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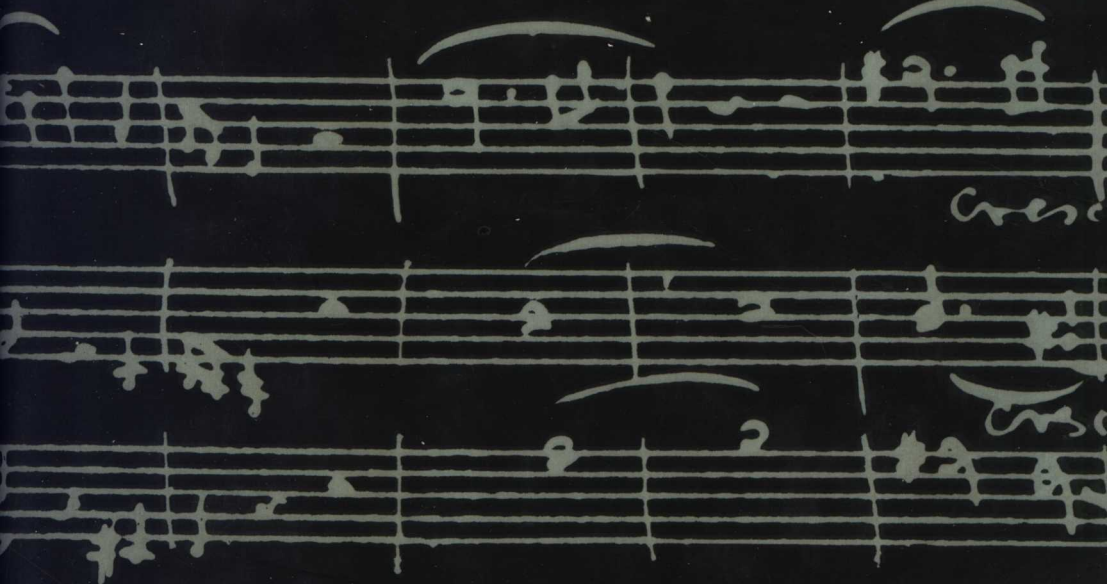
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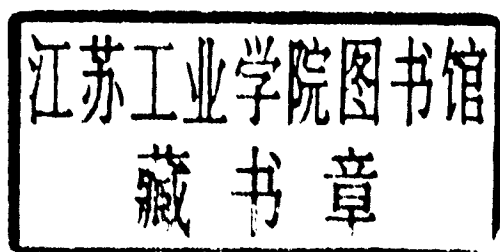
*edited by*

JAMES M. MORRIS

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# *On Mozart*

EDITED BY JAMES M. MORRIS



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AND



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From the eighteenth century to our own, Mozart has remained one of the world's most inventive and popular composers. The essays in this collection examine Mozart and his art from psychological, historical, cultural, and aesthetic perspectives. They set Mozart, first, in the timeless ahistorical space reserved for individuals of spectacular creativity, then in his time, and finally in our own time. Most of the authors are not professional Mozart scholars, and only a minority are musicologists, but all are Mozart lovers. Each speaks of Mozart and his accomplishments from a particular position of expertise—as psychologist, historian, biographer, economist, musicologist, literary critic, film critic.

The essays originated in a three-day symposium organized by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in 1991 to observe the bicentennial of the composer's death. In nonspecialist language, they seek to draw out the human genius of Mozart from the divinely inspired Mozart of myth, who took his notes directly from God. They consider Mozart as prodigy, as working composer, as family member, as late eighteenth century man, and as an enduring cultural presence, whose significance has changed over the course of two centuries, but whose stature has only grown.

*In Memory of*  
JOHN L. CLIVE  
1924–1990

Historian, Raconteur, Mozartian

*“Soave sia il vento . . .”*

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# Introduction

JAMES M. MORRIS

NOW COMES THE TEST. It is 1994 as I write, and the fever that marked the celebration, in the United States at least, throughout 1991 of the two hundredth anniversary of Mozart's death has long since broken. The recordings of his music claim less space, though not much less space, in record shops, and concert programming has become attentive once again to the riches of the non-Mozartean repertoire. But the public's love for Mozart holds. It's true that the Mostly Mozart Festival in New York City suffered a drop in attendance during the summer of 1992, a consequence perhaps of the need for some concertgoers to clear their heads and recover their footing after overdosing on *Nachtmusik* in 1991. Yet they were surely not inclined to kick the habit, and attendance rebounded last year. So far, the composer's popularity has survived the adulation.

Now that we are some distance from the Mozart bicentennial, the occasion invites further comment, as a striking instance of what can happen when the culture decides to bearhug an icon. Gioacchino Rossini had a birthday party in 1992, and it was a modest business indeed by comparison with the preceding year's exuberance. Bruckner and Brahms will soon claim centennial years of their own (1996 and 1997, respectively), and each observance will no doubt engage the intellect but probably not stir the heart. No other composer, with the exception perhaps of Beethoven, has so strong a claim on universal affection

as Mozart. That the enthusiasm of the bicentennial year should subside a bit and that the commercial clutter—the sweatshirts and ashtrays and coffee mugs bearing likenesses of the composer—should be swept from the shelves are both natural and healthy. The esteem had grown to idolatry and brought the concomitant abdication of critical sense that characterizes most worship.

What was sometimes dismaying about the bicentennial was neither its bountiful celebration of Mozart nor the enjoyment that so many people took in his music. It was rather the sense of lost opportunity, the failure to educate people to hear the differences in the music and to make confident judgments about its quality. Many listeners went on the equivalent of aesthetic automatic pilot. “If it’s Mozart, it must be good,” they believed, because that is the signal the culture sent through its secular canonization of the man.

Of course, “it” was always at least interesting. We are speaking, after all, of the work of a prodigy and a genius. But “it” was not always riveting or transcendent, despite what the evenness of the public’s enthusiasm might have tempted one to believe. Indeed, what was missing too often from the year’s festivities was a finer measure of discrimination. Too little was done to alert the engaged public—not the musicologists, who already know—to what is good, better, best in Mozart’s music and what is really rather ordinary by late-eighteenth-century standards. The opportunity to popularize a realistic Mozart, a figure from life and history, was seized only halfheartedly. It was as if the composer had emerged without a context and a progress through time, or had risen so far above his natural landscape that its contours were no longer visible beneath him.

Consider Lincoln Center’s determination to program over a period of some eighteen months just about every finished bit of music left by Mozart. He came through the exposure with reputation intact, and that confirmed his greatness. At the same time, the rationale that all of this music is worth hearing, if only because it is by Mozart, flattened his achievement. Better perhaps to have played fewer pieces over and over again than to have made room for everything by invoking the criterion of completeness.

In the same vein, one wonders what people will do with those compact-disc sets of “the complete Mozart” issued by Philips in 1990. Virtually every work is there, the slight along with the sublime,

sitting on a countertop in my local music store even as I write—145 compact discs for \$1,699.99, in forty-five volumes available separately or packaged together in two large boxes, with plastic handles, like super economy sizes of laundry detergent. According to a special supplement to the April 1993 issue of *The Gramophone*, world sales of performances in these sets had reached the extraordinary figure of nine million discs by the end of 1992. But what part of the vast corpus will actually command the attention of nonspecialist buyers? The portion already well known and well loved, I would wager, after some selective satisfaction of curiosity about the rest. We are less patient with the tunes of Mozart at sixteen because we know the melodies of Mozart at thirty. Best to regard these sets as one would an encyclopedia in which one invests with no intention of reading through each volume. The many pages on the many topics are there to be consulted should circumstances one day require, but to be left otherwise without thumbprint.

For the past several years in the United States, professing to love Mozart has become a kind of password that admits one to the high-culture club for a modest initiation fee. Individuals who might face with dismay the prospect of hearing Haydn or Schubert go placidly to Mozart concerts, happy to be in the presence of genius—because they have been told that's where they are. Were they then to hear a couple of Haydn symphonies under the impression that they were hearing Mozart, they would not know the difference.

The Mozart mania has been the equivalent of a pop-culture binge in the high-culture playground—like one of those blockbuster museum shows of recent decades that invite crowds to contemplate room after room of Picasso or Matisse while they are being funneled toward a merchandising operation, where they can buy genuine replicas of what they have just seen. The souvenirs confirm the experience, the way a small photograph of the Grand Canyon guarantees, when the recollection has clouded, that one actually stood on the brink.

What were the enduring consequences of the celebration? There were opportunities to hear works by the young Mozart (young being a relative term when the dead Mozart was, after all, still a young Mozart), and they proved by and large inferior to what he would compose when older. No surprises there. They reveal that he had mastered classical forms early on—he was of his time, and more quickly than

his competition—but that he could not yet breathe his peculiar genius into them. We knew all along that this was so and needed no bicentennial display to instruct us.

The Belgian Théâtre Royale de la Monnaie, for example, toured the world with a highly praised production of *La finta giardiniera*, an opera composed by Mozart when he was eighteen years old. This is remarkable for an eighteen-year-old, I recall thinking, and yet not remarkable for Mozart. In fact, the opera proved difficult to hear—not because one had any aural difficulty apprehending the music and the text, but because one kept hearing through them to the operas that would come afterward: the musical ideas presented by the composer in *Giardiniera* in scrupulous classical form would blossom gloriously one day into the transformed and, indeed, transforming musical landscapes of *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Così fan tutte*. In *Giardiniera* one senses Mozart's confidence in his mastery of form. The piece goes on at great length, as if to demonstrate the extravagance of the composer's talent. But that is the problem. The opera demonstrates talent, not genius, and familiarity with the eventual passionate manifestations of that genius engenders impatience with its expert but merely ordinary antecedents.

There is a risk of trivialization. Mozart is on his way to becoming background music for the age, safe because never really attended to except as a kind of cushion against the petty hurts of the day: white noise as civilized and elegant as any ever devised. Uncritical acceptance of the entire canon, as if it were all of a piece because all Mozart, does not serve the composer well.

Of course, no music is easier to listen to. It rewards even modest effort with great delight. It does not shake or disturb, not really, even when a stone spirit is dragging a man to his doom. It is kept in bounds by its conventions. If *Le nozze di Figaro* is subversive of established social order, as some wish to believe, the threat barely registers on grateful modern audiences. The larger threat is that Mozart will spoil us for other music, particularly music that demands work on the part of an audience if it is to be understood, respected, and, in time perhaps, with enough effort and familiarity, loved. But why make the effort when we already have this great body of work that is at once accessible and capable of imparting such life-enhancing pleasure?

It is not Mozart's fault that he claims so much of the programming time of the contemporary orchestra or chamber group or opera com-

pany or soloist out to fill the seats of an auditorium. To decry the absence of newer work is to pit the untried and surely unlikely against genius long embraced and lovingly guarded. The compromise solution is to sneak the newer music (“new” in this setting being a term that bears little relation to the common understanding of the chronological schemes by which the world orders its affairs) onto a program that prominently features Mozart, and to serve the rare stuff first—as if it were a disagreeable course at dinner, some strange crustacean or mutated vegetable that one ingests only because promised a creamy dessert. Of course, too much creamy dessert will slow the blood.

What did Mozart’s contemporaries hear when they heard his music? How different for them was he from Haydn or Salieri or Dittersdorf or Süssmayr? Why has it been left to our age to enact the final stages of an elaborate ritual of divinization? Why is it well-nigh blasphemous to be critical of the man or confess that, on the whole, one prefers Beethoven or Schubert or Brahms or even Verdi? How can one take exception to perfection? These are mysteries beyond the deciphering capacity of reason. We may speculate and bring to bear the conclusions of methodical research, but in the end we scratch our heads or, more operatically, throw up our hands. In the realm of taste, some regions will be marked forever with stakes that warn “Here be dragons.”

So perhaps we should not judge the bicentennial salute too harshly. Mozart himself would have been pleased with the notoriety—and the royalties. Imagine him in a well-stocked contemporary music and video store, searching the shelf after shelf of recordings under his name, calculating with satisfaction how much more space he has been given than even Papa Haydn, and noting with greater pleasure still, while leafing through the “S” bin, the likely absence of anything by Salieri. Surely he would be curious about these last two centuries of competition against which he has held his own—and, by linear measure at least, prevailed. So many unfamiliar names! What sounds did they propose, he wonders, for their publics’ pleasure?

The imagined happiness of this fantastic shopping Mozart may be reason enough to justify the bicentennial, which was not all missed opportunity. Some institutions did take the occasion to educate (that was an implicit purpose of even the Lincoln Center marathon), and this volume commemorates one conspicuously public attempt to do so. Late in 1991, a group of the most important cultural organizations in Washington, D.C., joined forces to observe the two hundredth

anniversary of Mozart's death. The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the Library of Congress, the National Gallery of Art, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars sponsored a series of performances, exhibitions, and symposia to honor the composer. The Woodrow Wilson Center organized the most significant of these symposia, "Mozart and the Riddle of Creativity." It took place over four days in the first week of December and concluded on the afternoon of December 5, the date of Mozart's death, in time for participants to attend the performance of the *Requiem* given that evening by the National Symphony Orchestra at the Kennedy Center.

The symposium began as an idea in the mind of the late historian John Clive, loving reader of the great historians of the past, biographer of Thomas Macaulay, and Mozart enthusiast. He conceived of a bicentennial event that would instruct intelligent lay audiences about Mozart, and entertain them as well, by presenting the composer in a context that had the density of real life and was, by turns, personal, psychological, historical, cultural, and aesthetic. Clive died early in 1990, and it fell to his friend Charles Blitzler, director of the Woodrow Wilson Center, to shape the agenda of the symposium, to choose its participants, and to raise support for it. Three foundations—the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation—contributed generously, and the National Gallery of Art and the National Museum of American History provided space for the sessions.

A group of scholars—some expert on Mozart and some not, but all knowledgeable appreciators—met for three mornings in the East Building Auditorium of the National Gallery of Art to deliver papers, debate with one another, and field questions from the audience. The symposium took for its point of departure an inquiry into the nature of creativity generally, as background to situating the particular genius of Mozart. It set him first in the timeless ahistorical space reserved for individuals of spectacular creativity, then in his time, and finally in our time. Each afternoon, for example, the audience watched a filmed version of a Mozart opera, introduced by critic Stanley Kauffmann, who reflected not just on the success or failure of the film but on the larger issue of how a work of art created for one medium can be transposed into another medium that has quite different rules. Kauffmann's generously expansive approach was typical of the entire event.

For this volume the original lectures have been expanded and revised, and their order has been shifted. Two papers that were not part of the original mix—those by Christoph Wolff and Denis Donoghue—have been added. In the opening chapters, Donoghue offers philosophic and aesthetic reflections on music and genius and on how we might approach the two in the conspicuous case of Mozart, while psychologists Howard Gardner and David Henry Feldman write of prodigies in general and of the prodigious Mozart in particular. William and Hilda Baumol then set the composer within the social and economic context of his time, and Neal Zaslaw and Christoph Wolff observe him among the workaday circumstances of his craft. Subsequent chapters enlarge our understanding of a Mozart who is at once all too human and consummately professional. Maynard Solomon uses textual evidence to explore the troubled relationship between Mozart and members of his family, and Joseph Kerman uses musical evidence to suggest the collapse of a relationship between Mozart and his Viennese audience in the 1780s. Like Kerman, Wye Allanbrook works from the music, but she hears in it a different aspect of the composer's personality—a “comic” Mozart, whom she urges us to take seriously. Michael Steinberg pits the composer against the dominant culture of his age, and Leon Botstein traces his fate through the next century (and more) of musical and cultural development. Finally, Stanley Kauffmann explains how directors harnessing the technologies of film and television have presented certain of the composer's works to contemporary audiences.

Denis Donoghue begins the volume with a discussion of the many contexts, “spiritual” and “sensual,” against which Mozart's music has been heard over the years and asks how well any of them will serve us today. How are we to speak of the manifestations of genius, even if we cannot account for them? Schumann, for example, believed Mozart to be a composer of lightness, grace, and charm, though others have heard, in the same measures, the demonic, the sinful, and the terrifying. How can this be? Is a political, economic, civil, and essentially secular context sufficient for our appreciation of Mozart, or must we have recourse to categories that invoke metaphysical realms and religious experience? Using as his text *Die Zauberflöte*, which might seem the hardest case, Donoghue opts for a secular Mozart. *Die Zauberflöte*, he says, “is entirely secular, despite its invocations of Isis and Osiris. . . . [W]hen there is an allusion to a religious theme, Mozart quickly

disperses it into sociality.” And yet, for Donoghue, as for Gardner and Feldman in the essays that immediately follow his, there remains within the achievement of the individual genius, at the core of any appreciation, a degree of mystery that resists solution.

The psychologists Howard Gardner and David Feldman bring to their study of Mozart the experience of having worked for many years with gifted and creative people. Their research is closely linked. Gardner has been investigating whether there are characteristics of the creative process that are common across various realms of endeavor. He discerns in all the individuals he has studied a pattern whereby each achieves mastery over some area of creativity after a period of about ten years, and then makes a second breakthrough some ten years later. “One can find other individuals of Mozart’s era, or of our own era,” writes Gardner, “with whom he shared salient characteristics: individuals as prodigious as Mozart, individuals as productive, individuals as personally pugnacious and troubled.” It is the combination of prodigality, productivity, and pugnaciousness that marks Mozart as extraordinary. Gardner identifies several factors that argue for Mozart’s uniqueness: the evenness of his growth and productivity; the combination of immature and adult traits in his personality; the sharpness of his insight into human personalities (as manifested in the operas but not in his own life). Yet he is forced to acknowledge finally the mystery against which our passion to lay bare the sources of genius proves ineffectual: “All that we know of Mozart’s brief life provides scant insights into his music. . . . Mozart remains among the most compelling arguments for respecting the distance between the personal life and the life of the creative mind.”

Feldman has spent more than a decade studying child prodigies and constructing a framework for the study of creativity. He finds that Mozart exhibits characteristics of both the typical and the untypical prodigy; unlike most prodigies, for example, Mozart had a successful adult career. Feldman reflects on the mind and emotions of the composer at “a level of interpretation above the flow of events themselves” that is nonetheless “respectful of the facts as we know them.” To the study of two aspects of Mozart’s behavior—his love of verbal play, as manifested especially in his letters, and his exceptional sociability—Feldman applies his concept of “the transformational imperative.” By this he means the tendency human beings exhibit, in markedly different degrees, “to take intentional liberties with the world, and thereby



to change it.” Mozart’s transformative impulses were incessant, according to Feldman, and he can document their occurrence. Yet, for all the evidence, he concedes that the scale and the individual character of Mozart’s achievement remain unexplained, and perhaps inexplicable.

If the interior workings of genius remain closed to our inspection, the trappings of the world in which it flourished are another matter. In their exceptionally interesting chapter, William and Hilda Baumol consider the political, social, and economic circumstances of the late eighteenth century that favored the emergence of so many talented composers—not just Mozart, of course, but Gluck, Haydn, Dittersdorf, Salieri, Beethoven, Schubert, and more. Unlike Feldman and Gardner, the Baumols do not attempt to account for the sources of creativity. They are concerned rather with the circumstances that encourage its manifestation and growth. These they trace in part to the rising prosperity of the age and to the sheer number of petty states that existed at the time in the Holy Roman Empire, each with its own petty prince and each a potential home for court orchestra and court composer. Thus, musical talent was a marketable commodity (the authors draw an analogy with the situation of playwrights in Elizabethan England). Romantic notions of Mozart’s impoverished circumstances die hard, but the Baumols’ careful economic analysis edges such notions somewhat closer to the grave.

Neal Zaslaw continues in this practical vein. After Gardner’s and Feldman’s speculations, it is startling to have him suggest that Mozart went about his business not for the high-minded motives we might like to hear in the music—“inner necessity” or “pure inspiration” or “for posterity”—but simply to make money and to live well, to buy furniture and clothes and carriages. Here is a counterweight to the received tradition of the beatific composer in direct communication with heaven, and to comments such as George Bernard Shaw’s that “if God had a voice it would be Mozart’s.” Some part of us might still prefer the myth to the reality that the composer increased his output to remedy a cash-flow problem. Though we live in an age when art and the marketplace regularly bed down together, we would prefer to avert our eyes from their lusty union when certain hallowed figures are involved. Zaslaw’s cold water on the flame of piety is a bracing corrective. The alternative he proposes has in its favor the texture of real life.