

On 27 January 2006, the Austrian conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt gave a talk in the Mozarteum concert hall in Salzburg, marking the official opening of the Mozart-Year 2006 observances. This informal and unofficial translation was made from a verbatim transcript of his remarks.

Festrede von Nikolaus Harnoncourt

Because I think Mozart's symphony is in fact the opening speech, I would like, ladies and gentlemen, simply to welcome you.

The G minor symphony Köchel 550 that we are about to perform was composed as the middle work of the three last symphonies, works that certainly all belong together. They clearly portray a kind of pilgrim's progress of mankind. Starting with the symphony in E-flat major, the key of love, but also of "solemn seriousness," Mozart takes us down into the abyss of the G minor symphony, where all is put to question, only to resolve it perfectly with the glorious C major of the Jupiter symphony, bringing release and redemption to the distraught listener. Out of Mozart's more than 40 symphonies, there are only two in the minor mode, both of them in the key of G minor. In his day, G minor was regarded as the key of death, as the key of sorrow, and felt as such by those hearing it.

Even in the very first theme – you will hear it in a moment – not a single note is struck directly, an appoggiatura leans on every note, an appoggiatura either from above or from below. Thus what seems the simplest, the most natural thing in the world is rendered unearthly, ethereal. It blurs – we hear it as though seen through waves of water. The second movement begins with the fugal theme, slightly concealed, of the Jupiter symphony, which is in the key of E-flat major, as though the nightmares of the first movement were being dispelled, thus giving promise, so to speak, of "hope for a better world."

We shall now play the first two movements.

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And now, after this incredible music – where no word is adequate, where silence should prevail – I am supposed nevertheless to say something about Mozart and, if possible, something about this Year. No! For this music, no rhetoric is adequate. Still I'm expected to say something about Mozart, but how can I? Nobody can, yet everybody does these days. This year Austria means Mozart. But that doesn't have anything to do with him, I'm afraid. It has rather more with business and money-making. Actually we should all be feeling a bit embarrassed. For, you see, what Mozart wants from us, and what he has been wanting for more than 200 years, would be so easy: we should have been staying completely still and listening carefully. And when we had understood his pleas and supplications, then, as I said, we should really have felt embarrassed, rather than going around feeling proud of ourselves. – Today we praise him and applaud him, and it sounds almost as though we were wishing to praise and applaud ourselves. But where Mozart is concerned, we have absolutely no reason to be, somehow, proud of ourselves. Not even since the time when he was living here in Salzburg and in Vienna.

With the unsparing insistence of his genius, he demands something from us and we offer up our anniversary celebrations with their calculations of profit and loss and allow his music, chopped up into little pieces, to pour from all the channels of commerce. That simply should not be – it's a scandal and a disgrace – how do we put up with it? For if, in spite of all this, a Year of Reflection should nevertheless be made meaningful, then we must listen – listen – listen – and then we will come to understand, perhaps, some small part of the message. Mozart doesn't need our accolades – it is we who need him and the deeply moving whirlwind of his music. And so, in reality, an anniversary year is an opportunity for us.

What the substance of his pleas to us? It is Art itself, it is Music, and we are called to account for what we have done with it and are still doing with it – and over and beyond that, what we are neglecting and not doing.

Art, and with it Music, is an essential part of human life, it is given to us as a counterpoise to all that is practical, useful, and usable. It is clear to me that, as many philosophers say, it is Art, and Music especially, that endows mankind with humanity. Art is an inexplicable gift of magic, a magical language.

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Because Art dwells in the realm of fantasy, there is something mysterious about it, something beyond explaining. Its invisible power is enormous and dangerous, its impact is subversive. And for this very reason, rulers down through the ages have constantly tried to make it serve them. But without success, for Art is always in opposition, is always sovereign, it can neither be tamed nor taken over. It is a language of the indescribable, the unutterable – but one that often comes nearer to ultimate truth than the language of words, of communication with its logic, its clarity, its dreadful "either Yes or No." The purposes that we grant to Art in making it serve us are many and varied, to calm us but also to allow us to brag and boast. In our lovely, well-patronized musical life, people ought to find rest and pleasure in it after their strenuous work – they should find renewed energy and strength to deal with the stress of the day – and this line of thought is dangerous step in a long and illegitimate process of making Art "useful." The music of the great composers has almost never served this trend, it was always much more than that: in short, it was a sensitive reaction to the intellectual climate of the times.

Music was, and still is, a mirror that helped the listener to recognize himself, that let him peer into the depths: when people were hearing Mozart's G minor symphony for the first time, they wanted to know if such shocking music was allowed. For the people then, the symphony went to the ultimate limits of music's power to speak. The Swiss cultural philosopher Hans Georg Nägeli (1773-1836), in common with many of his contemporaries, expressed grave doubts whether such music made sense, indeed, was even permitted – in those days, certainly no one left for home feeling soothed and comforted.

Through Art we are drawn, often virtually driven, to new knowledge: it is the mirror thrust before us. Somehow to get away from it, we have adopted a purely aesthetic, some would even call it a "frivolous," way of dealing with Art: we listen to "beautiful" music, we look at "beautiful" paintings – but we would rather not let ourselves be shaken by it and certainly not be changed completely.

As a young orchestra member fifty years ago, I had to play Mozart's G minor symphony over and over again every year – and in these days, always sweet and pleasant, the listeners would nod their heads contentedly and afterwards speak of "Mozart bliss." But the score I saw before me was saying something quite different: how everything here is being called into question, yes, being wrenched asunder: the melody, the harmony, the tempi. Strictly speaking, nothing is as it should be, except perhaps the romantic Trio of the Minuet. Of course, it could have been that in those days right after the Second World War people had a need for radiant harmonies, for something to gladden them – they had already had enough of terrible experiences. And so it was then that almost every Mozart interpretation emphasized all that was light and positive – and suppressed all that was shocking and distressing.

This symphony held my fate in its hands: it radically changed my life when, one day after 17 years as an orchestra cellist and not wanting to play it "sweet and pleasant" one more time, I left the orchestra. . .

In this symphony, one can discern a kind of challenge, not unlike that found in many works of literature and the plastic arts: how far may, or should, or must Art go. But also: what can and must the listener be prepared to bear. That is what Mozart was constantly probing to the absolute limit.

In common with virtually all great artists, Mozart as a person remains enigmatic. There is something eerie about him. People think they know all about him – and his life is certainly well documented – but when you go to say something about him, you see right away that you really don't know him.

By and large, our historical or biographical "knowledge" is no knowledge at all. We come by it indirectly and fancy that we are eyewitnesses. We regard the pictures – from television, for example – as facts and believe we have been there, but we haven't really, we haven't felt it in our flesh and blood. The pictures are just that, pictures – but the reality has been feigned – it was altogether something else. We shall never learn the truth about the person Mozart – the picture of him that we treasure is one we have made for ourselves. Only his works possess the truth.

To know and understand the person seems impossible – and so, as with many artists, we've arrived at a kind of "Doppelgänger" approach. As though there were two Mozarts: one, the playful child, the happy adolescent extrovert, about whom his friends could never ever say that he was grumpy; who wrote his letters in a polished personal style from early on; well-educated, quick-witted, and sure of himself. The Mozart beloved of biographers, with all his financial, family and artistic crises: was he rich or poor? was he at odds with his father or were they as one in loving harmony? after "Le Nozze di Figaro" failed in Vienna, was he artistically washed up? I don't believe a word of it. Keep in mind what Oswald Spengler says: "Nature should be dealt with scientifically, but history – it should be written with poetry" – and that we've done beyond all measure.

But the other Mozart, the actual Mozart, is beyond our reach and comprehension; he defies every judgment. When we try to get a hold on him, then to our shame we must admit that we have no yardstick equal to his dimensions: he came from another world. He lives only through his works: serious of purpose at all times, severe even in his wit. The "Musikalische Spass" was no less bitter a piece than the eerie laughing-aria in "Zaide." What a shock it must have been in the Mozart household when his father recognized the genius in his little child. He thinks he has a sweet, bright youngster and suddenly sees that he has – a *Krokodil!* [laughter] A genius like Mozart, there is no such thing. It's like – I don't know – like a meteor from outer space. Not a playful child at all, but instead a performing adult.

Society has no idea how to raise a genius, there's no model to go by. Such a demonically gifted human being naturally absorbs all about him in his environment. You can't just "bring him up." He is a beloved member of the family and, at the same time, a frightening one. From the time of his very first musical efforts on, Mozart's progression as artist was unswerving and marked by a breath-taking sense of certainty. Even in his childhood years, he was composing works whose emotional content reached far beyond what he could have seen and experienced. And so it is that, from the youth that he always was and remained, we can learn the ultimate, deepest secrets of love and death, of tragedy, guilt, and happiness.

He compels us first to peer into the depths of our souls and then to raise our eyes to heaven. He is perhaps a Finger of God's Hand.

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