

## INVITATION

### *Anticipatory Pronouncements . . .*

“Whoever has discovered Mozart even to a small degree and then tries to speak about him falls quickly into what seems rapturous stammering.”<sup>1</sup> So reports Karl Barth, German theologian, notable Mozart lover—and the producer of a number of his own rapt assessments of the composer’s art. Indeed, the sound of Mozart urges many critics to make pronouncements that invoke musical perfection and more: no less a skeptic than Bernard Shaw said that Mozart’s was “the only music yet written that would not sound out of place in the mouth of God.”<sup>2</sup> Donald Francis Tovey strikes a more Christ-like note: “[Mozart] died young, and he touched no problem without solving it to perfection.”<sup>3</sup> Mozart’s proximity to divinity is claimed by these and others without hesitation or embarrassment—it is hard to imagine saying such things about any other composer, apart from Bach. Barth even felt it necessary to distinguish between the divine qualities of Bach and Mozart: “It may be that when the angels go about their task of praising God, they play only Bach. I am sure, however, that when they are together *en famille*, they play Mozart and that then too our dear Lord listens with special pleasure.”<sup>4</sup> Bach, then, is always on the job, but when the agents of divinity go off duty, they turn to Mozart, as to the sounds of familial love and joy.

Others, without making direct reference to the divine, have heard Mozart’s music as emanating from a heightened prospect. Schubert confided to his diary that Mozart offers “comforting perceptions of a brighter and better life”; Wagner spoke of Mozart as “music’s genius of light and love.”<sup>5</sup> Ferruccio Busoni, who authored several pages of aphorisms about Mozart on the occasion of his 150<sup>th</sup> birthday (1906), claimed “serene cheer” as the composer’s “predominant feature.”<sup>6</sup> Brighter,

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lighter, lovelier, happier—Mozart’s music stands above the fray. As musicologist Alfred Einstein avers, in the final sentence of his biography of Mozart: “here is pure sound, conforming to a weightless cosmos, triumphant over all chaotic earthliness.”<sup>7</sup>

The sonic purity Einstein values becomes Music Itself in the view of Karl Barth: “Could it be that the characteristic basic ‘sound’ of both the earlier and later Mozart—not to be confused with the sound of any other—is in fact the primal sound of music absolutely? Could it be that he discovered and struck this ‘tone’ in its timelessly valid form?”<sup>8</sup> Here we have moved all the way up to a Platonic Mozart, the ideal from which all other musics fall off into contingent realities. Paul Henry Lang translates this sense of unrivalled superiority into the language of aesthetic objectivity:

Mozart is the greatest musico-dramatic genius of all times. This unique position he owes to a temperament which approached everything, every situation, and every human being with absolute objectivity. . . . Every situation and every individual appeared to him as music, his whole conception was purely aesthetic, and music was his language. He preserved the old and great virtues of Italian music, and in his universal genius these united with German transcendentalism, embodying the plans, desires, and hopes of the outgoing century.<sup>9</sup>

What doesn’t Mozart achieve in Lang’s exalted summation? Here we encounter the universal, objective Mozart, an aesthetic god in his dispassionate handling of all things human, forging the link from Western music’s past to its future. Barth too posits a godlike Mozart who keeps life and death, heaven and earth “ever present before his eyes, in his hearing, and in his heart.” Barth continues: “Knowing all, Mozart creates music from a mysterious center, and so knows and observes limits to the right and the left, above and below. He maintains moderation.”<sup>10</sup> Barth’s great themes concerning Mozart’s music are Play and Freedom; it is as though the composer can place himself at the calm center of the human universe, freely and playfully translating into music the multifarious parade of humanity spinning around him.<sup>11</sup>

Wherever one positions Mozart in the cosmography of human perfectibility, one thing remains unquestioned: we place absolute trust in Mozart’s musical judgment, as in no other’s. He seems a kind of aesthetic tuning fork, incapable of a poorly voiced sonority, a misjudged line, an overworked effect. And not only do we trust him, but who among us has not experienced wonder at his unerring mastery? Other things in which

we invest both trust and wonder include what we can observe of the great rhythms of nature: the phases of the moon, the orbits of the moons of Jupiter, the appointed rounds of celestial objects. But these are distant worlds, far removed from the circle of human intimacy, while Mozart's music is somehow both unerring and human. Why is this combination not disturbingly uncanny, or supremely off-putting? In my own case, it has partly to do with an emotional reaction that often ambushes me when I pay closer attention to Mozart's music. This is the same reflex that can bring tears to the eyes when listening to Bach, or Art Tatum: in the presence of such joyful abundance and facility, such superhuman play, I am not floored with overawed admiration, but rather find myself glad to be alive, overjoyed to be in the same world with such sounds.

Trust, Wonder, Joy. No surprise that Mozart's music is often treated as an unfailingly good thing, a beneficial presence—like light, or warmth. Unlike the sublime infallibility of great celestial bodies, light and warmth can be brought into one's own circle and—in moderation—can always and only be good. For Mozart's much vaunted evenhandedness ensures that the light will never glare nor the warmth sear. Yet the effect of Mozart's music goes beyond the comforts of a well-moderated environment. Rather, one welcomes Mozart's music as one welcomes certain gratifying effects of light and warmth, such as the smell of fresh baked bread, or the surging smile of a loved one.

But metaphors of creature comfort, and even of human love, will never quite capture the special experience many of us have when listening to Mozart. For this we may need to draw closer to a sense of enchantment, by invoking that quality of Mozart's music that everyone asserts but almost no one discusses: unsurpassed beauty. That Mozart composed the most beautiful music we can know is an article of faith among listeners and critics of Mozart's music. And like other articles of faith, it is rarely if ever held up to scrutiny. Most musically trained critics are content simply to acknowledge the sheer beauty of this music as they move off to more tractable topics. A recent exception that proves the general rule can be found in Maynard Solomon's 1995 biography of Mozart, in which he devotes two entire chapters to a probing interpretation of the beautiful in Mozart's music. But for most others, those in the rank and file of academia as well as millions of music-loving civilians, the beauty of Mozart's music is simply taken for granted, as a happy boon, one of the few things in life that do not need to be questioned or examined but only enjoyed. Or commodified—in the form of the so-called "Mozart Effect," a kind of spiritual balm that enhances the growth of house plants, increases the intelligence of children about to take tests, and generally leads the troubled modern mind to a semblance of serenity.<sup>12</sup>

### *. . . Toward an Enchanted Appreciation*

In what follows, I too wish to speak of the Mozart effect, but unlike more commercial proponents I do not wish to leave it unexamined. Instead, I have composed what might best be called an appreciation, a personal attempt to describe what is striking about the sound of Mozart. In making this attempt, I deploy simple analytical accounts of musical effects, but always also relate these effects to other domains of human significance. The musico-aesthetic issues I will address include sonority, texture, line, harmony, dissonance, and timing, as well as aspects of large-scale form such as thematic returns, retransitions, and endings. In conjunction with these many musical instances I will explore qualities of expression, intimation, interiority, innocence, melancholy, grace, and renewal.

Above all, I wish to apprehend the quality of beauty in Mozart's music. Until recently, such an agenda would likely have appeared naïve and obsolete. Scholars and critics engaged with the arts had long outgrown the notion of beauty, dismissing it as a moldering aesthetic category, an uncritical pledge to some fantasy of "immanence"—or, worse yet, as a trivializing assessment signifying little more than "pretty." Nowadays, theories of beauty are once again flourishing in various quarters.<sup>13</sup> And while I myself am neither equipped nor inclined to make a philosophical argument for the importance of acknowledging beauty, I would like to think that my treatment of Mozart's music could function in support of such an argument, or at least that any such argument would do well to consider the remarkable bearing of Mozartean beauty.

For the beautiful in Mozart seems to stand apart, untouched by human hands. Which is to say that Mozart's music often seems effortless, an aesthetic judgment often ratified by what we know of the circumstances of its composition. Human strain, or even overt human manipulation, the tooling of a product, would seem to have left little mark here. The music seems somehow pre-made, and it glows with a self-sufficiency that has less to do with "unity" and more with apartness: untouched, untouchable. It is often heard as a kind of alabaster that flows without perturbation—this effect has nothing to do with a lack of dramatic events in the music but rather with the bearing of the music, for even the most electrifyingly dissonant passages never cloy; the psychic envelope of the music never threatens to tear; nothing is going to burst. Yet even so, the effect is not that of some distant Olympian but is often as moving as Schubert. What musical features account for this particular kind of beauty? Why do we tend to hear Mozart's music as both untouchable and touching? Questions like these will inflect my discussion of sonority and line in the opening chapter of the book, in which we will first encounter beauty as

though held in suspension, and then beauty as though placed in motion, becoming grace.

In the central chapter, I will make much of the Romantic idea of liminal states, arguing that Mozart often stages the uncanny threshold of another dimension, whether deeply interior or incipiently transcendent, by composing passages that seem to rise above the discourse of their surroundings. Many of these will involve oblique, out-of-phase dissonance, or so-called “purple patches” arising from the middle of a phrase. Such passages will also be heard to signal a move away from Enlightenment certainties toward the less certain but more enticing attractions of Modernity. And in the third chapter, I will try to account for an intuitive sense of grace and renewal that infuses Mozart’s music at moments of formal consequence, such as his way of seeming to arrest the flow of time during retransitions. As the book draws to a close, my observations will be increasingly tinged with references to ironic self-consciousness, as an analogy to the reflexive buoyancy of Mozart’s music. In the epilogue I will try to gather some of these themes under the sign of “knowing innocence,” an ingratiating and renewable modality of spirit fostered through the Mozart experience.

While my approach may seem to entail an ambitious reach, much about Mozart’s music will remain outside the penumbra of this short book: there will be nothing on his compositional process and no attempt toward comprehensive coverage of his every genre or formal type. And though I hope that performers of Mozart’s music will be in the front ranks of my audience, I will not presume to suggest ways to realize his music, nor will I analyze any existing performances. Given these disclosures, one might suspect that my project is rather more self-indulgent than systematic, nor would it be incorrect to do so: my initial motivation was in fact the urge to write about many of my favorite passages. In the face of one of his own cherished spots in Mozart, Tovey once said this: “Mozart . . . has uttered one of those sublimities which are incomparable with each other and with everything else, except as touchstones for one’s own sense of beauty.”<sup>14</sup> I like to think of the passages I have selected here as my own set of Mozartean touchstones. My aim in considering these touchstones has been a simple one: listen closely and describe their effects as I hear them. I do this in part to support some of the reigning critical intuitions about Mozart’s music with fresh analytical evidence, and in part to develop a newly inflected view of our perennial susceptibility to his music.

Though such an analysis may serve to demystify some aspects of Mozart’s music, I have no interest in disenchanting the experience. Quite the opposite: I would rather enter into a kind of knowing enchantment. Scholars working hard on the broad and complex front lines of musicological inquiry may well regard my enterprise as a retreat into some

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hopelessly Romantic engagement with the musical experience, as though to escape reality by drifting into an enchanted realm. Yet I believe we all inhabit such realms, whether we acknowledge it or not: even the most resolutely disenchanting among us maintain any number of welcome illusions in order to sustain such a resolution. So I invite you to share my enchanted appreciation of Mozart, my ongoing embrace of the illusions of beauty and grace.<sup>15</sup> If you feel you can accept this invitation, may our time together be well spent.