythms of spoken discourse. Paradoxically, in a work specifically intended for ballet, the dance spirit seems to have been liquidated. *Le Sacre du Printemps* reduces the dance to prehistoric gambolling, unsure of its steps. But in Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, we hear a fusion of dance and sonata form and, in the traditional third-movement minuet, the invocation of a specific dance form. But these dance movements are not intended for the physical participation of dancers. The dance becomes an object of contemplation and, in so being, takes on a symbolic function.

The dance as a collective activity, whether in imperial courts or on the village green, celebrates the union of man and woman and that larger union known as the human collective. The Haydn or Mozart symphony asks us to take in the dance in archetypal *tempi*—moderately rapid, slow, furiously rapid, two or three or four to the bar—and meditate on their communal significance. The sonata or the string quartet or the concerto or the symphony becomes symbolic of human order. With Mozart it seems evident that the more or less static tranquility of the Austro-Hungarian Empire is being celebrated. Thus the music is objective, lacks any personal content of a Mahlerian or Straussian kind, and, through that irony, which is a corrective to the complacency of social order, works through the alternation of stress and resolution. The heart is the organ that it imitates, but it is the heart of the community. There may be a

modicum of personal inflection of the objective structure—comic in Haydn, pathetic in Mozart—but any large incursion of idiosyncratic symbols has to be resisted. In Mahler, banal barrel-organ tunes may grind because of adventitious associations, but the Mozart symphony remains aloof from such egotistical intrusion.

It seemed in my youth that the Austro-Hungarian Empire was hopelessly remote. It had collapsed in World War I; before that collapse Freud and Schoenberg recorded the turmoil of individual psyches, microcosms of a larger confusion. It was easy to forget that, in respect to its art, that Empire was still with us. A failed Viennese architect was to tyrannize Europe; in the Adriatic port of the Empire, James Joyce began to revolutionize world literature; Rainer Maria Rilke affirmed poetic modernity in the *Duino Elegies* (1923). And, of course, in music, atonality and serialism portended a major revolution. Everything happened in Vienna. If Mozart seemed to stand for a kind of imperial stasis, it ought to have been clear to the close listener that a chromatic restlessness was at work and that, within accepted frameworks, the situation of an individual soul, not an abstract item in the citizenry, was being delineated. Mozart was as Viennese as Freud.

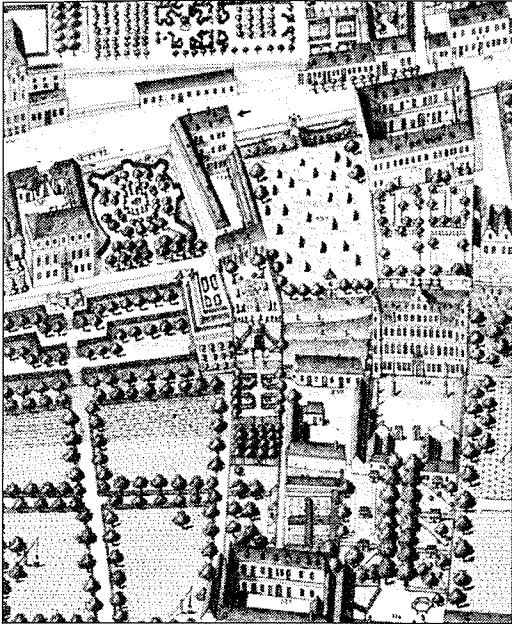
I must beware of overpersonalizing an art that manifests its individuality in ways of managing pure sound. One aspect of Mozart's greatness is a superiority in disposing of the sonic material that was the common stock of composers of his time. Sometimes he sleeps, nods, churns out what society requires or what will pay an outstanding milliner's bill, but he is never less than efficient. Clumsiness is sometimes associated with greatness: The outstanding innovative composers, like Berlioz and Wagner, are wrestling, not always successfully, with new techniques. Mozart is never clumsy; his unvarying skill can repel romantic temperaments. "Professionalism" can be a dirty word. He touched nothing that he did not adorn. If only, like Shakespeare, he had occasionally put a foot wrong—so some murmur. He never fails to astonish with his suave or prickly elegance.

It is his excellence that prompts disparagement. The perfection of his work has perversely inspired denigration of his

personality. There is a mostly fictitious Mozart whom it is convenient to call Amadeus—a name he was never known to use. This is the man whom an equally fictitious Salieri wished to kill from a variety of motives—clear-headed recognition of his excellence stoking jealousy, the horror of the disparity between his genius and a scatomaniacal infantilism, a Christian conviction of the diabolic provenance of his skill. This makes compelling drama but bad biography. In personal letters the whole Mozart family discloses a delight in the scatological, harmless, conventional, not untypical of an Age of Reason that gained pleasurable shocks from the contrast between the muckheap of the body and the soaring cleanliness of the spirit. All the evidence shows a Mozart who obeyed most of the rules of Viennese propriety, accepting the God of the Church and the Great Architect of the Freemasons. An attempt to mythologize Mozart's end—the mysterious stranger with the commission to compose a Requiem, the pauper's grave, the desertion of the coffin in a sudden storm—collapses under scrutiny of the recorded fact. Meteorological records, the imperial decree to cut down on funeral expenses through the use of common graves, the not uncommon plagiarisms of amateur musicians with more money than talent, all melt the mythology into banality. The heresy of indecorous probing into an artist's life has been with us for a long time. Few can take their art straight.

I began my artistic career as a self-taught composer who, because of insufficient talent and a recognition that music could not say the things I wished to say, took, almost in middle age, to the practice of a more articulate craft. Yet the musical background will not be stilled, and the standards I set myself owe more to the great composers than to the great writers. It has always seemed to me that an artist's devotion to his art is primarily manifested in prolific production. Mozart, who produced a great deal of music in a short life, knew that mastery was to be attained only through steady application. His literary counterparts—Balzac in France, H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett in England—have often been reviled for what is termed





Mozart lived with his wife and son in this house (indicated by arrow) in the Alsergrund suburb of Vienna from June 1781 until early 1789.

“over-production.” To discover virtue in costiveness was a mark of Bloomsbury gentility. Ladies and gentlemen should be above the exigencies of the tradesman’s life. But art is a trade that ennobles itself, and the consumer, by giving more than is paid for. The market is served but also God. Mozart wrote for money, which E. M. Forster did not have to do: His scant production is as appropriate to a *rentier* as Mozart’s fecundity is right both for a serious craftsman and a breadwinner. Ultimately artists must be judged not merely by excellence but by bulk and variety. The musician is, however, luckier than the writer: It is always possible to produce an acceptable minuet, rather more difficult to achieve a story or a poem.

The celebration of Mozart cannot be accomplished in words, except those of stringent technical analysis with ample music-type illustration. We can only celebrate by listening massively and then emitting some almost pre-verbal noise of approval, amazement, or exaltation. But, to the artist in whatever medium, Mozart presents an example to be followed, that of devotion to craft. Without craft there can be no art.

Those of us who practice, as I still inadequately do, the craft of music cannot easily stifle envy. It is not envy of individual genius so much as a bitterness that the cultural conditions which made Mozart possible have long passed away. The division between the music of the street and that of the salon and opera house was not so blatant as it now is. Bach could end his Goldberg Variations with a quodlibet based on the popular tunes of his day. Conversely, melodies from Mozart’s operas could be whistled, and not solely by aristocrats dressing for dinner. Till quite recently the ghost of the sense of a musical community lingered. A Mozart sonata could be popularized, though condescendingly, as “In An Eighteenth-Century Drawing Room”; Frank Sinatra, in his earliest film, could sing *La ci darem la mano*. Simple tuneful melody was something of a constraint. Stravinsky tried to make money by converting a theme from *L’Oiseau de Feu* into a pop ballad. But what was popularized came from the classical or romantic past: no music by Schoenberg, Webern, or Bartók could hope to entrance the general ear. The gulf between the serious and the merely diverting is now firmly fixed.

A serious composer commissioned to write, say, an oboe concerto will feel dubious about using tonality with occasional concords; he is uneasy about critical sneers if he does not seem to be trying to outdo Pierre Boulez. There are various modes of musical expression available, perhaps too many, but none of them can have more than a tenuous link with the past. Atonality, polytonality, polymodalism, postmodality, Africanism, Indianism, minimalism, Cageism—the list is extensive. No composer can draw on the heritage that united Monteverdi and Mozart. Alban Berg, in his Violin Concerto (1935), could quote Bach’s chorale *Es Ist Genug* only because its tritonal opening bar fitted, by accident, into his tone-row. Perhaps only the neurotic Mahler, last of the great tonal Viennese, provides the bridge between a dead and a living society. Mozart can be parodied or pastiched, as in Stravinsky’s mannered *The Rake’s Progress* (1951), but we cannot imagine his wearing a lounge suit, as we can imagine Beethoven coming back in stained sweater and baggy flannels.

We have to beware of approaching Mozart while polishing the spectacles of historical perspective. Nostalgia is beloved, but it is inert. The vision he purveys must not be that of a long-dead stability for which we hopelessly yearn. In a world which affronts us daily with war, starvation, pollution, the destruction of the rain forests, the breakdown of public and domestic morality, and the sheer bloody incompetence of government, we may put a Mozart string quartet on the compact disc apparatus in the expectation of a transient peace. But it is not Mozart's function to soothe: He is not a tranquilizer to be taken out of the bathroom cabinet. He purveys an image of a possible future rather than of an irrecoverable past.

As a literary practitioner I look for his analogue among great writers. He may not have the complex humanity of Shakespeare, but he has more than the gnomic

neatness of an Augustan like Alexander Pope. It wouldn't be extravagant to find in him something like the serene skill of Dante Alighieri. If the paradisaic is more characteristic of him than the infernal or even the purgatorial, that is because history itself has written the *Divine Comedy* backwards. He reminds us of human possibilities. Dead *nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*—in the middle of the road of our life—he nevertheless presents the whole compass of life and intimates that noble visions exist only because they can be realized.

I refuse to end on a grandiloquent note. Mozart himself wouldn't have liked it. So I come down to the ground level of the smell of ink, of greasepaint and stage lights. Works have to be written before they can excite ecstasy or vilification. The humus from which they arise can be accidental. Let's go to the cinema.

#### SCENE 20. INTERIOR. NIGHT. THE BURGTHEATER

*There is an opera in progress. The auditorium candles remain lighted. The audience is not over-attentive. There is chatter, flirtation. The opera is not by any composer we know. The composer presides at the harpsichord in the pit. On stage a soprano sings a cabaletta and falters on her high notes. Rotten fruit and bad eggs are hurled. A member of the audience stands to inveigh.*

MEMBER OF THE AUDIENCE:

Never mind about *her*. Throw something at *him*.

*He points an accusatory finger at the cowering composer.*

He's a thief. He stole that from Sacchini. Or it might be Paisiello.

*The opera continues with difficulty.*

#### 21. INT. NIGHT. A VIENNESE COFFEE HOUSE

*Vicente Martin Soler takes coffee with Giovanni Paisiello.*

SOLER:

Outrageous behavior. Yet it may be taken as enthusiasm. For the *genre*, that is. There is certainly no indifference.

PAISIELLO:

It's the rage for the ever-new that one finds oppressive. Operas are like newspapers. You know how many I have written?

SOLER:

Twenty would be too much.

PAISIELLO:

Over a hundred. The maw of what you would call the *aficionados* is insatiable. You, me, Salieri, Cimarosa, Guglielmi, Sarti. And there's Mozart pretending to be an Italian.

SOLER:

*Touché.*

PAISIELLO:

Oh, you're a Latin. Very nearly an Italian. These Viennese can't tell the difference.

SOLER:

Your *Barbiere di Siviglia* exemplifies our internationalism. A Spanish setting, a French play, an Italian operatization.

PAISIELLO:

Your *Una cosa rara* is pure Italy. It's knocked out poor little Mozart's *Nozze di Figaro*. The insolence. Figaro's my property.

SOLER:

The man's an instrumentalist. His woodwind fights the voices. There's a certain talent there, but it's not operatic. Will he last?

PAISIELLO:

Will any of us? And does it matter? Come, we're going to be late for *La Grotta di Trofonio*. Salieri will never forgive us.

## 22. INT. NIGHT. THE BURGTHEATER

*Salieri's insipid work is in progress. The camera pans over a moderately attentive audience. It reaches Mozart, who stands gloomily at the back. His inner voice speaks over the unmemorable music.*

MOZART (voiceover):

And does it matter? Not to be understood? None of us shall see posterity. There's no advantage in working for the yet unborn. If my music dies with my death, I shall be in no position to complain. Am I serving the age I live in, live in very precariously, or am I serving God? Of God's existence I remain unsure, despite my choral praises. Does God manifest himself in the world in trickles of music? I don't know. The quest for perfection, even when perfection is unwanted. This is the crown of thorns. It cannot be rejected. God or no God, I must avoid blasphemy. I am only a little man whose health is not good and whose coffers are empty. Counting each *kreuzer*. Wondering whether I can afford the pulling of a tooth. The fingers of my right hand are deformed with the incessant penning of notes. And the true music remains unheard, taunting, demanding birth like a dream child. God help some of us. There are some who need no help.

*He looks at the stage, where the opera is coming to an end.*

## 23. INT. NIGHT. THE BURGTHEATER STAGE

*The final ensemble comes to an end. Tonic and dominant. The audience bows. Salieri rises from the harpsichord and takes his bow. He smiles. Flowers are thrown.*

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I take my bow too. You will throw no flowers. I hope I've demonstrated adequately enough that there's nothing to say.

Oh—one last thing. My title—"Mozart and the Wolf Gang." It is we who are the wolves, ganging up to devour the *corpus*

*verum* of the master. But he cannot be devoured. His musical flesh is eucharistic and bestows grace. And if that is blasphemy, God, whom Mozart, perhaps at this very moment, is busy teaching about music, will forgive it.

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