

“All my musical self-respect is based on my keen appreciation of Mozart’s work.” -- George Bernard Shaw, April 1893

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George Bernard Shaw: Mozart and his Musical Self-respect

The time: October 1887. The place: London. Last Saturday, the Crystal Palace presented a concert performance of *Don Giovanni*, the occasion being the 100th anniversary of the opera's first performance in Prague on 29 October 1787. You leaf through the *Pall Mall Gazette* looking for the review. Now, where is it -- ah, here it is. You read the first paragraph. Interesting what it says about Mozart, but what about the concert? You read the second paragraph. Interesting what it says about *Don Giovanni*, but what about the concert? Third paragraph, more of same ... no, there it is, last sentence: “Of the concert technically, I can only say that it was practically little more than a rehearsal of the orchestral parts.” End of review. The author? G.B.S.

Centennial anniversaries are traditionally major occasions for recalling the musical accomplishments of composers of the past. And for Shaw, this would surely have been true of Mozart even if he had not himself been a Mozart-centenary child, born in 1856. Although I have nowhere read of Shaw's taking note of this, I have often wondered if he did not at least unconsciously draw the parallel, particularly in those years when he was active as a music critic and each year (until 5 December 1891), was in one way or another, a Mozart centenary year.

When 1891 arrived and with it the broad public observance of Mozart's death one hundred years before, Shaw had been actively reviewing music for a number of London publications for several years. In 1888, he had begun contributing the occasional article to the newly founded *Star* evening newspaper. In 1889, he became its principal reviewer under the pen-name of Corno di Bassetto. From 1890 to 1894, he wrote a weekly music column for *The World*, signing his articles “G.B.S.” In later years, even after his attention had turned more and more to playwriting, Shaw continued to write on musical subjects and turn out the occasional review.

From even a casual reading of Shaw's collected music reviews, one thing is clear: the place that Mozart occupied in his thinking and in his writing about music was special.

To get some idea why this was so, we first need to see Shaw in his historical framework. He lived such a long life (until 1950) that we are prone to think of him essentially as our 20th century contemporary, as indeed he was. But he was also very much the 19th century contemporary of such composers as Wagner, Brahms, Gounod, Liszt, Tchaikowsky [Shaw's spelling], and Verdi, all of whom were alive when Shaw was plying his critical trade.

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As a music critic, his stage was the late-Victorian musical world, with its antagonisms and controversies, when the Brahmsian and Mendelssohnian traditionalists and academics were pitted against the Wagnerian radicals. Exhilarating times, and no pro-Wagner partisan more ready to give the traditionalists a whiff of the grape than G.B.S. Looking back on those times in 1935 from the vantage point of his 79 years, Shaw wrote: "The wars of religion were not more bloodthirsty than the discussions of the Wagnerites and the Anti-Wagnerites." Shaw was not a music reviewer to leave you wondering where he stood.

Further, in considering the historical Shaw and his relation to the music of Mozart, it is well to keep in mind some aspects of London's concert and opera life in the late 1880s and 1890s. For one thing, the general concert-going public still had not grasped the full extent of Mozart's achievement as a composer. Even though music publishers had begun to bring out so-called "complete works" soon after Mozart's death, it was not until 1877 that the comprehensive, critically edited *Gesamtausgabe* of Mozart's works, published by Breitkopf and Härtel in Leipzig, began to appear; while most of the project had been published by 1883, individual works were still appearing as late as 1910.

There was a wide gap between the high words of praise uttered on the occasion of the first centenary of Mozart's death and the low number of Mozart's works regularly performed. As the Austrian musicologist Gernot Gruber points out in his book, *Mozart and Posterity*: "One played the same works over and over again -- *Don Giovanni*, *Figaro*, *Zauberflöte*, the Requiem, the late symphonies, and string quartets, the D-minor piano concerto, and those piano sonatas used as practice pieces by learners."

Or as Shaw observed in this connection in 1891: "It is not possible to give here any adequate account of Mozart's claims to greatness as a composer. At present his music is hardly known in England except to those who study it in private." And in another article in the same year: "But there was no getting out of the centenary: something had to be done. Accordingly, the Crystal Palace committed itself to the Jupiter Symphony and the Requiem; and Albert Hall, by way of varying the entertainment, announced the Requiem and the Jupiter Symphony."

But there was another problem, one still with us a century later -- the adequate performance of Mozart's music. There were (and are) two sides to this. The first is the difficulty presented by Mozart's music itself. One reason why performers shy away from Mozart's music, Shaw said, is this:

"You cannot 'make an effect' with Mozart, or work your audience up by playing on their hysterical susceptibilities. Nothing but the finest execution -- beautiful, expressive, and intelligent -- will serve; and the worst of it is, that the phrases are so perfectly clear and straightforward, that you are found out the moment you swerve by a

hair's breadth from perfection, whilst, at the same time, your work is so obvious, that everyone thinks it must be easy, and puts you down remorselessly as a duffer for botching it."

Or as the mezzo-soprano Margaret Price put it in an interview, commenting on the demands of singing Mozart: "With Bellini or Rossini you can give or take a few tra-la-la's and nobody notices. With Mozart you've only to sing a tiny bit out of tune, or the notes don't quite match up, and people notice immediately."

The other factor is the historical circumstance of Mozart being on the far side of the great divide in music that came in the wake of the French Revolution and the emergence of Romanticism. As the 18th century turned into the 19th, the sound of instruments began to change; the orchestra swelled in size; the concept of the ideal symphonic sound was transformed. More fundamentally, the underlying perception of the function of music shifted. Putting it in simple terms, Nikolaus Harnoncourt has written: "Before 1800, music spoke; afterwards, it paints." Music to be understood as speech is understood gave way to music to be felt as moods are felt. And in the process, the musical vocabulary of Mozart -- with its hard dissonances, its rough contrasts of tempo, its sharp changes of dynamic -- was smoothed into the sonorous sine-curve of the Romantic ideal. (In his fine book on Mozart symphonies, Prof. Neal Zaslaw speaks of "the unarticulated outpouring of sound cultivated by post-romantic orchestras...")

Listening to performances of Mozart in his time, Shaw was repeatedly moved to complain of "vapid, hasty, trivial readings" of the orchestral works, of performances of *Don Giovanni* in which "the vigorous passages were handled in the usual timid, conventional way." Writing in 1917, he raked a conductor over the coals for seeming "to have no conception of the dynamic range of Mozart's effects, of the fierceness of his *fortepianos*, the *élan* of his whipping-up triplets, the volume of his fortes." (And who was this hapless conductor? Sir Thomas Beecham, no less!)

It was, then, in this late-Victorian world that George Bernard Shaw began his journalistic labors as a music critic, turning his attention, as a critic must, to the random and heterogeneous musical offerings of the London concert and opera scene. Today Mendelssohn, tomorrow Meyerbeer; now Wagner, then Verdi; here Goetz, there Grieg -- all grist for Shaw's critical mill. And throughout Shaw's writings, however varied the composers and the compositions, you encounter Mozart. Time and again Mozart -- his music, his craft as composer, his power as dramatist -- provides the point of departure for Shaw's comments and criticisms. Mozart is the *Maßstab*, the measure, the criterion. Not the only one, but certainly the most frequent and the most important.

"All my musical self-respect is based on my keen appreciation of Mozart's work." This, one of Shaw's most often cited references to Mozart, appears in a review written in April 1893. The occasion was a performance of the piano quartet in G-minor (K.478). Fired by this thought, Shaw leaves the concert far behind ("... a very good program wasted on a very bad audience...") and addresses himself instead to the source of his musical self-respect:

"It is still as true as it was before the Eroica symphony existed, that there is nothing better in art than Mozart's best. We have had Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Goetz, and Brahms since his time ... but the more they have left the Mozart quartet or quintet behind, the further it comes out ahead in its perfection of temper and refinement of consciousness."

Or in the realm of opera. For Shaw, Mozart, capitalizing on the way shown by Gluck, had opened up the 19th century for the work of Wagner:

"When Wagner was born in 1813, music had newly become the most astonishing, the most fascinating, the most miraculous art in the world. Mozart's *Don Giovanni* had made all musical Europe conscious of the enchantments of the modern orchestra and of the perfect adaptability of music to the subtlest needs of the dramatist ... After the finales in *Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*, the possibilities of the modern music drama lay bare."

Or on Mozart the symphonist: 1885 -- "... the superior (of Berlioz) in the handling of his favorite instrument, the orchestra." 1890 -- "... in his highest achievements, the manifest superior of Beethoven."

For Shaw, Mozart is not only a standard for weighing the worth of other composers, however, but also for judging the abilities of performers. He evolved what we can call the "six-bars-of-Mozart" test, a measure he was wont to invoke in the middle of a review of, say, a Brahms or a Tchaikowsky piano concerto.

Take for example, the performance of Miss Florence May of one of the Brahms piano concertos in December of 1888: "... it quite possible for a young lady with one of those wonderful 'techniques,' which are freely manufactured at Leipzig and other places, to struggle with (Brahms's) music for an hour at a stretch without giving such an insight to her higher powers as half a dozen bars of a sonata by Mozart."

The thought occurred again some 18 months later when Shaw was present as Dr. Sapellnikoff presented the first English performance of the second Tchaikowsky piano concerto. Shaw found the work "impulsive, copious, difficult, and pretentious," without distinction or originality. "It left me without any notion of Sapellnikoff's rank as a player: ... six bars of a

Mozart sonata would have told me more about his artistic gift than twenty whole concertos of the Tchaikowsky sort."

If there was one Mozart work more than any other that gripped Shaw's imagination and informed his criticism, it was *Don Giovanni*. He had learned it early as a boy growing up in a household with an enthusiastic amateur mezzo-soprano for a mother (and with Mrs. Shaw's eccentric singing teacher and friend, George John Vandeleur Lee, as well), and it was with him for the rest of his life. The Don was important to him both for its revelation of what music could be and for its demonstration of dramatic power. In it, he found (he said) music that "came sometimes like answers to unspoken questions of the heart, sometimes like ghostly echoes from another world." Shaw would return repeatedly to the subject of *Don Giovanni* as he went about his job as critic. He had, of course, the one problem with the opera that we all have. Writing in 1891, he noted with a sigh, "Ever since I was a boy I have been in search of a satisfactory performance of *Don Giovanni*; and I have at last come to see that Mozart's turn will hardly be in my time."

In this connection, it is worth recalling what had happened to *Don Giovanni* in the course of the 19th century. The *drama giocoso* of Da Ponte and Mozart had been turned into a Romantic *Liebestragedie*, "amorality" had given way to moralizing, and the opera usually ended in smoke and flames as Don Giovanni went straight to hell (taking the concluding sextet with him). Shaw, on the other hand, saw the opera in all its musical complexity and dramatic contrast and called for its presentation in the spirit and form intended by librettist and composer. In *Don Giovanni*, he wrote, we see that "in the subtleties of dramatic instrumentation Mozart was the greatest master of them all," that he had composed a score "that creates men and women as Shakespear and Molière did -- that makes emotion not only specific but personal and characteristic." "Play the opera in two acts only," he pleaded (in the face of the custom of playing it in four) and put "an end for ever to the sensational vulgarity of bringing down the curtain on the red fire and the ghost and the trapdoor."

While he was at it, Shaw was not one to refrain from directing the singers in the proper execution of their roles. Take, for instance, a performance of the French baritone Victor Maurel. Shaw found him better than average, true, but still not very good:

"On the entry of the statue, which Don Juan, however stable his nerve may be imagined to have been, can hardly have witnessed without at least a dash of surprise and curiosity, Maurel behaved very much as if his uncle had dropped in unexpectedly in the middle of a bachelor's supper-party... The problem of how to receive a call from a public statue does not seem to have struck him as worth solving."

In 1918, more than two decades after Shaw had ceased his journalistic duties as music critic, he was still wrestling with the problem of the proper performance of *Don Giovanni*. In June, he wrote in *The Nation*: "Last week my old professional habit of opera-going reasserted itself for a moment. I heard the last two acts of *Don Giovanni* at Shaftesbury Theatre by the Carol Rosa Company, and the *Valkyrie* at Drury Lane." He found the Wagner better done than the Mozart but, he said, "I grant that there are extenuating circumstances. Mozart's music is enormously more difficult than Wagner's; and his tragi-comedy is even more so. With Mozart you either hit the bull's eye or miss; and a miss is as bad as a mile. With Wagner the target is so large and the charge so heavy that if you get the notes out anyhow, you are bound to do some execution."

Part of the problem with doing *The Don* the way it should be done, Shaw concludes, lies in seriousness of artistic purpose. "I am strongly of opinion that nothing but superlative excellence in art can excuse a man or woman for being an artist at all... I have a large charity for loose morals: they are often more virtuous than straitlaced ones. But for loose art I have no charity at all." The run-of-the-mill conductor, faced with presenting *Don Giovanni*, noses "through the score for the vulgar fun which is not there" and overlooks "the tragic and supernatural atmosphere which is there." The conductor who "will take the work in tragic seriousness ... will find other things besides the tragic intensity of the overture and the statue music. He will find that the window *trio*, *Ah, taci, ingiusto core*, is not a comic accompaniment to the unauthorized tomfoolery of Don Juan making a marionet of Leporello, but perhaps the most lovely nocturne in the whole range of musical literature."

As the first centenary of Mozart's death arrived, Shaw was ready for it. He had been professionally engaged as a music critic for several years. Moreover, he had been daily contending with the question, what is great musical art, and had elaborated his aesthetic perceptions and standards. Some of these -- like his vigorous advocacy of the music of Wagner and his equally vigorous aversion to "absolute music" -- would evolve and change (with Shaw, one hesitates to use the word "mellow") over time. But one tenet of the Shavian musical canon was and remained a constant: belief in the perfection of the art of Mozart.

Writing in connection with the anniversary of Mozart's death one hundred years before, Shaw took note of the inordinate amount of "literary and musical business" being generated for the occasion. The critic's task on the occasion, he opined, "is not quite so easy. The word is, of course, Admire, admire, admire..." But what exactly is there to admire? It is not, he said, that Mozart was the "leader of a new departure or founder of a school." He came, rather, "at the end of a development, not at the beginning of one."

Continuing: "But in art the highest success is to be the last of your race, not the first... Surely, if so great a composer as Haydn could say, out of his greatness as a man, 'I am not the best of my school, though I was the first,' Mozart's worshippers can afford to acknowledge, with equal gladness of spirit, that their hero was not the first, though he was the best."

And a final thought: "For my own part, if I do not care to rhapsodize much about Mozart, it is because I am so violently prepossessed in his favor that I am capable of supplying any possible deficiency in his work by my imagination."

Surveying the London musical scene at the end of 1891, George Bernard Shaw allowed himself to hope that the public was finally beginning to grasp "the important secret that the incompetence and superficiality of Mozart's interpreters are the true and only causes of the apparent triviality of his greatest music. Properly executed, Mozart's work never disappointed anybody yet." And he offered this summing-up:

"The appetite for riotous, passionate, wilful, heroic music has been appeased; and we are now beginning to feel that we cannot go on listening to Beethoven's Seventh Symphony and the Tannhauser overture for ever. When we have quite worn them out, and have become conscious that there are grades of quality in emotion as well as variations of intensity, then we shall be on the way to become true Mozart connoisseurs..."

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It may be too much to claim that we have reached the end of the road and become, indeed, "true Mozart connoisseurs." But we have made progress. Take, for example, this all-Mozart concert heard on the radio: it began with the so-called Munich Kyrie (K.341), continued with a performance of the piano concerto in B-flat (K.595), and concluded with the choruses and interludes to *Thamos, König in Ägypten* (K.345), three fine and widely varied examples of Mozart's art -- and none of them, so far as I can determine, given public performances in London in Shaw's time as music critic.

Surely the writings of Shaw -- as he surveyed the world of music a hundred years ago and came again and again to discover the centrality of Mozart in the formation of his critical judgments -- contributed importantly to the process referred to by the great British musicologist Alan Tyson when, in a 1982 book review, he wrote:

"It is entertaining to speculate when (on the widest possible franchise) Mozart began to replace Beethoven as the paradigm of 'the greatest composer,' a process that has not been completed everywhere, but in many parts of Europe probably dates from before World War II."

Writing in 1987, Joseph McLellan, the music critic of the *Washington Post*, came at the question straight on:

"Was Mozart the greatest composer of all? ... In at least one sense, Mozart's achievement is more impressive than those of Bach and Beethoven, the other major contenders for the title of greatest. Mozart ... did not live to see his 36th birthday. But his works far surpass the longer-lived Beethoven's in number and he outdistances nearly everyone else (though not Haydn) in his variety of forms, from opera and church music to string quartets and concertos for such unusual instruments as horn or clarinet. Mozart compensated in fluency and the constant freshness of his inspiration for what he lacked in longevity... It may be argued that Beethoven's work gains in power and intensity from the extraordinary effort expended in its creation. The composer's titanic struggle to achieve his ideal can be heard in the music. ... That kind of anguish is nowhere evident in Mozart, and for that reason there have been critics in the past who found him lacking in depth. They were wrong. Moments of depth abound in his more solemn works ... but the true greatness of Mozart lies elsewhere. He is one of those rare composers (Haydn is another) who find profundity in happy music."

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Since the time when Shaw ushered his readers through the first centenary of Mozart's death, another hundred years have come and gone, an event this time marked with all the "literary and musical business" uniquely possible in today's globalized, internetted, multimediated world. And inevitably, of course, other anniversaries beckon. Consider, for example, what "literary and music business" may be called forth by an occasion to come. In the year 2056, the world will have the opportunity to observe not only the 300th anniversary of the birth of Wolfgang Mozart but also the 200th anniversary of the birth of George Bernard Shaw. There could be interdisciplinary, worldwide celebrations of mind-boggling dimensions:

"500 years of Mozart and G.B.S.!"

Mozart, Mozart, Mozart. "Admire, admire, admire..." As these anniversaries come and go, will we overdo it? Certainly. Does it matter if we do? Probably not. Mozart will surely survive. And giving heed to the astringent and commonsensical voice of G.B.S. echoing down through the years, so shall we.

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This essay was originally written in anticipation of the 1991 observances of Mozart's death. It has since gone through various revisions and been published, at various times, in the newsletters of the Friends of Mozart (NYC) and the Mozart Society of America. With Mozart Year 2006 soon behind us and the next Mozart-Shaw Anniversary Year some 35 years hence, this could well be the final revision.

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