

*A note of introduction: In view of the Mozart-Year 2006 Anniversary talks by three prominent Mozart scholars – Nikolaus Harnoncourt, Volkmar Braunbehrens, and Ulrich Konrad – now present in the aproposmozart website, I thought it might be of interest to add GBS as a Guest Author and give the record of remarks Shaw felt appropriate when reviewing the London musical scene at the time of the Mozart Centenary in 1891.*

George Bernard Shaw

## The Mozart Centenary, 1891

9 December 1891 (1/)

The Mozart Centenary has made a good deal of literary and musical business this week. Part of this is easy enough, especially for the illustrated papers. Likenesses of Mozart at all ages; view of Salzburg; portrait of Marie Antoinette (described in the text as "the ill-fated"), to whom he proposed marriage at an early age; picture of the young composer, two and a half feet high, crushing the Pompadour with his "Who is this woman that refuses to kiss me? The Queen kissed me! (Sensation)"; facsimile of the original MS. of the first four bars of *Là ci darem*, and the like. These, with copious paraphrases of the English translation of Otto Jahn's great biography, will pull the journalists proper through the Centenary with credit. The critic's task is not quite so easy.

The word is, of course, Admire, admire, admire; but unless you frankly trade on the ignorance of the public, and cite as illustrations of his unique genius feats that come easily to dozens of organists and choir-boys who never wrote, and never will write, a bar of original music in their lives; or pay his symphonies and operas empty compliments that might be transferred word for word, without the least incongruity, to the symphonies of Spohr and the operas of Offenbach; or represent him as composing as spontaneously as a bird sings, on the strength of his habit of perfecting his greater compositions in his mind before he wrote them down – unless you try these well-worn dodges, you will find nothing to admire that is peculiar to Mozart: the fact being that he, like Praxiteles, Raphael, Molière, or Shakespear, was no leader of a new departure or founder of a school.

He came at the end of a development, not at the beginning of one; and although there are operas and symphonies, and even pianoforte sonatas and pages of instrumental scoring of his, on which you can put your finger and say, "Here is final perfection in this manner; and nobody, whatever his genius may be, will ever get a step further on these lines," you cannot say, "Here is an entirely new vein of musical art, of which nobody ever dreamt before Mozart." Haydn, who made the mould for Mozart's symphonies, was proud of Mozart's genius because he felt his own part in it: he would have written the E flat symphony if he could, and, though he could not, was at least able to feel that the man who had

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1. From Volume I in the series, *Music in London, 1890-94* (London: Constable, 1932), as reprinted in *The Great Composers: Reviews and Bombardments by Bernard Shaw*, Louis Crompton, ed. (Univ. of California press, 1978)

reached that pre-eminence was standing on his old shoulders. Now, Haydn would have recoiled from the idea of composing – or perpetrating, as he would have put it – the first movement of Beethoven's *Eroica*, and would have repudiated all part in leading music to such a pass.

The more far-sighted Gluck not only carried Mozart in his arms to within sight of the goal of his career as an opera composer, but even cleared a little of the new path into which Mozart's finality drove all those successors of his who were too gifted to waste their lives in making weak dilutions of Mozart's scores, and serving them up as "classics." Many Mozart worshippers cannot bear to be told that their hero was not the founder of a dynasty. But in art the highest success is to be the last of your race, not the first. Anybody, almost, can make a beginning: the difficulty is to make an end – to do what cannot be bettered.

For instance, if the beginner were to be ranked above the consummator, we should, in literary fiction, have to place Captain Mayne Reid, who certainly struck a new vein, above Dickens, who simply took the novel as he found it, and achieved the feat of compelling his successor (whoever he may be), either to create quite another sort of novel, or else to fall behind his predecessor as at best a superfluous imitator. 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. It is always like that. Praxiteles, Raphael and Co., have great men for their pioneers, and only fools for their followers.

So far everybody will agree with me. This proves either that I am hopelessly wrong or that the world has had at least half a century to think the matter over in. And, sure enough, a hundred years ago Mozart was considered a desperate innovator: it was his reputation in this respect that set so many composers – Meyerbeer, for example – cultivating innovation for its own sake. Let us, therefore, jump a hundred years forward, right up to date, and see whether there is any phenomenon of the same nature in view today. We have not to look far. Here, under our very noses, is Wagner held up on all hands as the founder of a school and the arch-musical innovator of our age. He himself knew better; but since his death I appear to be the only person who shares his view of the matter. I assert with the utmost confidence that in 1991 it will be seen quite clearly that Wagner was the end of the nineteenth century, or Beethoven school, instead of the beginning of the twentieth-century school; just as Mozart's most perfect music is the last word of the eighteenth century, and not the first of the nineteenth. It is none the less plain because everyone knows that *Il Seraglio* was the beginning of the school of nineteenth-century German operas of Mozart, Beethoven, Weber, and Wagner; that *Das Veilchen* is the beginning of the nineteenth-century German song of Schubert, Mendelssohn, and Schumann; and that *Die Zauberflöte* is the ancestor, not only of the Ninth Symphony, but of the Wagnerian allegorical music-drama, with personified abstractions instead of individualized characters as *dramatis personae*. But *Il Seraglio* and *Die Zauberflöte* do not belong to the group of works which constitute Mozart's consummate

achievement – Don Juan, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, and his three or four perfect symphonies. They are nineteenth-century music heard advancing in the distance, as his Masses are seventeenth-century music retreating in the distance. And, similarly, though the future fossiliferous critics of 1991, after having done their utmost, without success, to crush twentieth-century music, will be able to shew that Wagner (their chief classic) made one or two experiments in that direction, yet the world will rightly persist in thinking of him as a characteristically nineteenth-century composer of the school of Beethoven, greater than Beethoven by as much as Mozart was greater than Haydn. And now I hope I have saved my reputation by saying something at which everybody will exclaim, "Bless me! what nonsense!" Nevertheless, it is true; and our would-be Wagners had better look to it; for all their efforts to exploit the apparently inexhaustible wealth of musical material opened up at Bayreuth only prove that Wagner used it up to the last ounce, and that secondhand Wagner is more insufferable, because usually more pretentious, than even secondhand Mozart used to be.

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. Gounod has devoutly declared that Don Giovanni has been to him all his life a revelation of perfection, a miracle, a work without fault. I smile indulgently at Gounod, since I cannot afford to give myself away so generously (there being, no doubt, less of me); but I am afraid my fundamental attitude towards Mozart is the same as his. In my small-boyhood I by good luck had an opportunity of learning the Don thoroughly, and if it were only for the sense of the value of fine workmanship which I gained from it, I should still esteem that lesson the most important part of my education. Indeed, it educated me artistically in all sorts of ways, and disqualified me only in one – that of criticizing Mozart fairly. Everyone appears a sentimental, hysterical bungler in comparison when anything brings his finest work vividly back to me. Let me take warning by the follies of Oulibicheff, and hold my tongue.

The people most to be pitied at this moment are the unfortunate singers, players, and conductors who are suddenly called upon to make the public *hear* the wonders which the newspapers are describing so lavishly. At ordinary times they simply refuse to do this. It is quite a mistake to suppose that Mozart's music is not in demand. I know of more than one concert-giver who asks every singer he engages for some song by Mozart, and is invariably met with the plea of excessive difficulty. 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. Naturally, then, we do not hear much of Mozart; and what we do hear goes far to destroy his reputation. 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 the Albert Hall, by way of varying the entertainment, announced the Requiem and the Jupiter Symphony.

The Requiem satisfied that spirit of pious melancholy in which we celebrate great occasions; but I think the public ought to be made rather more sharply aware of the fact that Mozart died before the Requiem was half finished, and that his widow, in order to secure the stipulated price, got one of her husband's pupils, whose handwriting resembled his, to forge enough music to complete it. Undoubtedly Mozart gave a good start to most of the movements; but, suggestive as these are, very few of them are artistically so satisfactory as the pretty *Benedictus*, in which the forger escaped from the taskwork of cobbling up his master's hints to the free work of original composition. There are only about four numbers in the score which have any right to be included in a centenary program. As to the two performances, I cannot compare them, as I was late for the one at the Albert Hall. . .

The highest proof of Richter's ability as a conductor was his success with Mozart's symphony in E flat. Many of our conductors, who gain considerable credit by their achievements in our grandiose and sensational nineteenth-century music, are so completely beaten by Mozart that their performances have undermined the composer's immense reputation instead of confirming it. Herr Richter, however, held his own masterfully; and the only reputations damaged were those of the composers whose works were close enough to the E flat symphony in the program to suffer from the inevitable comparison. It was curious to observe in the two last movements of this work that the power of music to produce hysterical excitement when used – or abused – solely as a nerve stimulant, which is the only power that the nineteenth century seems to value it for, is used by Mozart with exquisite taste and irresistible good humor to relieve the audience from the earnest attention compelled by the more serious part of his work. Could he have foreseen that this half jocular side of his art would be that most seriously elaborated by his successors, and that his great compositions would appear as tame to some musicians of a later generation as a recitation from Shakespear presumably is to a howling dervish, his too early death might not have lacked consolation.

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### 12 December 1891 (2/)

Wolfgang Mozart, the centenary of whose death on December 5, 1791, we are now celebrating, was born on January 27, 1756. He was the grandson of an Augsburg bookbinder, and the son of Leopold Mozart, a composer, author, and violinist of good standing in the service of the Archbishop of Salzburg. When he was three years old he shewed such an interest in the music lessons of his sister,

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2. *The Illustrated London News*, as reprinted in *How to Become a Musical Critic*, Dan H. Laurence, ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961)

four and a half years his senior, that his father allowed him to play at learning music as he might have allowed him to play at horses. But the child was quite in earnest, and was soon composing minuets as eagerly as Mr Ruskin, at the same age, used to compose little poems. Leopold Mozart was a clever man up to a certain point, "self-made," untroubled by diffidence or shyness, conscious of being master of his profession, a practical, pushing man, ready to lay down an ambitious program for his son and bustle him through it. Seeing that Wolfgang had talent enough to qualify him for the highest attainable worldly success as a composer and *virtuoso*, he at once set about founding a European reputation for the future great man by making a grand tour through Vienna, Paris, London, Amsterdam, and many other towns, exhibiting his two children at Court and in public as "prodigies of nature." When the boy made a couple of tours in Italy in 1769-71, he knew everything that the most learned musicians in Europe could teach him; he became an unsurpassed harpsichord and pianoforte player; and as an organist he made old musicians declare that Sebastian Bach had come again. As a violinist he did not succeed in pleasing himself. Leopold insisted that nothing but self-confidence was needed to place him at the head of European violinists; and he may have been right; but Mozart never followed up his successes as a concerto player, and finally only used his skill to play the viola in quartets. On the whole, it must be admitted that the father, though incapable of conceiving the full range of his son's genius, did his utmost, according to his lights, to make the best of him; and although Mozart must, in his latter years, have once or twice speculated as to whether he might not have managed better as an orphan, he never bore any grudge against his father on that account.

Mozart's worldly prosperity ended with his boyhood. From the time when he began the world as a young man of twenty-one by making a trip to Paris with his mother (who died there) to the day of his early death, fourteen years later, he lived the life of a very great man in a very small world. When he returned to settle in Vienna and get married there, he burst out crying with emotion after the ceremony. His wife cried too; and so did all the spectators. They cried more wisely than they knew, considering what the future of the couple was to be. Mozart had three means of getting money – teaching, giving concerts, and using such aristocratic influence as he could enlist to obtain either a Court appointment or commissions to compose for the church or the theatre. None of these ways were fruitful for him, though between them all, and a good deal of borrowing, he just managed to die leaving his wife in possession of £5, exactly £15 short of what they owed to the doctor. As a teacher, he got on very well while he was giving lessons for nothing to people who interested him: as a fashionable music-master he was comparatively a failure. The concerts paid a little better: he wrote one pianoforte concerto after another for them, and always improvised a *fantasia*, and was overwhelmed with applause. But there was then no great public, as we understand the term, to steadily support subscription concerts of classical music. His subscribers were people of fashion, inconstant except in their determination only to patronize music in "the season." His failure to obtain anything except a wretched pittance at Court for writing dance music was due to the extreme dread in which he was held by the cabal of musicians who had the ear of the Emperor. Salieri frankly said afterwards, "His death was a good job for us. If he had lived longer not a soul would have given us a crumb for our compositions." Mozart was badly worn out by hard work and incessant anxiety when his last fever attacked him. He even believed that someone had poisoned him. A great deal of false sentiment has been wasted on

the fact that the weather was so bad on the day of his funeral that none of the friends who attended the funeral service at St Stephen's Church went with the hearse as far as the distant graveyard of St Mark's. The driver of the hearse, the assistant gravedigger, and a woman who was attached to the place as "authorized beggar," were the only persons who saw the coffin put on top of two others into a pauper grave of the third class. Except to shew how poor Mozart was, the incident is of no importance whatever. Its alleged pathos is really pure snobbery. Mozart would certainly not have disdained to lie down for his last sleep in the grave of the poor. He would probably have been of the same mind as old Buchanan, who on his deathbed told his servant to give all the money left in the house away in charity instead of spending it on a funeral, adding, in his characteristic way, that the parish would have a pressing reason to bury him if they left him lying there too long.

It must not be supposed, however, that Mozart's life was one of actual want in the ordinary sense. He had immense powers, both of work and enjoyment; joked, laughed, told stories, talked, traveled, played, sang, rhymed, danced, masqueraded, acted, and played billiards well enough to delight in them all; and he had the charm of a child at thirty just as he had had the seriousness of a man at five. One gathers that many of his friends did not relish his superiority much more than Salieri did, and that, in spite of society and domesticity, he, on his highest plane, lived and died lonely and unhelpable. Still, on his more attainable planes, he had many enthusiastic friends and worshipers. What he lacked was opportunity to do the best he felt capable of in his art – a tragic privation.

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. Public performances of it are few and far between, and, until Richter conducted the E flat symphony here, nobody could have gathered from the vapid, hasty, trivial readings which were customary in our concert rooms that Mozart, judged by nineteenth-century standards, had any serious claim to his old-fashioned reputation. One reason among many for this mistake may be given. Leopold Mozart undoubtedly did his son the great harm of imposing his own narrow musical ideal on him, instead of allowing him to find out the full capacities of the art for himself. He taught the boy that when a piece of music sounded beautifully, and was symmetrically, ingeniously, and interestingly worked out in sonata form, nothing more was to be expected or even permitted. Mozart, if left untutored, would probably have arrived at the conclusion that a composition without a poetic or dramatic basis was a mere luxury, and not a serious work of art at all. As it was, he was trained to consider the production of "absolute music" as the normal end of composition, and when his genius drove him to make his instrumental music mean something, he wasted the most extraordinary ingenuity in giving it expression through the forms and without violating the usages of absolute music, bending these forms and usages to his poetic purpose with such success that the same piece of music serves as a pet passage of tone poetry to the amateur who knows nothing of musical formalism, while the pedant who is insensible to poetry or drama holds them up as models of classic composition to his pupils.

This combination of formalism with poetic significance has been much applauded, not only for its ingenuity, as is natural, but as a merit in the music, which is perverse and absurd. Mozart apologizing to his father for some unusual modulation which he could not justify except on poetic grounds cut but a foolish figure. If he had written his G minor quintet, for instance, in the free form contrived by Liszt for his symphonic poems, the death of his father, which immediately followed the composition of that work, would, no doubt, have been attributed to his horror on reading the score; but there is not the slightest ground for pretending, with Wagner's works to instruct us, that the quintet would have been one whit less admirable. Later on, when Mozart had quite freed himself, and come to recognize that the forbidden thing was exactly what he was born to do, he still, from mere habit and mastery, kept to the old forms closely enough to pass with us for a formalist, although he scared his contemporaries into abusing him exactly as Wagner has been abused within our own time. The result is that since Mozart, under his father's influence, produced a vast quantity of instrumental music which is absolute music and nothing else, and since even the great dramatic and poetic works of his later years were cast mainly in the moulds of that music, we have hastily concluded that all his work is of one piece, and that an intelligent dramatic handling of his great symphonies would be an anachronism. In his very operas it is hard, nowadays, to get the most obvious dramatic points in his orchestration attended to, even the churchyard scene in *Don Juan* being invariably rattled through at Covent Garden as if it were a surprisingly vapid quadrille.

Fortunately, the persistence with which Wagner fought all his life for a reform of orchestral execution as to Mozart's works, the example set by the conductors inspired by him, and such authoritative utterances as those of Gounod on the subject of *Don Giovanni*, not to mention social influences which cannot be so simply stated, are at last letting the public into 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. Its popularity is increasing at present, after a long interval. 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 *Tannhäuser* 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 and to value Wagner's best work apart from its mere novelty. The obstacle to that at present is the dulness of our daily lives, which makes us intemperate in our demands for sensation in art, and the bluntness of mind which prevents us from perceiving or relishing the essentially intellectual quality of the very finest music. Both these disqualifications are the result of deficient culture; and while that lasts Mozart will have to lie on the shelf. But that is so much the worse for the uncultured generation – not for the composer of *Don Juan*.

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