

In the air

Living with Mozart

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It goes without saying: you don't need a nice round anniversary year to think about Mozart. Or do you? If you love his music and call him Brother you think about him all the time, don't you? Yet why not pause once in a while and try to put into words what he really means, and has meant, to you personally.

As a child learning the piano, there was obviously lots of Mozart, including a Fantasia, which I liked but couldn't get right, and the *Sonata in E flat* (K.282), which I didn't like, but could more or less get my fingers round. I still have the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music edition, „designed to assist students towards intelligent and expressive performance on the modern pianoforte by offering more guidance on tempo, phrasing, dynamics and style than is available in the original text“, which is so old it cost 3 shillings.

Yet Mozart was only one composer among many I was taught and was far from being my favourite. Perhaps my piano teacher's stern evaluation of the intelligence and expressiveness of my performances was decisive; anyway, I decided Mozart was too difficult for me and started listening to real pianists playing him instead.

Pianists like Annie Fischer, in the *D minor Piano Concerto*, K.466, with Adrian Boult. The second movement caused a shock of recognition. This music, I just knew, was about Wolfgang's relationship with his father. I saw in the alternation of the tender first subject and the stormy second one in G minor the same conflicting feelings of affection and rage I felt as a teenager for my own father. I would play it to myself and cry and yet be comforted that a great composer like Mozart could have felt the same things and put them so eloquently into music.

The next shock was the *Concerto for Flute and Harp*. What was going on: why did the piercing beauty of the melody bring on the tears in a way an equally beautiful Schubert *Lied*, for instance, did not? (I meanwhile have an idea about that).

Then came the *Magic Flute*. During a summer working at the Arts Theatre in London, Lotte Reiniger came with her shadow-puppet film for children about Papageno. Why was this comic figure driven to despair, then saved by „divine“ intervention? And why did his despair make you smile while his joy at finding Papagena made your eyes water? Since then I have found other, more serious,

things in the opera – a shared ideal, a common experience, a spiritual journey – nowhere, probably, so powerfully portrayed as in Ingmar Bergman's film.

A rare treat: Glyndebourne, to discover *Don Giovanni*, with its curious mixture of modes: supernatural episodes breaking in on a naturalist narrative. And over the years, the furious hours spent defending Zerlina against those who accuse her of being a little flirt instead of looking at her situation: she is a servant, at the bottom of the hierarchical heap, fighting for survival: she can risk neither rejecting the advances of her feudal overlord nor losing her fiancé. This is the *jus primae noctis* in action, the barbarous feudal law that is here, as in *Figaro*, held up to the contempt it deserves.

And yes, *The Marriage of Figaro*. My stage-management course was working on an evening of opera extracts that opened with the second act of *Figaro*. (A couple of days before the opening, the Six Days War broke out. We agonized briefly about the meaninglessness of art in the face of such horror then went on with the show.)

The ambivalence of erotic beauty: in a reversal of Shakespeare, *As you Like It* for instance, where boy-actors playing women „disguise“ themselves as boys, Cherubino is a female singer playing a boy, being „disguised“ as a girl. And clearly, the Countess – probably Susanna too – is attracted to him/her. The beauty of erotic ambivalence. And the tender complicity between the Countess and Susanna, composing the note that is to ensnare the Count and save their marriages ... for the time being, at least. Their cause is one and they sing in unison: surely one of the most achingly lovely duets ever written.

Figaro has always been my favourite Mozart opera. At one time, certain critics told us we should prefer *Così fan tutte*,

(as it is „better“, musically). I tried to but couldn't. I love *Figaro* unreservedly and when really needing to be comforted, it's *Figaro* I turn to.

And today? Now, it's less a question of discovering unfamiliar works than new interpretations that may shed light on the music. Or may not. I'm still convinced that of all composers, Mozart is the most difficult to interpret – and not necessarily from the technical point of view. There are soloists, chamber ensembles, conductors, whose readings of other composers are brilliant, sensitive and intelligent but whose Mozart is no good. You can hear it straight away: what they give us has the same relation to Mozart as verse does to poetry. There are as few true Mozartians as there are true poets.

And this leads on to another interrogation and as far as I am concerned, a terrible paradox: I think of myself as a rationalist, yet when I try to describe the effect Mozart's music has on me or how I perceive him as a man, I find myself floating off in the arms of mysticism.

Listen to a genuine interpretation of his music and the tears will well at the sheer beauty of the world he allows you to glimpse, like the bright garden Alice sees through the tiny door but cannot enter. You weep because you live not in that world but in this. You cry not so much for a paradise lost as for a paradise never to be gained, an unattainable ideal.

And the man Mozart: despite all the familiar traits of character – the loyalty and courage, the humour, gaiety and idealism – the human being remains somehow elusive.

I know it sounds absurd, but I think that's the point: Mozart is a being from that other dimension, who was briefly on loan to us humans and left us his music as an awe-inspiring glimpse into that other, unattainable, world.



Photo: Márta Rédner

Annie Fischer: A true Mozartian