

***Moz-art* and Amadeus, Compositions and Fictions, Dissonance in Interpretation¹**

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Abstract

Mozart's music continues to appeal to all ages and tastes, and continues to be an inexhaustible source for avant-garde composers just as much as it is for children's concerts. Like no other composer, Mozart seems to please everyone: music lovers who seek relaxation listening to classical music, specialists who have not exhausted their work dissecting the generative mechanisms of Mozart's works, performers of all kinds and ages – conductors, instrumentalists, and singers, and today's composers who can still discover creative impulses coming from Mozart's themes and ideas. This essay offers an overview of aspects of the reception of Mozart in recent decades, from Paul Johnson's book to Miloš Forman's film, via the postmodernism of Mozart in Egypt, Gilles Apap's interpretation and Alfred Schnittke's scores.

Keywords: the “Mozart effect”, Paul Johnson, Alfred Schnittke, Gilles Apap, Mozart in Egypt, history of musical performance, Miloš Forman

Transparent Sonorities

Seeking transparency in music generally involves looking for all sorts of seductive metaphors that associate imagination with clear, limpid, crystalline sonorities. If you ask a musician (or a music lover) to enumerate transparent musics, it is very likely that the first

¹ This text was published in Romanian, in Valentina Sandu-Dediu, *În căutarea consonanțelor* (In search of Consonances), Bucharest: Humanitas, 2017, pp.15-25.

composer on the list will be Mozart. The next might be Maurice Ravel (*Jeux d'eaux*, among others) and generally pieces associated with water in all its forms and shapes (*The Scărișoara Glacier* by Marțian Negrea, for example, or *La cathédrale engloutie* by Claude Debussy). We tend to associate water-related topics with transparency; but if we reflect a little bit further, we realise that impressionist works, such as those mentioned, prefer a certain blurring characteristic, a kind of vague, ambiguous transparency. But, to return to Mozart, one is bound to notice that even now, such a long time after he physically passed away, his biographers still have doubts about many aspects of his life: this lack of transparency inevitably hovers over his chroniclers' accounts. Some adopt a scientific perspective and regret that certain mysteries cannot be solved, others rejoice at the multiple possibilities of fictionalising Mozart's destiny.

Mozart's music continues to reach all ages and tastes, and it has never ceased to be an inexhaustible source for avant-garde composers just as much as it is for children's concerts. Like no other composer, Mozart seems to be able to please everybody: music lovers who look for relaxation listening to "classical music", specialists who have not yet completed their work dissecting its generating mechanisms, performers of all kinds and ages – conductors, instrumentalists, and singers, as well as today's composers who still discover creative impulses coming from Mozart's themes and ideas.

In the 1990s, the "Mozart effect" was a very hot topic, especially in America. Various researchers (not necessarily musicians) tried to demonstrate that one can use Mozart to improve mental capacity and intelligence, treat certain diseases, or to assist when educating children with disabilities; and his music was even used in experiments with rats, or various plants, to investigate the consequences of melotherapy; but 21st century researchers (once again, not necessarily musicians) have moved to deny such hypotheses.

As regards public taste, Miloš Forman's film *Amadeus*, based on Peter Shaffer's play, launched the image of the composer being childish and irresponsible, at the same time as being endowed with a divine gift. More than 30 years after the release of the film, we are still fascinated by the way in which our favourite topics from Mozart's

biography – genius versus mediocrity, the mystery of the musician’s death – are wrapped in the mantle of Modernity, which follows in the steps of Romanticism. The fine balance between creativity and craft, the apparent contrast between an artist’s gift and an artist’s personality, continue to be favourite topics of any evocation of the Mozart-Salieri pair.

All of these aspects continue to lead us to further discussion. Let us take a more in-depth look at it all, under a lens which, though obviously transparent, can also be somewhat distorting.

“Mozart, a life”

The biography bearing this title, published in 2013 by Paul Johnson (the journalist, historian and watercolour painter who also authored portraits of Napoleon, Washington, Socrates, Darwin and Churchill) has recently been published in Romanian translation². If I read the book with a musicologist’s eyes, I can find fault with the author’s exclusively British sources, or perhaps frown at the last chapter “Mozart in London” (the latter inevitably reminds me of older generations of Romanian musicologists who always insisted on having a similar chapter, with such autochthonous nuances, even if one wrote a monograph on Arnold Schönberg or Gesualdo da Venosa). But the truth is that Paul Johnson never claimed any musicological expertise, so I instead read the book for what it is, and admire it for two reasons: its structure, at once ingenious and simple, and its convincing dismantling of all sorts of myths built up around Mozart’s biography.

With a realism occasionally spiced up with humour and irony, Johnson rebuilds Leopold Mozart’s image: not as an authoritarian, feared father, but as the professional father who supported his musician children, in every way he could, from the moment he detected their talent. The legendary ease with which Wolfgang approached things was certainly encouraged and unleashed by Leopold through a musical education which started at the age of three: Wolfgang’s acquisition of German was thus simultaneous with his acquisition of the language of music. The author’s plea for Constanze

² Paul Johnson, *Mozart, o viață*, Bucharest: Humanitas, 2015, Romanian translation by Liliana Donose Samuelson.

is also to be appreciated: the wife which history labels irresponsible, greedy and naive was actually a good housewife, devoted to her husband, who knew how to cultivate his memory decades after his death. Mozart's debts and alleged poverty, his disease, his death, and funeral are also the object of reconstitutions that look closely into the context and customs of the age (I was fully persuaded by the evidence on debts and borrowings – a circuit more common at the time than is generally understood).

Johnson synthesises a wealth of information and musical details, each chapter following a leading thread. In the second chapter “Master of Instruments”, for example, Mozart's instrumental writing is discussed in direct connection to the instruments themselves, each instrument's history, and the composer's qualities as a performer and refined connoisseur. The piano and the violin are associated with their respective sonatas and concertos, the viola with *Sinfonia concertante for Violin, Viola and Orchestra*, but also with chamber viola music. During discussion of the horn, we learn about Mozart's “tricks, catches and magic effects”, since the composer actually knew each and every wind instrument's mechanism intimately, but we find elsewhere that he knew those of the harp or percussion instruments also. In the other chapters, references to scores appear in connection with topics from Mozart's biography (be it his preference for dance or the type of commissions he received), with his family life, religious beliefs and connections, with artistic patronage and with other musicians of the time. Trained, from his experience as a journalist and a historian, to consult several sources at a time, to check and compare them, and to corroborate biographical accidents with the trends of the age, Johnson avoids any cliché, including those around the eternal *Wunderkind* and genius stories.

Despite Schopenhauer's attempt to rephrase the received image of Mozart as an immature genius in a positive light, reconciling the grandeur of the artist and the man's immaturity, public taste still prefers the idea that divine grace descended upon the child who learned to compose before he could write, and, for as long as he lived, remained an eternal child, irresponsible with respect to the practical side of life. When French musicologist Georges Starobinski consulted the earliest biographies of Mozart, he evaluated the degree of kitsch

and nostalgia still associated with the image of the child Mozart.³ However, evidence and common-sense show that Mozart's father, a respected musician of the time, taught him all those able fingers could achieve with great efficiency, and acquainted his son with the grammar of classical music at considerable speed. Even given these sound pedagogical methods it could not have been expected that Mozart would always end up so surprisingly and brilliantly ahead of his teachers' efforts, and this evidence alone would be enough to suggest genius, but it is important not to regard this label in an exaggerated light, covering it in fantasy and mystery.

Performances, Reception, Research

It seems that the first recordings of Mozart's music that have been found are two fragments of *Don Giovanni* made on wax cylinders, for non-commercial documentary purposes, in Copenhagen in 1889. Ever since this point, we have been noticing and analysing changes in performance styles over time, listening to great artists and the different versions they offer on various media (nowadays, YouTube is the one most at hand, and even if Mozart does not receive as many visits as a pop star, he is in no need of popularity). Compared to the first decades of the twentieth century, a cleaner, simpler, “purer” style has gradually been gathering ground, with fewer string and voice *portamentos*, stricter rhythms and more uniform tempos. By 1940, most of the important works had been recorded (with the exception of *operas seria*, sacred music, concert airs and a few chamber pieces), but it was after 1956, when the musical world spectacularly celebrated the bicentennial of Mozart's birth, that the new fashion of historical performance had a decisive influence on the Mozartian repertoire. The performing manner of Mozart's contemporary instrumentalists was carefully and rigorously researched, as was the build of the instruments, the acoustics of concert halls, and the profile of those who commissioned and consumed the music. Among the performers

³ Georges Starobinski, „*Du Wunderkind à l'éternel enfant: Les premières biographies mozartiennes dans le contexte de l'esthétique romantique*”, *Revue de Musicologie*, vol. 92, No. 2, 2006, pp. 343-356.

responsible for Mozart's "de-romanticisation" were the conductors Richard Strauss, Sir Thomas Beecham and Fritz Busch; the pianists Arthur Schnabel and Edwin Fischer; and the violinist Joseph Szigeti (according to David Hamilton in his study "100 Years of Mozart Recordings"⁴).

But what of the present day? After various postmodern experiments, audiences got used to the most extravagant perceptions and performances of Mozart's music. With the propagation of fusion and crossover genres, not even Mozart escaped various instances of demystification, being brought down from the pedestal of "scholarly" music and "popularised" in various ways. Anything is possible in the 21st Century, even transcriptions and reworkings of Mozart transposed into Egyptian modes. The *Mozart in Egypt* CDs released in the European market contain famous themes from the Viennese composer wrapped in Eastern harmonies, rhythms and orchestrations by the French arranger Hughes de Courson. For instance, the unmistakable colouring of the Queen of the Night in *The Magic Flute* sounded in tune with European taste in 1791, but also with Eastern taste in 2005: the soloist is accompanied by an ensemble of traditional Egyptian instruments and creates short soloistic cadenzas, adorned with augmented second ornaments. Listening to this⁵ one could be amused or even indignant, but we shouldn't overlook that it gives a clear illustration of the possibilities for Mozart's treatment in the heyday of globalisation. In fact, the composer may well have thoroughly enjoyed all this, considering his characteristic humour. In the same spirit, he probably would have been pleased with violinist Gilles Apap's nonconformist cadenza in his performance of *Concerto No. 3 for Violin and Orchestra*⁶, which contains not just virtuosic passages but *whistled* passages, the violin is turned into a percussion instrument, and there are echoes of Indian, Irish, Gypsy, Hungarian, cowboy and jazz musics – all melting within the body of a cadenza that is actually an attempt to stay close to the idea of improvisation at the time Mozart lived. Following that period, performers got

⁴ David Hamilton in his study "100 Years of Mozart Recordings", *Early Music*, vol. 20, No. 2, *Performing Mozart's Music III*, May, 1992, pp. 275-277.

⁵ *The Queen of the 1001 Nights*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_zLrkgsAKI

⁶ A recording also launched on *YouTube* around the years 2000: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VmjGDBWZZFw>

accustomed to playing more and more pre-composed cadenzas, and they lost the spontaneity and talent, which Gilles Apap finds in his not-at-all-conventional manner, to improvise, to invent, and to be free within a space specifically designated by the composer for these purposes. Might Apap's eclectic invention of cadenzas for canonical works be a dissonant one? Perhaps, but just as consonance and dissonance change roles throughout music history, function of context and perspective can change roles also.

Gradually, through the nineteenth century, the image of the “dream team” of classical music composers was formed: Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, imaginary gilded statues, emblems of misunderstood creative genius, and the source of favourite motifs on the basis of which themes such as destiny, humanity and struggle with society were developed. The twentieth century announced an evident change of vision, at least from the point of view of musicology, which has become more objective, more attentive to verifiable sources and more preoccupied with questioning the clichés that had been spreading around previously. Postmodernism came, in its turn, with sometimes exaggerated relativisations, to the point where one would feel embarrassed to write academically about aesthetic value, originality, artistic subjectivity. On the other hand, marketing strategies now rule: for anyone visiting Salzburg it is clear they enter Mozart’s country, the city being full of all kinds of souvenirs that are now contributing to the city’s prosperity. There are, it seems, about three hundred “Mozart” chocolate brands, neckties and wines, which bring an annual profit of about nine billion dollars⁷.

The postmodern orientation has, however, had the merit that, in composition, it eliminated avant-garde taboos and reinvigorated all kinds of new connections between contemporary creators and musical tradition. Mozart could not be missing from such a dialogue, and Alfred Schnittke’s polystylism brings it to life, for instance, in *Mozart-Art* for two violins (1978). Here, the Russian musician takes a lesser-known Mozart work as his starting point (it is actually a surviving

⁷ Information offered in the study signed by Hee Sook Oh, „*Das abgelehnte Genie – Betrachtungen zur Kritik an der musikalischen Genieästhetik im 20. Jahrhundert*“, *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, vol. 44, No. 1, June 2013, pp. 79-99.

fragment from a pantomime for two violins, violas and bass, composed in 1783 for the traditional Viennese Carnival). This K. 416 d keeps only a few musical extracts from a *commedia dell'arte* scenario, but it is enough for Schnittke to generalise them as Mozartian stylemes, and process them with fantasy in his own work. Moreover, the three motifs in K. 416 d are combined with numerous ideas taken from Mozart's well-known expressive techniques (e.g., that themes in E flat major or D minor are associated with the indications *Maestoso* or *Adagio lamentoso* respectively). Schnittke's ludic attitude leaves an ambiguity regarding whether or not some themes are authentically Mozartian (some are in fact Mozart-like stylistic exercises, rather than quotations), yet other themes' authenticity is poignantly clear - for example the treatment of the beginning of *Symphony No. 40*⁸.

Performers, audiences, composers, musicologists: all relate their own obsessions, creative thoughts, and ideas, whether fresh or commonplace, to Mozart. Researchers have turned Mozart's creations inside out and outside in, and have analysed them from the perspectives of language, rhetoric, mathematics and information theory. They reached the conclusion that both the serenity and transparency of this music, and its informal, natural, spontaneous nature, are illusory: behind the apparent simplicity of his musical ideas there are complicated and refined technical procedures.

In the 1990s a new fashion was launched in research known generally as the "Mozart effect". It was an expression launched by the Frenchman Alfred Tomatis, who used Mozart's music in his activity healing various ailments of the ear and the brain. Hence, efforts were made to demonstrate that, by listening to Mozart's sonorities, one can experience a temporary improvement of certain mental functions and IQ. As ever, the power of marketing strategy, in particular promoting products for children, amplified the ideas that his music reduces stress, depression and anxiety, that it induces relaxation and sleep, and that it even helps with ailments such as attention deficit disorder or autism. Along with the analyses from experiments on rats (which seemed to reveal that they could manage better in a labyrinth having been listened to Mozart during their intrauterine life), such theories remain

⁸This famous musical motif represents a climax before the final coda, as you can hear on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOLkma-Gal>

controversial and have not been proven with conclusive results.

Fictions

More than 30 years have passed since the release of Miloš Forman's film *Amadeus*, based on the play of the same name by Peter Shaffer (the play is ostensibly an extension of Pushkin's romantic drama *Mozart and Salieri*, but in actuality the similarities are limited). The film is a fascinating mixture of the academic and the popular, of Mozart-the-man and Mozart-the-myth, of composition and its reception. It has been said that the film was ahead of its time, likely having a considerable influence on a subsequent wave of musicological research which looked at Mozart from new perspectives: the relationship between his music and that of his contemporaries (including Salieri), as well as Mozart's reception from his time to the present day⁹.

On its release in the mid-eighties some read the narrative as blasphemous (or at least those of us who were musicians living in communist Romania did). It seemed far from historical truth, seemingly reducing the composer down to someone who behaved unacceptably: just remember his annoying emblematic laughter, or his composing while playing billiards, wineglass in hand. Indeed, the portrayal of the composer's morality as "dubious" inspired lack of trust in many other film scenes.

However, Schaffer's narrative encourages us to reflect on biographical subtleties, on the (in)exactness and (in)accuracy of the data we have, on the unclear separating lines between fact and fiction, and on the difference between high- and low-brow perceptions of the man and his music. The story is told in layers by Salieri (dead in 1825), by a late twentieth-century playwright, then by a film-maker, who, each in turn, aim at their own contemporary audiences, and is perhaps therefore a rather good summary of the composer's reception in recent decades.

⁹Let us read Simon P. Keefe, "Beyond Fact and Fiction, Scholarly and Popular: Peter Shaffer and Miloš Forman's *Amadeus* at 25", *The Musical Times*, vol. 150, No. 1906, Spring 2009, pp. 45-53.

If Mozart belongs to all of us: musicologists, performers, composers, concert organisers, and music lovers, as well as to people with no knowledge of music of the last 250 years at all (or, as Salieri says, to “all the world’s mediocrities”), then he has, in *Amadeus*, the most appropriate advocate. And, in the end, don’t each of us create our own fiction? Don’t we feel the need to turn Mozart into our contemporary or close acquaintance, to bring homage to him, to associate him with our various clichés (some of which are slowly disappearing, and being replaced), to quote him constantly, deforming his image perhaps forever? The resulting film seems to be in full accordance with our reality.

English Version by Maria-Sabina Draga-Alexandru

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