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Historicizing the Mozart Myth: Volkmar Braunbehrens's *Mozart in Wien*

Genius fascinates. Faced with the extraordinary occurrence that we call "genius," we are driven to try to define and understand it, not only what it is but how it came to be. It is the same whether we speak of a literary genius like William Shakespeare or a musical genius like Wolfgang Amadè Mozart. Moved by the power of the words or, in Mozart's case, by the time-defying freshness and relevance of the music, we turn to an examination of the artist, of his life, his contemporaries, his times, hoping to find the key to such genius or, at the least, a better understanding of how its creative power came to be. Writing in 1831, after years of concern with Mozart's music that began when he first heard Mozart – then a lad of seven – play the piano, Goethe could only say: "But of course, the appearance of a Mozart is and remains a miracle, beyond our ability to explain." Goethe may be right, but we persist nevertheless in seeking an explanation, which biographers of two centuries have sought to provide.

A recent book, originally published in German in 1986 and now available in English translation (*Mozart in Vienna, 1781-1791*, translated by Timothy Bell [New York: Grove Press, 1989]), presents the results of a wide-ranging historical examination, concentrating on the last ten years of Mozart's life. In *Mozart in Wien* (Munich: Piper Verlag), Volkmar Braunbehrens tries to get beyond the anecdotes, myths, and moralizings of earlier Mozart biographies, in which the absence of fact never got in the way of a good story. To do this, Braunbehrens frees himself from the myopic Mozart-centricity of most earlier biographies and takes the approach that a wider understanding of Mozart's times will bring a better appreciation of what Mozart accomplished. As the author notes in his foreword, the book is "simultaneously the biography of the Josephine decade in Vienna" – the period from 1780 to 1790, when Joseph II reigned alone as Kaiser, following the death of his mother and co-regent, the Empress Maria Theresa. In 1781, Mozart left his father's home in Salzburg, took up residence in Vienna, and lived there until he died in 1791. Braunbehrens uses this almost perfect coincidence in time to weave together the events and activities of Mozart's life and the political, economic, and social initiatives of the reform-minded apostle of the Enlightenment and consummate despot, Joseph II.

This review was written in 1988, before the Timothy Bell translation was available, and subsequently published in the journal, *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* (Vol. 30, Number 1, Spring 1989; ISSN 0193-5380), pp.73-8.

Biography is a balancing act. The biographer who comes too close to his subject, who falls in love with his hero, who would enter his ego, speak his thoughts, and express his every mood, forfeits the perspective of distance and objectivity. And yet too great a distance renders the biographer incapable of the revealing insight that draws errant threads together. In Mozart biography, the tendency over the years has been to try to draw ever closer to the subject. And yet, despite the large fund of letters (some 350 from Mozart himself, several hundred from his father) that have come down to us, our certain knowledge of the man is not great. There are long periods, especially in the later years in Vienna, when the written record tells us little or nothing of consequence about what Mozart was doing from day to day, much less anything about the state of his artistic being. Almost none of those people closest to Mozart – the musicians and singers with whom he worked, for example – has left any contemporary report of him. Such reports as do exist (Da Ponte's autobiography, for example, or the reminiscences of the Irish tenor Michael Kelly, who sang Don Curzio and Don Basilio in the first production of *Figaro*) were written several decades after the contacts with Mozart they describe. Beginning in February 1784, Mozart started a notebook in which he noted down – more or less faithfully – each new composition as he finished it. On either side of the occasional fixed points are often profound voids of fact, voids which biographers from the beginning have been all too ready to fill with whatever anecdote or surmise would serve. Until relatively recently, succeeding generations of biographers tended to rewrite the facts, half-facts, myths, and legends of the ones before, taking little effort to differentiate or to validate.

Probably the best known book on Mozart published in the last fifty years is Alfred Einstein's *Mozart: His Character, His Work*. When he wrote the book in the middle thirties, Einstein had just completed his monumental revision of the Köchel catalog of Mozart's compositions. As a guide to the universe of Mozart's music, the book is still useful. As biography, it is little more than a rewrite of anecdotes past. Since Einstein published his book, however, there has been a growing effort to fashion a truer appreciation of Mozart, free of the unfounded story and the judgments intended to push our perception of the man this way or that. In the late seventies, Wolfgang Hildesheimer broke through the sterility of much previous Mozart biographical effort with his book, *Mozart*. It provided a new impulse to the field, especially in the way Hildesheimer sought to demonstrate the light one could throw upon the lives of Mozart and his family by a psychological reading of the many letters that have survived; however, Hildesheimer's psychological analysis was ultimately marred by his inability to objectify his approach to Mozart. The book is in many ways a failure, a biography written too close to the subject.

Volkmar Braunbehrens has been far more successful at the balancing act. He is not only a graduate musicologist, but a skilled historical researcher as well. Two principles characterize his approach:

one, to extend as widely as possible the body of admissible contemporary knowledge relevant to his subject; and two, to be explicit about what is known, what is unknown, and what is only surmise. Informing these two principles is a commitment to detailed inquiry and research, facilitated by an uncommon ability to discern the connection between matters which do not immediately appear to be related.

The focus of Braunbehrens on the last decade of Mozart's life is in part determined by the fact that once Mozart had moved to Vienna, he seldom left the city. (By contrast, *das Wunderkind* Mozart spent ten of his first 25 years on the road, traveling to France, England, Italy, etc.) Braunbehrens has capitalized upon this circumstance to investigate a comprehensive body of sources – municipal records, newspapers, and political tracts, as well as letters, diaries, and other commentaries of daily and social activities in Vienna – sources that seldom contain any mention of Mozart and that, for this reason, have received little attention from previous Mozart biographers. And yet, as Braunbehrens demonstrates, these sources have the potential to tell us much about Mozart and his life in Vienna. In the end, the author has not uncovered many previously unknown facts about Mozart, but he has provided us with new perspectives that yield new understanding.

Take, for example, the enduring legend of "poor" Mozart, reduced in his last years to begging his friends for a handout. No element is so vital to the Mozart myth as that of the composer's ultimate descent into abject poverty, for from this theme flow sub-themes and variations: rejection, ruin, burial in a pauper's grave. The Braunbehrens approach proceeds characteristically at two levels. At one level, he systematically adds up the sums of money Mozart is known to have received in his last ten years and sets them in a coherent historical framework. Having established the minimum levels of income for each year, Braunbehrens offers his estimate of what Mozart's average annual income would have been if all the facts were known. He then moves his examination of the subject to a broader level. He first provides the reader with a detailed basis for comprehending Mozart's income over these last ten years in relation to the income of other musicians and composers in Vienna at the time, as well as the income of other social groupings. Then he turns to the major source of the poverty myth -- the series of *Bittbriefe* (letters asking for loans) that Mozart wrote his friend and fellow-Mason, Michael Puchberg, beginning in 1788 and extending irregularly into 1791. In doing so, Braunbehrens fills in the historical situation in these last four years of Mozart's existence, describing both the general political and economic malheurs of the period as well as Mozart's personal circumstances, especially his wife's illness.

In brief: much of Mozart's not inconsiderable income during the last years in Vienna can be documented; it is less easy to document his outgo. The evidence suggests, however, that Mozart essentially lived at the level of his income. When from 1788 on, he was confronted with uncertain income and unexpected increases in expenses (chiefly the result of Constanze's illness), he elected to supplement his income by borrowing rather than by cutting back on his standard of living. Later, even though his prospects had substantially improved, anxiety over his financial situation hung on. In short, Mozart often felt himself strapped for ready cash in his last years, but poor he was not, nor did he ever regard himself as such.

Living in Vienna, Mozart became an active and engaged Freemason. The depth of his commitment can be seen in the numerous compositions he wrote as part of his contribution to Loge activities. This much has been known and often commented upon. Einstein devotes a chapter in his book to "Catholicism and Freemasonry" in Mozart's life. As the title suggests, Einstein tends to see the interest in Freemasonry largely as an extension of Mozart's spiritual orientation and development. It is further evidence of Braunbehrens's whole approach that he goes at the subject in an examination that relates the political, social, and intellectual attractions of Freemasonry under the absolute despotism of Joseph II to Mozart's life as citizen and artist. To do this, the author draws upon the "Confidential Archives" of the Viennese internal security forces, deployed by Joseph's successors to report on the suspect activities of the Loges and to confiscate their records and correspondence. Braunbehrens's analysis of the Freemasonry connection in Mozart's life has no parallel in Mozart biography. Its effect is to deepen our appreciation both of life in the Josephine era in Vienna and of Mozart as a man keenly interested in the problems of his times and active in his society.

It is this dualism of approach throughout the book that gives substance to the portrait of Mozart that emerges. The author addresses himself repeatedly to the difference between the contemporary Mozart and the Mozart of myth and legend. The need to make this distinction surfaces often, for much of the "traditional" view of Mozart (represented to the point of parody in the film *Amadeus*) reflects the value systems and judgments of later times and has little or no relevance to an understanding of what took place in the late eighteenth century in Vienna. Why, for example, did Vienna react so tepidly to *Don Giovanni* when it first opened there in May 1788? Didn't the Viennese see the magnificence of the drama and appreciate Mozart's musical projection of its demonic character? No, Braunbehrens points out, because the Don Juan theme was no novelty to the theater-going audience of 1788, and because the elucidation of its demonic brilliance would only come with E. T. A. Hoffmann, writing in 1813. Explaining his approach

in a parenthesis as he begins his discussion of the opera, Braunbehrens says, "It goes to the question of Mozart and his contemporaries, of *their* historical relationship, and not of some later view of Mozart."

Integral to the author's methodology is the frequent identification of research yet to be undertaken. Braunbehrens notes, for example, that there is still only scant detailed knowledge of concert activity in Vienna during the years when Mozart (and Haydn and others) were composing and performing. It is one of the ironies that we are informed in detail about that event which was supposed to be most secret – the commission that led to the composition of Mozart's Requiem – but we often know next to nothing about a program that Mozart played at a concert attended by several hundred people. The work of Braunbehrens gives the promise that there is more to be learned in this field; the research remains to be done. It is the same for many other matters related to furthering our understanding of Mozart. If, with sound research and analysis, we can come ultimately to a comprehensive perception of Mozart, his life and his work, then we will be better prepared to take the next important step: to explain the significance of his genius to our own times. This new book by Volkmar Braunbehrens is an important contribution to that end.

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