

The Musical Brain Conference 2014

Mozart and the Power of Music: Memory, Myth & Magic

Friday 24 October 2014, Senate House

TRANSCRIPT

Mozart's Life and Times – Stephen Johnson

STEPHEN JOHNSON: There's an image I love towards the end of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* where Nietzsche looks forward to the time where he will be worshiped as he knows is his due. Then he has a dreadful thought - they will build a monument to him and the trouble is that artists and heroes always disappear underneath monuments. I feel that's the great danger with Mozart, he is such an extraordinary figure, such a remarkable figure. I am not going to argue any statement that he is one of the greatest creative minds this planet has ever produced but at the same time, legends and myths have grown about him, some of which boost him unfairly, some of which do him a disservice. It would be nice during the course of the day if maybe we can bring a little light to bear on this because sometimes the truth is even more interesting and is more to his credit than the somewhat sentimentalised Dresden china version that the divine child, sent to earth perfectly formed, would have us believe. It's much easier to debunk than affirm and I often think, listening to some academics, that there is an added thrill in this, like the senior boys telling the junior boys that there is no such thing as Father Christmas and watching them cry.

Well, I have got to start in Mozart's case by saying that I do believe in Father Christmas. I believe in the sublimity of this music that defies any rationalisation I have come across to describe its extraordinary and, in many such diverse ways, beneficial effects. But myths attach themselves like limpets and it is important to consider Mozart's background. He lived through a period of epochal change. It is often said of Beethoven, who lived from 1770-1828, that he saw one of the biggest changes in cultural history. When he was born, composers were still liveried servants but by the time he died, a composer could be a national hero and have something equivalent to a state funeral. As somebody is supposed to have remarked on seeing the coffin, "They are burying the general of the composers." By the time of Beethoven's death, it was even felt by some that an artist could do what a military figure like Napoleon couldn't and achieve a true spiritual revolution. The version we have of Mozart is that somehow or other he got terribly near it but tragically failed. Actually, he got an awful lot nearer to it than we might think.

The last year of Mozart's life has been so heavily mythologised that actually it is very difficult to extract, but we are beginning at last to see something a little bit more focused about what was going on. For a start, one thing that I noticed a little while ago is the terrible, embarrassing, heart-rending, begging letters, particularly to his Masonic friend Puchberg, had stopped and one of the reasons they had stopped is because he was not so desperate for money any more. He was actually starting to get money. Two aristocrats, one Hungarian and one Austrian, had agreed to provide him with a little retainer, or not so little, in order to provide chamber music and other occasional works. He had also been tipped off that when the Kapellmeister of St Stephen's dies, he would get the job, so he had everything to look forward

to. In a letter, he wrote about the great series of church works he was contemplating writing, of which the Requiem, just bear this in mind, was to be only the beginning. He was so full of plans, full of enthusiasm, so what killed him off? It might have been overwork. He was very busy in that last year, but also Vienna at the time was legendary, even among 18th century cities, for its terrible sanitary conditions. Nosegay sellers, offering lavender and other things to take away the stench of the inadequate drainage, made a better business in Vienna than in any other capital city at the time and it may have been this that killed off Schubert. It almost certainly was, his immune system had been reduced by something, and it almost certainly is what did for Mozart, having worn himself out a little bit with too much work in the last year.

It's fascinating how myths accrue around Mozart's early death - that he knew he was going to die and the Requiem was somehow for himself. This really doesn't bear any investigation at all. The story of the mysterious masked stranger who came to commission the Requiem does turn out to have a bit of truth in it. This was a man called Count Walzig who was fond of passing off other composer's works as his own. His wife had died and he wanted to put on a Requiem, knew he wasn't up to the job himself, so offered Mozart a lot of money if he would keep quiet about it, at least for the moment, and produce a wonderful Requiem which Walzig could pass off as his own. When Mozart died, of course it was obvious to Constanza that without the handsome remuneration she was expecting, they were going to be in serious financial trouble, so she begged Süßmayr to complete the Requiem for her.

All sorts of myths have grown up around this, and they are fascinating, but let's dispense with one. Antonio Salieri had nothing to do with the process. There is no evidence that he tried to poison Mozart, or even that he was particularly envious. Salieri wasn't a bad composer, actually, and was very helpful to Beethoven later on, which is not what you would expect, if he suspected another rival talent on the scene. However, this is where it all gets interesting. I am sure many of you know Mozart's Requiem, maybe some of you have sung it. If so, think of the Lacrymosa, one of the most wonderful things Mozart wrote...not! Mozart wrote the first 16 bars and then it stops and the handwriting is Süßmayr's. What Süßmayr wrote is very, very good. This is in such stark contrast to Süßmayr's other compositions, which generally speaking, are not that impressive, it has to be said with the best will in the world. The legend has grown up that Süßmayr was selected by Mozart for this task, that Mozart played him parts of the Requiem, showed him sketches and said, "Over to you, finish it." Süßmayr, with a strong musical memory and under the deep impression of what Mozart played for him, was able to make a reasonably good job reconstructing what his intentions were. How else could the Requiem be such a great work as it is? The evidence we have suggests it is all rubbish, I afraid. For instance, the most damning piece of evidence is that Mozart left a sketch for the end of the Lacrymosa, the Amen, and it wasn't the two chords Süßmayr wrote it was a big double fugue. What we can tell from Süßmayr's work, and the rest of the Requiem, is that he was a bit scared of counter point - the two fugal sections are very short. You can almost imagine him getting to the end and going, "Phew!" So either Süßmayr didn't know that this sketch was Mozart's idea or he said, "No, I can't possibly do that!" The remarkable thing is that what he did do is so impressive; the climax and continuation of the Lacrymosa are deeply moving. This is a suggestion that maybe, just once, the intensity of the experience, the focus, the closeness of death, the feelings that he had for Mozart and Constanza's need produced something more extraordinary from Süßmayr. What we have is that under extraordinary circumstances, mediocre talent could rise, just once, into relation with Mozart. That is worth bearing in mind, too.

There is a cult around Mozart, there definitely is. I have experienced this sometimes myself when members of the cult have taken issue with things I have said. I remember pointing out, for instance, that the notion of Mozart as the ideal child genius, as a composer, is heavily skewed by what we know of his later work. He was phenomenally gifted as a performer and composer, but was he more than that? I think that is a very good question. I remember asking this question in the BBC music magazine, and I got an indignant letter telling me to look at what he had written at 11, and they asked how could anyone be not a genius to write this? I did have a look at and found most was written in Leopold Mozart's hand. The muted brass he had written was brilliant and it was brilliant when he heard Hasse's Requiem in C minor in Berlin the previous year. It is a prodigious achievement, a remarkable achievement for a boy of this age, but you have to keep saying with a lot of the earlier works that it is for a boy of his age. Take that opera *Mitridate, re di Ponto*, that he wrote at 13, and which I had to listen to three times during the course of the great Mozart bicentenary in 1991. I have to admit that by the end of it, I had had enough. Some of my colleagues were saying, look at the wonderful foreshadowings of the great Mozart to come. I was thinking, where? The incredible musical information that you start to see emerge in *Il re Pastore* and develop more, that amazing empathy with characters where he seems to see inside their human situation, not just as individuals but in relation to each other, where is it? *Mitridate's* death is such a reprieve and such an anti-climax. I literally lost count of the number of arias that ended like this...just this little figure...[music plays] and in fact that really poisoned some of the later works of Mozart for a long time afterwards. He's very fond of that but to hear it at the end of, I think, all but two of the arias in this three hour long opera, that is not a fully formed composer.

I remember having a look at the lists of the most frequently performed and requested Mozart works. The BBC has various statistics for these, and I looked also at an American orchestra's statistics about this. What is fascinating is there is absolutely nothing he wrote before his 18th birthday. You can look at the lot of the earlier works and say, this is a phenomenally able composer, but the first works for which it seems there is a real widespread taste, like the Little Cantata as a result, and the G minor Symphony, No. 25, are phenomenal. He's at number 25 at 18. These are the periods when Mozart starts to produce the works he's really loved and valued for. You can see the enrichment and intensifying of this afterwards. In the year afterwards we have *Il re Pastore*, not a masterpiece, but full of intonations of what is to come. We have the violin concertos written in a year; at least one and five are masterpieces, and soon afterwards the Symphony No. 29 in A, a glorious symphony. At last, you can say to yourself he has really arrived but it was a long learning process. I would argue that he went on developing and developing and the marvellous thing for me about Mozart is, having been a somewhat supervised wunderkind, he developed into a truly great composer. It is the continuous laying of a scent for me and you can see it growing often at crisis points in his life, like the death of his mother at 20, like the great split up with his father, and the leaving of the service of the Archbishop, marrying Constanza, settling in Vienna, beginning to find his way there. These are important things and at each stage he's able to learn and develop from them. This is not a genius coming into the world fully formed, this is a composer who came into the world phenomenally talented but grew and developed in ways that are more like someone such as Beethoven, I would say. Certainly, I don't think there is anything that Mozart wrote before he was 18 that compares with something like Mendelssohn's Octet, one of the great

romances of the German repertoire, written at 16, or Schubert's defining masterpieces of the German Lieder repertoire. Where did this young teenage boy who apparently never had a girlfriend and not much contact with women manage to get inside the soul of a woman in love so intensely as he does in that song. That is a kind of miracle. Mozart was to achieve miracles like that, but I will argue that later.

On the other side, I would like to dispense with a myth that I would think is one to get well out of the way. It has not been one very favourable to Mozart and it has been boosted by *Amadeus*, particularly, I think. It was discovered in the letters, which were translated somewhat apologetically by a marvellous writer called Emily Anderson, who nevertheless felt there was an awful lot she had to smooth out in them. Mozart could be remarkably crude in his sense of humour. He loved stuff about farting and bottoms and shitting on every occasion! And this has led to the suggestion that he had some sort of compulsive problem like Tourette's syndrome. Now, it is important to stress that German and Austrian popular culture in Mozart's time, and before, and to some extent up to today, has rather more an anal fixation than other cultures have. I was going to suggest there is a synonym for the terrible disappointment and the shock suffered by American Evangelical Christians when they discovered how crude Martin Luther, the great hero of the reformation, could be. Martin Luther could get a fart joke into his thesis, the 99 thesis, and on other occasions he publicly said, "If I fart here, they smell it in Rome!" This was the kind of idea that was going on! Mozart, in one of his letters, describes going to a shooting gallery in Salzburg where the world is covered in what we call coprophagic slogans and jokes. I understand the expression he used with his mother, "Night, night, shit the bed," was very common in the German language and still used in certain parts of Germany today. It is the same as "Night, night, don't let the bed bugs bite."

If you look at whom Mozart writes the letters for, they are specific people. He writes to his mother like this, his sister, with whom he was a very closed circuit, and for a little while his teenage cousin who he seems to have had a little kind of exploratory liaison with, even at that age. He definitely doesn't write like this to his father. Indeed, suddenly his grammar improves! Suddenly the way the letters look on the page is slightly more organised, the handwriting is neater. Even his punctuation, which can be pretty whimsical, comes closer to standard usage. We can say with some security that Mozart did not have some disability that compelled him to come up with obscenities all the time. If you look at descriptions of him by people who knew him later in life, there are some indications of eccentricity, but nothing of the kind that you would expect if he was the figure portrayed in *Amadeus* in a very repressed court. The kind of society, which Henry James famously said is surrounded by the social drapery, which, in an over civilised society, muffles the sharpness of human contact. Even court life at the time of Mozart in Vienna wasn't quite like that. There were moments of surprising spontaneity, it would seem to us.

Descriptions of composers are very interesting. Tieck described Mozart as nervous, with shy eyes, not this out of control figure but somebody a little withdrawn, cautious, standing apart. Tieck wasn't very impressed with Mozart, interestingly, but he says nothing about the kind of impressions you would get if you were thinking that he was some sort of compulsive obscenity merchant, yelling foul language and running around incoherently all over the place. He knew how to behave on the whole in aristocratic society, even if his opinion was that he shouldn't be treated as a servant by the officials of the Archbishop of Salzburg. The famous story of him being literally kicked out of the Archbishop's service, a kick on the arse, as he

writes in one of his own letters, does appear to be true. Count Arco actually kicked Mozart out on to the street. That does seem to be one of the great liberating moments of Mozart's life. Paradoxically, the music itself received quite a kick in the process.

In the years afterwards we find him excitedly devouring Haydn's sixth set of quartets, Opus 33, which, as Haydn said, were written in a new and special way and in many ways embody the spirit of the new enlightenment. The whole idea of it, to summarise in a few words, was that truth was no longer to be discovered listening to the words of the prince or to the words from the pulpit. It wasn't an authority figure delivering truth; truth was discovered in discussion and by getting together with like minds and thrashing things out. It's fascinating to see chamber music really on the rise, in which you no longer have simple tune and accompaniment structures but you have a kind of contest between equal voices, going on like people arguing around a dinner table about something. That's something that Haydn created in those Opus 33 quartets and which Mozart devoured and produced in his six Haydn quartets, a tribute to Haydn. Then, you can see how he takes that to the world of opera, in *Figaro*, which is the next opera he wrote, only he transforms it into something quite extraordinarily new. There is a kind of quick fire dialogue that you get on the stage in the new form of comedy, which is so different from formalised tragedy in the 18th century. Mozart realized you can represent this using the instrumental techniques that Haydn had developed in string quartets, of having close quick fire dialogue between the instruments and those wonderful ensembles, like in Act II of *Figaro* which just seems to be happening in real time in front of you, between real people. In a way, this is a result of Mozart's serious study of Haydn's string quartets. I know recently Norman Lebrecht said Mozart didn't leave any innovations behind him, and I thought, well, just go and have a look at the operas for God's sake, there are extraordinary things he does there, in terms of characterisation, in terms of creating the kind of fluidity of psychological time, which Wagner was then to take so much further in his own operas. Wagner liked to portray Beethoven as his ancestor in developing the psychological fluidity of opera but Mozart got there first.

We are going to touch on this a little bit later with Michael, but there is just one other thing I would like to touch on as well and this is how, when people are really perceived to be legendary figures, when they become almost like cult figures, stories about their abilities are exaggerated. One of the most famous glamorous stories of Mozart's prodigious brilliance is the story of how, at 13, he was taken to the Sistine Chapel in Rome to hear Giorgio Allegri's famous *Miserere* in five parts with a final nine-part chorus. The story is that the *Miserere* was the exclusive property of the chapel and that to reveal it or perform it anywhere else meant instant excommunication, but that's rubbish. It had actually been performed in several other places, around Mozart's time, including in Vienna. Mozart wasn't there in time to hear it but a friend of his did, in fact it was Puchberg, the man who he later became associated with, and Puchberg told him about it later on.

There is a story I have read, in all seriousness, on a Wikipedia page that Mozart was presented to the Pope who had demanded Mozart's excommunication for having revealed the secret of the *Miserere*, but when confronted with his heavenly genius, he blessed him instead. No, I am sorry, there is nothing in that. But what about the feat of memory itself? Well, I think there are good reasons for being doubtful about that and Michael and I will look at it later on. After all, one of the things that is very important about the *Miserere* of Allegri is that

it is quite simple. Most of it is set in simple chordal style. I will play a bit later on when Michael is talking. The first section is heard five times. In most of it, the rhythm is decided literally by the chanting of the text. It has a short coda of just six bars at the end, which is the nine-part section. Counterpoint is very limited and very restricted; it is a beautiful piece but it is very simple. Five times of a piece that length would be fairly normal in an old fashioned musical aural memory test for advanced students at a university. It's not that remarkable. Also, it's interesting that no one in the story gives any evidence that Mozart's results when he copied it out after hearing it were checked against the original, which would actually have meant getting the original out of the Sistine Chapel in the first place, so we don't know whether he got it exactly right or not. This is in no way to underestimate or undervalue Mozart.

I've got to tell you one story. If you really want a story of a prodigious musical memory, I give you the 20th century Russian composer Alexander Glazunov. There are plenty of stories about this, so I'll tell you one of the best. Sergei Taneyev was invited to the Glazunov household to play his latest symphony on the piano. Alexander was there and heard it and afterwards, like many pushy parents, his mother went up to Taneyev and said, Alexander has written a symphony, to which Taneyev said, "Let's hear it." Glazunov sat down at the piano and played all of Taneyev's symphony from memory, all 40 minutes of it. That's truly extraordinary. The reason we have Borodin's opera *Prince Igor* in a finished version at all is, it seems, because Glazunov was there when Borodin played through the bits he never wrote down, so years later, Glazunov was able to make at least a good go of reconstructing what it was he remembered Borodin playing. That's phenomenal musical memory. Glazunov's ear was apparently so precise that going from Moscow to Petersburg was torture for him because of the difference in the A. Although I think Glazunov achieved some very fine things, he was nowhere near quite the statue of, say, Mussorgsky, Borodin, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, or Shostakovich, who wrote a masterpiece at the age of 18. So there he was, phenomenally able in terms of mechanical gifts but not on a level with Russian composers, less still Mozart. Mozart didn't need to have these quasi-supernatural savant gifts in order to be the great composer that he was. He just had to be a good practitioner, a really good practitioner, who was prepared to learn from life as much as from music and I think the evidence of so much of his greatest music is that he did exactly that. Thank you.