

Get Classical: The Mind of Mozart

By Paul Campbell

This is a special year for Mozart lovers: he died two hundred years ago. And this is a special time in this special year, since Wolfgang Amadeus Chrisosimos Mozart was born on January 27, 1756; 235 years ago tomorrow (Saturday). In light of this, and my own love of Mozart, I thought it a good idea to write a little about him.

It seems that for centuries people have debated who was the greatest composer: Bach, Beethoven, or Mozart. When I was young my friends would discuss it. Our discussions were never very well informed; they were rather based on our own feelings for the composers works... at least those of them which we knew, which were precious few.

In those days Bach was my favorite: I loved the majesty of his music, the sense of spaciousness and the grandeur that came, I knew even then, from the structuring of his music.

Most of my friends preferred Beethoven: they liked the emotional involvement they felt when listening to his music, and the feeling of power that it had. We all had to admit that Mozart was a pretty great composer, but I don't think that he was the favorite of any of us. I think now that was partly because we never heard really good performances of his music, but I think that it is also because Mozart is a more subtle composer than either Bach or Beethoven, and I think that the subtlety was lost on us.

One of my teachers said to me that you don't really like Mozart 'till you are 30. For me that was pretty true, and, if I have to choose, he is now my favorite. However the present generation and the one preceding seem to be proving my teacher wrong. Mozart is riding a wave of unprecedented popularity among youth, helped along by the films "Elvira Madagan" (about 20 years ago), and "Amadeus", which

I hope you have seen.

Mozart was musically precocious in the extreme. His father was a musician, one of the leading violin pedagogues of the day, and a composer to boot. Young Wolfgang would see his father, quill in hand, composing, and would imitate him. Since he had already started piano at the age of three and had shown remarkable ability, his father took his predilection seriously, and guided him.

It seems that for Mozart the making of music was mostly a play activity. He played with music much as you probably played with cars or dolls when you were young. When he was about 10 he met another precocious youngster, Irish, of the same age, and the two of them alternated running around like crazy with sitting down at the piano and improvising, or setting each other musical tasks of increasing difficulty. They became the best of friends, and as you can imagine, Mozart was devastated when his friend died at the age of 16. It was not because they ran around together that he felt that his Irish friend was his soul-mate.

We talk of "playing" music: Mozart actually did, and as a result by the time he was eight he was already an accomplished pianist, violinist and a not bad composer. His father decided to take him on a tour of the musical courts of Europe to show him off, and assure him a good post in the future. He astounded all who heard him, and learned to feel at home in the most prestigious courts of the most powerful lands of Europe. In 1770, while in Rome, the

14 year old Mozart heard a performance in the Sistine Chapel of the Missa Solemnis of Allegri, a work considered so perfect and sacred that the music was locked in a vault in the Vatican so that it could not be defiled by inferior performances. Mozart returned to his lodgings and wrote the entire work from memory, returning to the next performance to check it. He had two notes wrong! He then, since the work was so closely guarded, gave his copy to the Pope in a personal audience. Nearly 20 years later the Vatican recognized that act by awarding Mozart its highest decoration for lay people.

It is perhaps this phenomenal musical memory that stood Mozart apart from other composers. For him music remained a play thing. It was something which he used, with marvelous sophistication, to entertain himself. When he had a few spare moments, he would let his head fill with music, and he would play with it until the music was doing something he really liked, and then he would remember that. Later, perhaps, he would call it back again to play with it some more until he was satisfied. This he would store until he had a chance to write it down.

Stories of how he did things of this sort are legion. He would play cards, participating in the conversation around the table, while 'composing'. Really what he was doing was just transcribing what he had already composed, maybe months earlier. He would write out the violin part for a Sonata, say, play the piano part from his head

at the first performance, and write it down later when it was convenient. He waited until the night before the first performance of his opera "Don Giovanni" to write down the overture.

His scores were always impeccably neat, and without corrections. But the biggest benefit, for us, of this incredible memory, is that his music seems so natural. It is playful, or seductive, or expressive without ever forcing. It somehow fits: it feels right. I am sure this is a result of the ease with which he worked on his music.

There will be many chances for you to hear Mozart's music this year. In fact, if those of us who listen a lot to classical music on the radio are not a bit sick of it by the end of the year, it will be strong testimony to just how good his music is: most of us were a little fed up with Beethoven a few years ago on the bi-centennial of his birth. There is an excellent opportunity this evening: the Duo Pach are concluding their series of Mozart Violin and Piano Sonatas at Mem Hall at 8:00 PM. Free admission. Sunday afternoon CBC will devote to a three hour special on Mozart's life and music. Next Friday the New Brunswick Chamber Orchestra will give a concert at Christ Church Cathedral which will feature Jamie Parker, one of Canada's great pianists, in a Mozart Piano concerto. There will be many more. Take advantage of this special year to learn a bit about him. Get acquainted with the mind of Mozart.



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