

Nikolaus Harnoncourt

Mozart-related excerpts from an interview

In connection with the Styriarte music festival held in Graz, Austria, in the summer of 1989, the conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt was interviewed by Mathis Huber. Questions and replies relating to Mozart, the man and his music, came towards the end of the interview.

Mathis Huber: Perhaps it is a complicated matter, but it would be very interesting if you could outline for us the history of the reception of Mozart's music from his times to ours as you see it. And what is your personal opinion in this regard?

Nikolaus Harnoncourt: Well, of course I am not a trained historian, but I can tell you how I see things. To begin with, from the instant a piece leaves its composer, it is no longer his. The composer delivers up the picture made by his notes on the page, and he may enjoy two or three performances of his work. Then its interpretation becomes a matter for performers.

Now in the first place, the printed score does not begin to tell us how the piece goes. For that we have to know a great deal about what the composer intends with the notes he has written down. In the absence of specific instructions, the notes as such tell us nothing at all. They are only lines and dots that, in some magical way, convey the meaning of a work to the keeper of the key. And no more than that. And even the most exact construing and interpreting of the score leaves open the possibility of all kinds of misunderstandings. You can play every last note right and still play the work wrong.

Now it seems to me that the works of many composers, including Mozart, possess such power that they are able to withstand even being torn from their composer -- from the womb, so to speak -- and forced to lead an independent life, for the very reason that their quality shows through every possible interpretation.

And then something extraordinary occurs: practically every generation comes to see such works in a new way, always in the conviction that it is being completely true to the composer. The next generation, on the other hand, finds it false and comes up with a new approach. And when you look back over now some 200 years, then you can say that important aspects have usually been right all along and that it all turns out to have been a matter of bringing to the fore a detail that had hitherto been overlooked. And that at cost to the work as a whole and to the other details.

But I believe this to be a fundamental right of the interpreter because ultimately music must be interpreted. We cannot simply put the scores on display for all to see. Music must be performed by an understanding

musician, and he lives in his own time when certain opinions or, more brutally expressed, certain fashions hold sway. And just like fashions in dress, artistic fashions change from generation to generation. And so it happens that one facet of a work is given prominence and the work as a whole is neglected. And each generation believes that now it has expressed the work in its entirety and that preceding generations only possessed parts of it.

And I can imagine that, to the degree a particular age has lost the sense of its own identity and been driven more and more to occupy itself with the classics of the past, to that degree the work as a whole would bulk larger and larger. That is pure speculation of course: it could also be that generations to come will find our point of view just as ridiculous as we are apt, if we are not tolerant, to regard the approaches of earlier generations.

Now to be more specific. The major orchestral works of Mozart, that is, the operas and the symphonies, were looked on during his lifetime and in the first decades after his death as terribly heart-rending, harrowing. When I think back on the performances of the G-minor symphony that I experienced in 17 years of playing in an orchestra from 1952 to 1969, I cannot remember a single performance of this work that could have been called heart-rending. I always felt it was very nice, beautifully composed, often touching, moving perhaps, but my opinion was this: we must be playing it wrong, it cannot possibly have been meant that way, because whatever it was that the audiences of those times heard is not there for us to hear.

It began in the first generation after Mozart -- people chose from among his works and they selected only those works most congenial to the spirit of the times. In this regard, what Brahms and Clara Schumann said to one another, two generations later, when they spoke of Mozart is quite typical: "Yes, I have found something, something quite remarkable, this sinfonie concertante for violin and viola. Naturally one cannot perform it in public but for us connoisseurs, it is a rare treat."

Or take another example: "Così fan tutte." People found the music to be beautifully written but said that Mozart had wasted his skill on an unworthy libretto, and so it was that many efforts were made to rescue the music by giving it a new book and changing the plot. The attitudes of today look on such efforts as simply ridiculous, because today we have come to the view that it is a marvelous libretto, one of the most wonderful and lovely that could possibly be written, and the marriage of text and music is incomparably done. But this would not lead me to say: "They were stupid in those bygone days, they did not understand as we do." Rather I would have to say that it simply had not fit with the spirit and taste of the times; no one can castigate another for not thinking ahead forty or eighty years rather than living in his own time. To think about it historically, really historically, you have to have an insight into an era that was itself very self-confident, something not to be expected, something like the era in which Wagner, Brahms, Bruckner were composing and each new composition from them was a stirring event for the whole world of music.

Now let me summarize rather quickly what has happened to Mozart in this century. We all remember how Mozart has been performed in the last thirty years, but I remember as well how Mozart was performed earlier, and when I

listen to early recordings, I can tell exactly whether the recording was made before Gustav Mahler had exerted his influence or afterwards. For in those recordings not affected by Mahler's influence, the tempo changes every couple of measures in an interesting way but one alien to our tastes today, and the singing involves deliberate use of appoggiaturas and embellishments. The tempos are very quick for the most part, much quicker than we are used to today.

Then comes the divide and you can tell that the performer has taken Mahler's reforms on board. The tempos are even, there are no more appoggiaturas or embellishments, none whatsoever, and these reforms have so profoundly taken hold in the music world that the mode of interpretation which was customary at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries has ceased to exist inside of two generations.

Today, a straightforward approach to musical interpretation dominates the scene, tempos are held, you guard their expression very carefully and say, "A tempo must be even. If you don't keep time, you are making a mistake." And this has led to things being demanded the rightness of which has not been thought through and we have not even asked if they make sense. Today I see that a lot of that is not right and that here too the baby has been thrown out with the bathwater.

Huber: To conclude, let us come back a bit closer to the Styriarte festival. This year you are conducting eight of the Mozart symphonies in Graz. Did you just pick the first ones you thought of or did you have particular criteria in mind? What was your concept?

Harnoncourt: You see, I did not want to play the late symphonies, I wanted rather to concentrate on the Mozart who existed before he had established himself in Vienna. Moreover, I wanted to haul these symphonies out of their life in the shadows, used only to warm up the audience, and to give them a place on the program as the focal point. If you recall, that was a major objective of mine in connection with the symphonies of Haydn. One usually says, "To end the concert, we'll perform a big Tschaikowsky symphony." But Haydn is supposed to be played too, so then he has to come at the beginning. And this means his symphony will not be rehearsed properly, even though it is vastly more difficult to play than the big romantic symphony.

And now in place of Haydn you can say Mozart, for it is exactly the same. The Salzburg C-major symphony or the Haffner symphony is indescribably difficult technically to play, these are works that make the highest technical demands. But they are often rehearsed just so they will work somehow. On the other hand, when we look on such a composition as the major offering, then it is no longer merely something to start the concert with. That wonderfully proved to be the case in Graz with the Haydn symphonies and those of Schubert too, I think, when the audience and we in the orchestra were fully caught up in the music from the first measure on. And that is the reason why this time I did not want to do the Jupiter or the G-minor symphony.

Huber: In addition to the symphonies, you are conducting two masses by the youthful Mozart. Do the masses express something about the religious attitudes of the composer, who does not appear to me to be exactly what I would call excessively religious?

Harnoncourt: Well, now, how religious is religious? I mean, an excess of religion is a false religiosity. I know the Mozart letters very well (and I approach them with the greatest respect and not with the scalpel of a psychoanalyst in hand, for I find it almost an inexcusable embarrassment that these letters are open to us), and I do not have the slightest doubt as to Mozart's religious beliefs.

On the other hand, I must say that Mozart was first and last a pro and we should not attempt to draw his personal biography out of his compositions. His ability to write wonderful masses which give voice to a deep understanding of the words and ritual of the mass provides me no evidence at all of his religious feeling, rather it only tells me that he knew Latin, that he knew the liturgy, and that he understood the religious impulse.

I cannot discern if he was in a state of belief when he composed a mass, although in my opinion he was. Only be careful: that does not come out of his composition. Just as I cannot tell if he was sad when he wrote a tragic symphony. I can only observe that no emotion was foreign to him, that he could understand everything, and that he could express it in music. But if he felt that in the very moment of composing the work is something that no one can tell. And that is what I find so extraordinary. That is the professionalism in him.

Translation:
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