

Bruce Cooper Clarke

The Mozart Paradox: Meditation on a Theme

It is a paradox: we like to think that if we just knew the details of Mozart's biography, we would understand why and how he composed his music; yet, the music of Mozart is one that seldom reveals anything at all about the biographical circumstances of its composing.

We come to know the music of Mozart. We are enraptured. We want to know more. And more. What is the secret? Why is it that the music of this one man exerts such an attraction over our biological need for music?

We tell ourselves, if we just knew more about him and his life, then we could – somehow – ferret out the answer to the secret. And so we begin our search, little reflecting on the generations since the composer died who have asked themselves the same question and looked in vain for the answer.

"If we just knew more about him..." What did he look like? How did he spend his days? What did he think about? What emotions engulfed him? Who did he love – and who loved him? Why did he marry Constanze? Was she really important to him? What made him happy, sad, confused, anxious, thrilled, gay, depressed, lonely, gregarious, thoughtful? So many questions, but, surely (we tell ourselves) if we just knew more about him, then we might uncover the secret to this compelling music.

And so we begin to look, only to discover that, as full as it seems, the historical record of this man, especially in his later, adult years, is nevertheless remarkably sketchy and incomplete. Our quest is hindered, moreover, by the degree to which the temporal Mozart has receded behind a cloud of myth, a steadily all-enveloping fog whose first wisps appeared not long after his body was laid in its grave, for even then the power of paradox had begun to assert itself.

What are some of these legacies from earlier times that have played and continue to play such a persistent role in shaping our perception of the man? A sample:

Mozart the child prodigy

Mozart the eternal child who never grew up

Mozart who composed works in his head, casually writing them down later

Mozart who was always sick

Mozart who was always poor, always in financial straits and in need of loans

Mozart who married a shallow woman who never understood his loneliness

Mozart who never could find a post befitting his genius

Mozart who was not paid as much as Gluck was paid

Mozart who suffered

Mozart who was humiliated, treated like a lackey and made to wait in cold rooms

Mozart who knew only turmoil and disappointment, repudiation and loneliness

Mozart whose sister turned away from him at the end

Mozart who knew but a short burst of popularity before falling into oblivion

Mozart who was unappreciated and all but forgotten at his death

Oh, if we just knew the truth about all these matters, surely we could uncover the secret to the power of his music.

And then the paradox presents itself: for it turns out that, no matter how hard we dig, the answer to the secret of the power of Mozart's music, to his extraordinary creativity, is not to be found in an intimate, detailed knowledge of his life at all. There are reasons why this is so.

The lesser reason: the secret of artistic creativity is not one that yields to factual knowledge. Latter-day Mozart scholarship proceeds in the hope that the facts of his biography can be established, thus separating myth from reality and freeing our minds and understanding from the prison of mythology. But even the most thorough, objective scholarship can never hope to penetrate to the last essence of what it was that enabled this man to write the music he did. The German musicologist Ulrich Konrad expressed it this way: Quoting Goethe's reluctant conclusion, made to Eckermann in February 1831, that "a phenomenon like Mozart is and remains a miracle beyond all explaining," Konrad said:

I would like to express it more concretely in this way: those committed to knowledge rationally arrived at and a musicology similarly conceived can never succeed in explaining the inexplicable nature of artistic creativity. But it is their obligation to identify the inexplicable and to make it discernible. They can do no more, but they should attempt no less. For all that lies beyond this obligation, however, it is also true that, in music, not everything must be explained to be understood.

But there is a larger reason for the paradox: Mozart did not compose out of a conscious sense of embodying his transient emotions in notes and transmitting them in his music. It was alien to the musical tradition within which he worked. In common with Michael and Joseph Haydn, Johann Christian Bach, and Antonio Salieri (to name but a few), Wolfgang Mozart wrote music that was not biographically determined. To take one example, consider the wealth of music for the church that he composed, music that had much to do ultimately with shaping his mastery of orchestral instrumentation and writing for the voice. When he wrote the moving *Missa solemnis* in C major, say, was he in a state of beatitude? In answer to such a question, Nikolaus Harnoncourt had this to say:

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 whether he felt that in the very moment of composing the work is something no one can tell. And that is what I find so extraordinary. That is the professionalism in him.

In the end, it comes down to this: it lies in the nature of things that the Mozart paradox cannot be resolved. But there is this consolation: the music is there, miraculously saved over a space of more than two centuries, and it is the music that is important and essential. The biography, what we can learn of it, is interesting, fascinating, call it what you will, but of and by itself, it is not – and it cannot be – the key to the secret of his music.

The paradox will always be there. In short, the key to the secret of his music – if there is one – is to be found in the music itself. (BCC, November 2005)