

## Reflections on Mozart

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### Abstract

This article seeks to explain how Mozart's music is unique. The article begins by positing a general view of Mozart's life achievement, drawing on Paul Johnson's short new biography for support. The article then proceeds to give examples of Mozart's originality, covering the solo instrumental, chamber, vocal and orchestral divisions of his *œuvre*.

What is it about Mozart's music that makes it so remarkable?<sup>1</sup> At the highest levels, it is not always constructive to compare the relative merits of different composers. However, there are times when it is useful to cite the work of another composer by way of reference.

When Beethoven started writing, he produced works that stand out for two principal reasons: the tremendous beauty of sound and a certain spiritual simplicity. As Beethoven grew older, he became more complex, and as he became more complex he became more introspective.

I do not for a moment wish to suggest that in the later works of Beethoven we no longer hear a beauty of sound; on the contrary, this special quality never deserted him. In the later works, we hear a different kind of beauty from that which distinguishes his earlier works. Moreover, the simplicity of spirit that one finds in the early Beethoven is nowhere near as manifest in the later works.

With Mozart, it's a different story. In the early Mozart, one hears an almost overwhelming beauty of sound. In addition, we encounter a simplicity of spirit, perhaps even

more so than with early Beethoven, though this particular opinion remains subjective. The most important point about Mozart is that the profound beauty of sound and striking simplicity of spirit that one hears in the early works remained with him all his life.

I think it is fair to posit that of all the composers in the Western canon Mozart stands out as having written music that is the most beautiful. However, the fact remains that his music is so compellingly melodic and mellifluous as to belie the remarkable technical mastery lying behind it.

If we were to attempt the audacity to sum up Mozart's overall achievement in just a few words, it might be that throughout his magnificent, multi-faceted output he wrote music that radiates the dance of life to an uncommon degree.

One of the most popular works in the orchestral repertory is the *Nutcracker Suite* by Tchaikovsky. For all that this is a wonderful piece, there is no substitute for seeing the complete ballet with all the dancers up there on the stage.

With the music of Wolfgang Amadeus, by contrast, we can hear the dance of life without resorting to, or feeling any necessity to visualise, a choreographed ballet on the stage.

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<sup>1</sup> The whole of Mozart's output is available online. <http://dme.mozarteum.at/DME/nma/start.php?l=2>

Such is Mozart's genius that regardless of whether we are listening to a solo piece, a chamber work featuring just a small number of instruments, or a much larger work for solo instrument and orchestra, as if by magic we hear the dance of life unfolding before our very ears.

In point of fact, Mozart was an inveterate and indefatigable dancer throughout his life — indeed virtually to his deathbed.

It is instructive to see how Mozart's infatuation with the dance manifests itself in larger compositions. Mozart's first collaboration with Lorenzo Da Ponte was *The Marriage of Figaro*, universally regarded as one of his best operas.

As Paul Johnson points out in his excellent new short book on Mozart, the play by Beaumarchais on which it is based “was a consciously radical assault on aristocratic privileges and pretensions and ran into trouble everywhere for precisely the reason that it showed humble-born persons as morally superior to aristocrats and getting the better of them for that reason — having higher intelligence, too. That is what initially attracted Mozart so strongly to the project, for it gave him its emotional dynamism” (Johnson, 2014, p. 90).

Without question, Beaumarchais' original scenario held a special resonance for Mozart in the composer's professional life. We learn from Johnson how Mozart and Da Ponte “first unconsciously, then quite deliberately and systematically, transformed the play into a comic epic of forgiveness, reconciliation, and final delight. Score settling became peace with honor, and revenge melted into content” (Johnson, 2014, p. 91).

*Figaro* is thus the embodiment of Mozart's emotional nature in music. He was a fundamentally easygoing person, whose

brief spasms of hot temper and outbursts of grievances were mere cloudlets racing across a sunny view of life. He enjoyed existence and wanted everyone to be as happy as he. He believed they could be, too, if only they were sensible. *Figaro*, in the end, shows everyone more or less being sensible, decent, and forgiving — and so happy. That is why it is not only Mozart's best opera but the one people love, probably more loved than any other in the repertoire. (Johnson, 2014, p. 91)

The transformation of Beaumarchais' dramatic parable into a more universally accessible and loveable opera buffa lends credence to the view that in his stage works Mozart subscribed, consciously or not, to a world vision characterised by a certain playfulness and *joie de vivre* or, if you will, a dance of life.

With the piano sonatas, chamber works, instrumental concertos and symphonies we have no recourse to an external program or narrative. In other words, we enter the realm of absolute music. When we listen to Mozart's instrumental music, we are able to hear notes dancing in a multitude of configurations and permutations. In this respect, Mozart was a choreographer of genius.

In order to hear Mozart's dance of life encapsulated at the highest levels of sublimation, we need to listen to those interpretative artists who by virtue of talent, temperament and intuition are completely attuned to the rhythm of his musical breathing. The names that spring most readily to mind are Clara Haskil for the piano works, Arthur Grumiaux for the violin works, the Amadeus Quartet for the string quartets and quintets, and Bruno Walter for the symphonies and operas.

There would be much to support Johnson's contention that in writing both operas and sacred choral music Mozart "lived in two quite distinct universes, which he kept entirely separate, intellectually and emotionally."

It is part of Mozart's genius that he could dwell simultaneously, without any sense of discomfort or uneasiness, on two quite different planes of sensibility — rather as he could switch from a carom in billiards to write five bars of a string quartet, then back again, without trouble. (Johnson, 2014, p. 101)

Yet by Johnson's own admission there is a discernible connection between *Figaro* and the Requiem Mass, Mozart's greatest sacred work. The net result is one of the most deeply personal compositions Mozart ever wrote. While serious, it is never solemn or austere. As Johnson points out, there is no hint of despair in the entire work.

On the contrary, there is a consistent note of gentleness, love, reconciliation, and peace. This is epitomized by the Confutatis, which implies eventual admission to paradise. In a curious way, the atmosphere of the Requiem is the spiritual equivalent to the spirit of forgiveness and acceptance we find in the last act of *Figaro* ... Mozart knew it would all come out right in the end. It is hard to imagine two works more different than *Figaro* and the Requiem, yet they both breathe this message, the theme, in some ways, of his life: "Never despair." (Johnson, 2014, p. 131)

Mozart had a remarkable ability to intuit the harmonic ramifications of a single chord. A fine example is the second movement of

String Quartet No. 7 in E-flat, KV 160.<sup>2</sup> This movement is a sonata form in A-flat.

Instead of starting on the tonic, this movement opens with a seventh chord based on the submediant. The chord resolves to the supertonic on the second beat of the bar.

In the second bar, Mozart gives the dominant seventh which resolves to the tonic on the second beat of the bar. This version of the tonic, however, has the note C sounding in the first violin; no fewer than three more bars elapse before the harmonic status of the tonic is clearly established.

Mozart's ability to approach the tonic in such an unusual way at the start of a new movement shows that he was already an original.

Mozart was all of 17 when he wrote this piece.

The first movement of the Seventh Quartet displays a different kind of originality with respect to harmony. It is a sonata form in E-flat.

In the exposition, there is a 4-bar passage leading up to the second subject in B-flat.

In the recapitulation, bars 71–74 constitute a 4-bar passage leading up to the second subject, now transposed to the key of the tonic.

With the sole exception of an alteration to the violins' figuration on the last beat of bar 72, these bars are identical to the corresponding 4-bar passage in the exposition.

Such a procedure gives the lie to the rule of thumb that for a sonata movement to be successful the second subject of the recapitulation must be approached via a different harmonic trajectory from its homologue in the exposition.

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<sup>2</sup>KV is an abbreviation in German for *Köchel Verzeichnis*. It is a register for all the compositions of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791).

An examination of Mozart's oeuvre confirms that he used this procedure more than once. A similar process may be observed in the first movement of Piano Sonata No. 2 in F, KV 280.

Mozart's originality with respect to harmony carries over to the realm of large-scale form.

The slow movement of the "Jupiter" Symphony No. 41, KV 551, is a sonata form in F.

The coda of this movement is based on the first subject. While the first subject was recognisable at the start of the recapitulation, the version of the subject in the coda bears a much closer resemblance to its homologue as it was initially heard in the exposition.

This particular application of sonata form is original.

Beethoven is quite rightly credited for his genius in incorporating fugues into several late multi-movement compositions: Piano Sonata No. 29 "Hammerklavier" in B-flat, Op. 106 (1818); Piano Sonata No. 31 in A-flat, Op. 110 (1821); and String Quartet No. 14 in C-sharp minor, Op. 131 (1826).

But the fact remains that Mozart, at a much younger age, wrote more than one string quartet which incorporated a fully-

fledged fugue. Cases in point are the last movements of the following: String Quartet No. 8 in F, KV 168 (1773); String Quartet No. 13 in D minor, KV 173 (1773).

While the range of Mozart's songs cannot compare to that of Schubert's, it should be remembered that the latter composer's coming of age coincided with a late blooming of German verse, without which Schubert would have had recourse to a much narrower range of texts. It is reasonable to posit, moreover, that unless we count a few arias by Bach only Mozart shared Schubert's innate gift in writing for the solo voice.

It is hoped that the above citations from Mozart's output, while few in number, will lend support to the view of the composer as one with an exceptionally high degree of originality, with a musical intuition second to none.

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### Reference

Johnson, P. (2014) *Mozart: A Life*, NY: Penguin.

