

## The Classical Beat

By Stephen Dankner

### MOZART: MASTER OR GENIUS?

My old composition teacher Paul Creston used to say that there are two kinds of superior musical intellects, the master and the genius. You are a genius if everything comes naturally and easily; the music just flows from your pen. Masters, though, have to work at it, even slave over their music. They often face the terror of the blank page, writer's block and agonizing uncertainty. So, if you buy this premise, Bach, Mozart and Mendelssohn were geniuses; Beethoven, who struggled with his muse, sketched endlessly and threw soup at his waiter for disturbing him in the midst of a raptus, was a master.

How do they do it, the Mozarts and Mendelssohns? Does a genius know everything? Unanswerable questions. Classical performers and presenters are falling all over themselves celebrating Mozart's 250<sup>th</sup> birthday this year, with round-the-clock performances of his operas, concerti, symphonies, sonatas and string quartets. In the midst of all this hoopla, I've had a slightly irreverent fantasy: What if we could go back in time, snatch the maestro from his apartment in Vienna, transport him through the ether and set him down in front of a Jackson Pollock painting at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, or give him a press pass, front and center, to Alban Berg's "Wozzeck"? What about Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" or "Pierrot Lunaire" by Schoenberg? How about Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot"? Would he get it, or would he die of the shock, on the spot? Is there, within the minds, souls and hearts of creators of genius, a universal awareness of greatness, unrestricted by time and place?

By now you must think I must be a sadist. Poor Mozart; to endure such artistic corruption! Certainly he'd be faced with sensory overload. My guess is that he'd think a society that could produce such "art" had descended into madness. But wait – maybe, given time, he'd perceive all this as personal artistic expression, freed from the conventions of a fixed, commonly accepted style.

All this gets to the real question: Is there progress in art? I think you could say, yes, up until about 1890, with the collective innovations in harmony,

musical form and the development and expansion of the orchestra as the most magnificent sound-producing machine conceived by the mind of man. But this is progress only in the technical sense. The composer's toolkit gradually developed more elaborate and complex means of expression. Great art, though, could still only be produced according to the skill and inspiration of the master/genius composer.

Mozart, if he were to attend any of his birthday bashes, would be amazed to find his music revered and performed so many years after it was composed. He was writing for a demand which existed, or for which he hoped would exist. Of course he knew the quality of his work, but posterity was certainly not on his mind. He spent his adult life looking for a job, and was constantly in need of money. Probably the first thing he would ask, after seeing Pollock's "action" paintings or hearing "The Rite of Spring" would be if people are actually paying to see and hear these things.

With the luxury of hindsight we can smugly look back and survey all the changes (there are hundreds of them), which have taken classical music on a stylistic roller coaster since 1756. With little effort we could convince ourselves that progress has been made: longer and louder symphonies weighed down with spiritual/religious meaning, increased harmonic complexity, experimentation with sound for its own sake, a fixation on empty virtuosity...

Has there been too much license under the banner of artistic entitlement? I recall Stravinsky's aphorism: "If everything would be permitted me, I would be lost in the abyss of freedom."

The love for Mozart's music, spanning the centuries, proves that the past is immanent. Progress means that we feel a need to bring the best of the past with us, to carry it forward, to cultivate a sense of history and to teach it to the young and cherish it as a model of excellence, as we work our way towards an uncertain musical destiny.

Pierre Boulez, when he was music director of the New York Philharmonic in the 1970s famously quipped – and not in jest – that he earnestly wished for "collective amnesia," so that audiences would not compare the masterworks of the past with modern music. His valiant attempts to convert audiences to the joys of modern music - most notably Schoenberg, Berg and Webern - failed. Now, James Levine is trying the same thing with the Boston

Symphony. I think this that this time, some of the music may have a chance of being accepted. Schoenberg died in 1951. Actually, fifty-plus years are about right for “progressive” music to enter the mainstream. Let’s forget about whistling those atonal melodies, though. Never going to happen. There’s more to music than melody – substance and power of imagination, for example; these are also attributes of greatness.

There are three stages of acceptance for music and the composers who seek to forge the next link in the chain of music history for their work: their music must become respected, loved or venerated. In the end, the master and genius will produce the same high level of work. Respected works generally interest scholars and professional musicians. Works that are loved, by such composers as Gershwin, Ravel, Puccini, Tchaikovsky, et al will always have a devoted following by music-loving audiences. The venerated composers such as Bach, Beethoven, Chopin and Mozart exist on an ethereal plane. Their music is beyond such unimportant and irrelevant questions of style or modernity.

So with the “Prague” Symphony No. 38 in the background, I’d like to lift a glass to the eternal and angelic Amadeus, perennially old-fashioned and modern, Janus-like in the humanity of his operas, the perfection of his symphonies and piano concerti and the nobility of his perfect taste. Happy birthday, Wolfie!

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