Mozart turns two hundred and fifty

Part 2: Paris and London

By Laura Villon
5 May 2006

The following is the second of a five-part series of articles. (See Part 1) It contains references to numerous works of music by Mozart. We encourage readers to listen to these pieces, long samples of which are available free of charge on www.classical.com.

Paris! On November 18, 1763, from their traveling coach, the Mozart family first viewed this center of Enlightenment thought. Upon their arrival the family was feted by the royal court at Versailles. Wolfgang “bewitched almost everyone” and was pampered by the musical Polish-born Queen Marie and her children. Ambassadors and courtiers sought them out. They visited the sumptuous apartments of the King’s mistress Madame de Pompadour, herself a patroness of the arts and accomplished harpsichordist, as well as her Paris mansion, today’s Elysée Palace.

With their concerts taking in a fabulous sum for the ever-cautious Leopold, the family stayed in Paris until the spring of 1764. They were in great demand in high society, and their concerts were well attended. The seven-year-old Wolfgang wrote four sonatas for keyboard and violin, which his father published.

But they were most at home with the group of Germans who formed an influential circle in Paris. The German-born Friedrich M. Grimm, secretary to the royal Duke d’Orléans, championed the Mozart children, organized their public and private concerts and helped them with Parisian etiquette.

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Grimm, a Machiavellian figure, published a fortnightly Correspondance Littéraire, Philosophique et Critique for select European princes to help them keep up with literature, Enlightenment thought, and the latest gossip of the great capital. The philosopher Denis Diderot contributed reviews to his paper. Grimm delighted in the chance to best his Italian and French rivals by promoting the Mozarts’ German talent.

Among Grimm’s Parisian circle was the brilliant materialist philosopher Holbach, whose house was a salon for people of the Enlightenment, the Encyclopedist Denis Diderot, and Helvetius.

Many people have heard of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), the philosopher of the French Revolution. Few realize that he was first known through his interest in music, that he invented a system of musical notation, and that his opera Le Devin du village played before King Louis XV at the Château de Fontainebleau.

Enlightenment thought of the early eighteenth century sought to apply reason to the problems of mankind and society, confident that the pursuit of knowledge could improve social conditions. Rousseau however, by the middle of the century, attacked these ideas. The arts, he wrote famously in Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts, “cast garlands of flowers over the chains men bore.”

At the request of Denis Diderot, Rousseau contributed the article on music to Diderot’s Encyclopédie, which set out to summarize all modern scientific knowledge and thought in one work. Revolutionary in its consequences, the multivolume work was everywhere banned, yet every great household had a complete set in Encyclopédie. The credit is with spreading the ideas of advanced scientific thought broadly throughout Europe and preparing the way for the French Revolution.

While the two friends later had a falling out, nonetheless their ideas would profoundly change the trajectory of European social and political thought as well as the direction of art and music.

In his Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, Rousseau wrote that civilization corrupted humanity through the power of property, while in the “natural” state, people were equal. The educated classes enthusiastically embraced Rousseau’s ideal of the “noble savage.” In the arts, support for a more “natural” style supported by Rousseau in music, Diderot in drama, and Noverre in dance swept through Europe and overturned old forms.[1]

For over a century the courts of Italy and France had demanded heroic opera and theater to reinforce the idea that the reigning monarchs were, if not descended from, at least closely related to the Gods.

In Italy, opera seria dealt with lofty themes from classical mythology of duty, sacrifice, love and repentance, usually an encomium to the appropriate prince. Between dry or more flowing speech (secco and arioso), which advanced the action with harpsichord accompaniment, the principal singers sang long virtuosic arias in which they embellished a vocal line and improvised variations on it.

The French counterpart to opera seria was tragédie lyrique. The Sun King Louis XIV had expelled the Italian musicians and selected Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632-1687), Florence-born and French-educated, to head a new French theater. Based on texts of classical antiquity by Corneille and Racine, French tragédie lyrique outlawed Italian vocal virtuosity in favor of choral ensembles. Ballet became an integral part of the opera, and movable stage sets and fantastic machines took the place of Italian vocal pyrotechnics.

By the mid-eighteenth century, however, the absolute power of the princely courts was losing its grip. Wealthy bourgeois mingled freely with the old nobility in the salons and in public theaters. Actresses shed their wigs and noble dresses in favor of more realistic costumes. The freer English style of dress and all things English suddenly became the rage on the Continent.

The conflict between the old and the new forms came to a head in France when an itinerant Italian troupe of lyrical comic opera, or opera-buffa, arrived in Paris in 1752 and won great popularity. Supporters of Queen Marie and the enlightened public greeted the emotional naturalistic drama of the Bouffons with delight. Their opponents, King Louis XV and his mistress Pompadour, for their part supported the national theater, now under Lully’s successor, the aged Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764).

The “War of the Bouffons” was still going on when the Mozart family arrived in Paris in late 1763. Each faction occupied their own corner of the opera theater. Insults were hurled and abusive pamphlets were published. Leopold wrote home of the “perpetual war between Italian and
French music.”

Baron Grimm and the lesser-known Rousseau supported the Bouffons against Rameau. Rousseau’s Lettre sur la musique française of 1753 decisively swayed French opinion towards the Italians. Rameau was humiliated.

In the midst of the “War of the Bouffons,” Christoph Willibald Gluck, Kapellmeister to the Empress Maria Theresa, produced a revolutionary opera, Orfeo ed Euridice, in Vienna in 1762.

Gluck’s new operatic form sought to integrate music with the dramatic action and to introduce complex human—i.e., flawed—emotions. “Simplicity, truth and lack of affectation” are “the sole principles of beauty in all artistic creations,” Gluck said, echoing Diderot. “To imitate nature is the acknowledged aim ... which I seek to attain” (Gutman 128).

Gluck is the direct precursor to the dramatic genius of Wolfgang Mozart, who, “making the drama of character part of the comedy of situation ... like Shakespeare, set tragedy and comedy side by side” (Gutman 157).

Rousseau’s appeal to naturalism would resound in Germany in the style bourgeois or Storm and Stress movement we associate with the French music.”

notes:

2. Polyphony signifies several melodic lines intertwining as they move forward. It derives from the plainchant of the Medieval Church. In counterpart, the contrasting parts carry the same weight and are of equal difficulty, in contrast to the chordal structure of the subsequent melodic music.

3. Singspiel was a form of popular opera or operetta, with spoken dialog in the German language interspersed with arias and ballads. It grew out of translations of English ballad opera. Its successor is considered to be operetta.

works cited and consulted:


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