

The Great Composers, Sketched by Themselves. No. III. Mozart (Concluded)

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Source: *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, Vol. 19, No. 421 (Mar. 1, 1878), pp. 138-141

Published by: Musical Times Publications Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3357465>

Accessed: 26-06-2016 20:27 UTC

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## THE GREAT COMPOSERS, SKETCHED BY THEMSELVES.

BY JOSEPH BENNETT.

No. III.—MOZART (*concluded from page 74*).

THE letters written by Mozart in Vienna, during the most active and important years of his life, give us very little insight into his opinions on questions of art. They are mostly taken up—those at least which have come down to us—with personal and family matters, and, while interesting as throwing light upon his character as a man, they tell us comparatively little with regard to matters of graver consequence. Here and there, however, we get a glimpse of the master's views on topics connected with the business of his life, and no examination of his letters would be complete which ignored the fact. I have then a subject for a final article.

A careful reader of the letters can hardly doubt that Mozart, in his own view, was a writer of Operas first of all, and of anything else only in a sense subordinate. He rarely mentions his great works for the church, the orchestra, and the chamber; but of those for the stage he seems never weary of speaking. No sooner was one Opera out of hand than another was taken up, the whole energy and genius of the man being directed towards the branch of art which seemed not less to engage his sympathies than to be the readiest means of acquiring fame and fortune. It is natural therefore that we should look to the letters for a fuller exposition of his views on Opera than can be hoped for with reference to anything else. Nor are we disappointed.

On the question, so prominently put forward by Herr Wagner, as to the relative importance of poetry and music in lyric drama, Mozart held very definite opinions, by no means according with those of the Bayreuth reformer. Indeed, they are so remarkable that the whole passage wherein they occur is worth transcribing. Writing to his father while “*Die Entführung aus dem Serail*” was in progress, he said, “In Opera the poetry must necessarily be the obedient daughter of the music. Why do the Italian comic Operas everywhere please—with all their wretched poetry—even in Paris, where I myself witnessed the fact? Because music rules there supreme, and all else is forgotten. An Opera is certain to become popular when the plot is well worked out, the verse written expressly for the music, and not merely to suit some miserable rhyme (which never enhances the value of any theatrical performance, be it what it may, but rather detracts from it), bringing in words, or even entire verses, which completely ruin the whole ideas of the composer. Versification is, indeed, indispensable for music, but rhyme, solely for rhyming's sake, most pernicious. Those gentlemen who set to work in this pedantic fashion will always insure the failure both of their book and of the music. It would be well if a good composer could be found who understood the stage, with talent enough to make suggestions, and combined with that true Phoenix—an intellectual poet. Then no misgivings would be entertained about the applause even of the unlearned. Poets seem to be somewhat like trumpeters with their mechanical tricks. If we musical composers were to adhere as faithfully to our rules (which were very good at a time when no one knew any better), we should compose music as worthless as their libretti.” The first doctrine here enunciated, viz. that poetry should be the obedient daughter of music is certainly a startling one, even to those who are not prepared to travel with Herr Wagner to the opposite extreme. But Mozart never hesitated to put it in practice. Writing to his father about the progress of the same

Opera on another occasion, he said, “In the original libretto, Osmin has only one song and nothing else to sing except in the Terzetto and Finale; so now he has an Aria in the first act, and also one in the second. I have already indicated to Stephanie [*the librettist*] the words I require for that Air, *the chief part of the music being finished before Stephanie heard a syllable on the subject.*” The clause I have put in italics shows beyond all dispute the remarkable fact that, not only did Mozart make poetry subservient to music, but that he sometimes wrote the music first, and had the words fitted to it afterwards. It must not be supposed, however, that Mozart was indifferent to the verbal text of his Operas; on the contrary, he paid it so much attention that the poets who worked with him found ample reason to complain of his constant suggestions and alterations. It was for this cause that the Abbé Varesco, who wrote the words of “*Idomeneo*,” took offence; and for this cause also, when he consented to prepare the book of “*L'Oca del Cairo*,” some years after, the collaboration was broken off, and the Opera never completed. Among other passages in Mozart's letters bearing on the subject of libretti there are two or three which should be quoted. On one occasion he writes, “A new Opera, or rather *vaudeville*, of Umlauf's has lately been given here, called ‘*Welche ist die beste Nation?*’—a miserable piece, which was offered to me, but I would not accept it, saying that whoever composed music for it, without changing it entirely, ran a great risk of being hooted off the stage; and had it not been Umlauf's it would have been hooted, but, being his, it was merely hissed. This was not surprising, for even with the finest music no one could have tolerated such a piece; but, in addition, the music was so bad that I don't know whether the author of the poetry or the music should carry off the prize of inanity.” Again, he says, “I have looked through a hundred libretti and more, but have not been able to find even one with which I am satisfied; at least so many alterations would be required that, even if the poet were to consent to this, it would be easier for him to write an entirely new one—always the better plan.” On a third occasion, answering the dramatist Klein, who had sent him a libretto, “*Rudolf von Hapsburg*,” Mozart said, “A man of such good judgment and great experience as yourself must know quite as well as I do that a thing of this kind must be read over again and again, not merely once but repeatedly, and with all possible attention and deliberation; and up to this moment I have not even had time to read it through without interruptions. All I can say at present is that I don't wish to return it to you, and that I beg you will entrust the piece to me for some little time.” These are clearly not the words of a man who was careless as to the libretti he took in hand; wherefore the conclusion is justified that Mozart's views about the relative importance of the arts in Opera were based upon a principle deliberately accepted. In his “*Opera and Drama*,” Herr Wagner represents the great master as utterly indifferent on the point where the letters show him to have been careful. He says, “Nothing is more characteristic of Mozart, with reference to his career as an operatic composer, than the careless absence of choice with which he began his works. He thought so little of reflecting on the fundamental æsthetic scruples of Opera, that it was rather with the greatest ingenuousness he set about composing the music of every Opera text proposed, actually indifferent as to whether the text was or was not a thankful one to him as a pure musician.” It is impossible of course to reconcile this statement with Mozart's own words, “I have looked through a hundred libretti and more, but have not been able to find even one with which I am satisfied.” Where-

fore Herr Wagner is wrong. But the author of "Opera and Drama," without intending wilful misrepresentation, had an object in view when holding up Mozart as heedless what book he set to music. He wished to show the need for a real commingling of the genius of poet and musician by the example of those works of Mozart which have not kept the stage—works carelessly undertaken by the master, upon whom the poverty of the verse had a depressing effect. "Mozart," he tells us, "always composed music, but he could never write *beautiful* music except when inspired. Although this inspiration necessarily proceeded from his inward and peculiar powers, it only appeared bright and brilliant when fired from without, when the lovely object which, ardently oblivious of himself, he could embrace was displayed before the genius of the most divine love within him. Thus it would have been exactly the most absolute of all musicians, Mozart, who would long since have most satisfactorily solved for us the operatic problem; who would, namely, have assisted in producing the truest, most beautiful, and most perfect *drama*, had he but met with the *poet* whom he, as a musician, would only have been obliged to assist." I have nothing to urge against Herr Wagner's position at the present moment, except that it is not safe, in so far as it rests upon an assumption that Mozart ever set music to words and situations for which he had no conscious liking. The weight of evidence is entirely against such an assumption, especially as evidence is found in the letters written when "L'Oca del Cairo" was progressing. Mozart, for example, objected to the introduction of the goose. "I must candidly confess," he says, "that my only reason for not disapproving of this goose story altogether was because two men of greater experience and judgment than myself approved it. I allude to yourself [Leopold Mozart] and Varesco." He then goes on to point out how the plot may be changed with a view to "more natural effects," and adds emphatically, "I beg you will tell the Abbate Varesco very distinctly my opinion." In a subsequent letter he raised more objections, and was so far obstinate with regard to them that, as already stated, the whole enterprise fell through, and "L'Oca del Cairo" remained a fragment, reserved for the manipulation, in our own time, of M. Victor Wilder. Other instances might be cited, all pointing in the same direction, and tending to show that, while Mozart may have made, and actually did make, mistakes in the matter of libretti, he was far from being as reckless as Herr Wagner desires us to believe. One of these I cannot pass over. The librettist of "Die Entführung" had written a line thus: "Doch wie hui schwand meine Freude." Mozart took away the "hui" and substituted "schnell," remarking, "I don't know what our German poets think; even if they do not understand the theatre, or at all events Operas, still they should not make their personages talk as if they were addressing a herd of swine." Here is verbal criticism worthy of Wagner himself. *A propos*, let me point out that in another place the author of "Opera and Drama," eager to fling another stone at Meyerbeer, holds up Mozart as the great artist who wrote from his inspiration and never for the sake of effect. If this be so, how are we to explain the subjoined passage from Mozart's own hand, referring to the Terzetto at the close of the first act of "Die Entführung"? "Then comes the major at once, *pianissimo*; it must go very quick, and wind up noisily at the close, which is always appropriate at the conclusion of an act; the more noise the better—the shorter the better, so that the people may not have time to cool in their applause." Surely the conclusion of the whole matter is that Mozart's Operas

fairly represent his principles and his predilections, and that whatever they embody—mistakes and all—comes down to us with the stamp of his deliberate approval.

As regards the care with which the great composer sought to express the dramatic situation, we find a very interesting passage in a letter referring also to the Eastern Opera. It is worth transcribing bodily: "In working out the Aria [Osmin's] I have given full scope to Fischer's fine deep tones to vibrate. The 'D'rum beim Barte des Propheten' is indeed in the same time, but with quick notes, and as his wrath gradually increases (when the Aria appears to be at an end) the *allegro assai* follows in quite another measure and key, which must insure the best effect; for, as a man in such a violent fit of passion transgresses all the bounds of order and propriety and forgets himself in his fury, the same must be the case with the music too. But as the passions, whether violent or not, must never be expressed so as to become revolting, and the music in the most appalling situations never offend the ear, but continue to please and be melodious, I did not go from F, in which the air is written, into a remote key, but into an analogous one, not, however, into its nearest relative, D minor, but into the more remote A minor. Do you know how I have expressed Belmont's Aria in A major, 'O wie ängstlich, O wie feurig!' and the 'throbbing heart'? By octaves on the violins. This is the favourite Aria of all those who have heard it, and mine also, and written expressly to suit Adamberger's voice. You hear the trembling, throbbing, swelling breast expressed by a *crescendo*, while the whispers and sighs are rendered by the first violins with *sordini* and a flute in unison." The chief value of this extract lies in its enunciation of the principle that music, even in its utmost exemplification of *Sturm und Drang*, must never be unpleasing. Mozart knew the full resources lying to his hand, and was perfectly well aware that all forms and degrees of expression were possible without breaking in upon this grand principle. Many of his successors, unfortunately, are in different case. Since Mozart's day the boundary separating music, which must please, from noise, which may distress, has been broken down, and composers, in the agonies of passion, go storming out into a veritable sound-chaos, crying, "Away with the tyranny of tone families." Poor Mozart! He only ventured from the minor of D to that of A. But even in our composer's day strange things were done by people eager for applause and not scrupulous as to how they got it. "The happy medium, truth in all things," complains Mozart, "is no longer either known or valued. One must write things so inane that they might be played on barrel-organs, or so unintelligible that no rational being can comprehend them, though on that very account they are likely to please."

In the course of our examination of Mozart's letters we have found ample evidence as to his sincere patriotism. He was a German of the Germans, proud of his nationality, and anxious in all ways to further its renown; naturally therefore he felt disgust at the small value set by the German Courts and aristocracy upon native talent, and at the preference shown to Italians. As Weber did after him, Mozart hated the Italians with a cordial hatred, not for their musical ability, but for the unscrupulousness with which they used the national gift of intrigue and cabal. Ah Sin is not more famous "for ways that are dark and for tricks that are vain" than, in Mozart's eye, were the ultramontane adventurers who swarmed in every German Court and city where there was anything substantial to be picked up. This feeling crops out now and then in the course of the letters. At one time we read, "A certain Abbate da

Ponte is our poet here. He has at present a vast deal to do in theatrical revision, and must, *per obbligo*, write a new libretto for Salieri, which cannot be ready for a couple of months, and then he promises to write one for me; but who can tell whether he will or can keep his promise? You are aware that these Italian gentlemen are very civil to your face. Well, we know them. If he is in league with Salieri, I shall never while I live get a libretto from him." In another place the master, referring to Clementi, says, "He is a charlatan, like all Italians. He writes *presto* over a Sonata, and often *prestissimo* and *alla breve*, and plays it himself *allegro* in  $\frac{4}{4}$  time. I know this to be the case, for I heard him do so." With equal bitterness the disgusted composer spoke of the neglect which left him to pick up a scanty living. "I believe I am fully capable of doing honour to any Court. If Germany, my beloved fatherland, of which I am (as you know) so proud, will not accept me, then in God's name let France or England be enriched by one more German of talent, to the disgrace of the German nation. You know well that the Germans are the people who have always excelled most in all the fine arts, but where have they laid the foundation of their success and fame? Not in Germany, certainly. Even Gluck—did Germany make him the great man he is? Alas! no. Countess Thun, Count Zichi, Baron von Swieten, even Prince Kaunitz, are all much dissatisfied with the Emperor for not more highly prizing men of genius, and for allowing them to leave his dominions. The latter, in speaking of me to the Archduke Maximilian, said, 'Such people only come into the world once in a hundred years, and must not be driven away from Germany, more particularly when we are so fortunate as actually to enjoy their presence in the capital.'" With the feelings which animated him, we are not surprised to find Mozart discussing the possibility of establishing a National Opera, as opposed to that which brought the Italians into his country. "Every nation," he exclaims, with more comprehensiveness than truth, "has an Opera of its own; why should not the Germans have one also. Is not German as well adapted for singing as French or English, and more so than the Russian? I am at present writing a German Opera *for myself*." Again, when writing to Herr Klein on this subject, he says, "I can give you very little intelligence as to the proposed German operatic stage, as everything is progressing very slowly, except, indeed, the building of the Kärnthnertheater, which is set apart for this purpose. It is to be opened the beginning of October. For my part I don't anticipate its being very successful. To judge from the preliminaries, it would seem as if it were intended to deal a deathblow to the German Opera altogether (which has for some time been in a languishing condition), rather than to restore and cultivate it. My sister-in-law, Madame Lange, is the only one who has got permission to sing at the German Opera. Cavalieri, Adamberger, Teyber, all Germans of whom Germany may well be proud, must remain at the Italian Opera, and are thus compelled to enter the lists against their own countrymen. . . . The Italian company do not require them, for, as far as numbers go, they can play without any foreign aid. The idea at present is to make use of actors and actresses in the German Opera who only sing when absolutely required. Most unhappily, the directors of the theatre, as well as of the orchestra, are to be continued in office, who by their ignorance and inefficiency have most of all contributed to the destruction of their own work. If there were even one good patriot on the same raft, the affair would soon assume another aspect. In that case, perhaps, the fair-budding National Theatre might one day

burst into blossom. It would be thought an everlasting blot on Germany if we Germans were ever really to begin to think in German, and to act like Germans, to speak German, and above all to sing in German!!! Do not take it amiss, dear sir, if in my zeal I may have gone perhaps rather too far. Fully persuaded that I am addressing a *true German*, I have allowed my tongue free course, which I can, alas! so seldom do that, after each such outpouring of my heart, I might boldly venture on an extra libation without injury to my health." How all these remonstrances and speculations ended need not be said. For one great work written in German, Mozart composed two in Italian, and the task of setting up a National Opera devolved upon others.

Every amateur knows that during the later period of his life Mozart's love for purely contrapuntal music became almost a passion, a fact curiously illustrated by the combined Chorale and Fugue in "Die Zauberflöte." This development seems to have arisen out of the composer's acquaintance with Baron von Swieten, a devoted admirer of Handel and Bach, whose works were frequently performed at his house. "By-the-bye," writes Mozart to his father, "I must ask you, when you return me the Rondo, to send me also the six Fugues of Handel, and Eberlin's Toccatas and Fugues. I go every Sunday, at twelve o'clock, to Baron von Swieten's, where nothing is played but Handel and Bach. I am now making a collection of the Bach Fugues [Sebastian], and also those of Emanuel and Friedemann Bach, and likewise of Handel." In a subsequent letter to his sister we find a full account of the first pianoforte Fugue committed to paper by the master—that which has a subject as follows:—

*Andante maestoso.*



He says, "I inclose a Prelude and Fugue. . . . My dear Constance is, in fact, the origin of this Fugue coming into the world. Baron von Swieten, to whom I go every Sunday, gives me all Handel's and Sebastian Bach's Fugues (after I have played them to him) to take home with me. When Constance heard these she fell in love with them at once; she will listen to nothing but Fugues, and particularly the works (in this style) of Handel and Bach. As she often heard me play Fugues, out of my head, she asked me if I never wrote them down; and when I said I never did, she reproached me for not having composed this most artistic and beautiful style of music, and never ceased her entreaties till I wrote a Fugue for her. So this is its origin. I have purposely timed it *andante maestoso*, that it may not be played too quick; for if a Fugue is not rather slowly played, the subject, as it comes in, cannot be distinctly and clearly heard, and thus naturally produces no effect. In the course of time, and when I have a favourable opportunity, I intend to write five others, and present them to Baron von Swieten, whose collection of music, though small in quantity, is good in value." The opportunity never seems to have come, but Mozart's suddenly awakened passion for contrapuntal writing influenced all his future works of importance, and culminated in the glorious Finale to the "Jupiter" Symphony.

Clementi's arrival in Vienna, and the distinction with which he was received, naturally had an effect upon Mozart, but not from any sense of inferiority as a pianist. As a matter of fact the German master entertained something like contempt for his Italian brother. In one letter he says of him, "Clementi plays well, as far as execution with the right hand goes. His greatest strength is his passages in thirds,

but he has not an atom of feeling or taste; in short he is a mere machine." Again he writes, "As to Clementi, he is a good player, and when this is said all is said. He has great facility with his right hand; his principal passages are thirds; but in other respects he has not an atom of taste or feeling, all is mere mechanism." And yet again, "I must here say a few words about the Clementi Sonatas. Every one who either hears them or plays them must feel that as compositions they are poor enough. They contain no remarkable or striking passages, except those in sixths and octaves; and I beg my sister not to practise these too much, that she may not disturb her quiet even touch, nor injure the natural lightness, facility, and smooth rapidity of her finger. For, after all, what is to be gained by it? Supposing you do play the sixths and octaves with the utmost velocity (which no man, not even Clementi, can thoroughly accomplish), you produce an unpleasant scramble, but nothing else in the world. . . . What he [Clementi] really does well are his passages in thirds, but he laboured at these day and night in London. Except these he can do nothing, absolutely nothing; for he has not the slightest taste or execution, far less feeling." Mozart, as has already sufficiently appeared, was in the habit of speaking about his contemporaries with plainness, but there were times when he was just as earnest in praise. In one letter we read, "Some Quartetts have just come out by a certain Pleyel, a pupil of Joseph Haydn's. If you do not yet know them, you ought to try to get them, for they are worth the trouble, being very well composed and pleasing: you will at once recognise his master by the style of the music. It will be a good and happy thing for music if Pleyel, in his day, is able to supply Haydn's place among us." These generous words may fitly be supplemented by those in which the master dedicated to Haydn his six famous Quartetts: "Be pleased to receive them kindly, and be to them a father, a guide, and a friend. From this moment I transfer to you all my rights over them, but I entreat you to look with indulgence on those defects which may have escaped the too partial eye of a parent, and, in spite of these, to continue your generous friendship towards one who so highly appreciates it, and, in the meantime, I am, from my heart, your sincere friend."

Here I leave the Mozart letters, satisfied if, through them, the illustrious master has been brought, in his very self, nearer to the readers of this journal.

#### BEAUMARCHAIS AND WAGNER.

A STRANGE but not unexampled association of names heads this article. When all the world was talking of Wagner's theatre at Bayreuth the poet-composer found himself placed in juxtaposition with no less unlooked-for a man than Grétry. Wagner built a house which the Frenchman had anticipated long before, and as the fact was pointed out, wise men reflected upon the truth of the proverb that "there is nothing new under the sun." After Grétry and Wagner, why not Beaumarchais and Wagner? Let us see if there be in history any reason for the connection.

In the preface to his poem, "Tarare," set to music by Salieri, the great dramatist reveals himself to us as an earnest and audacious reformer of Opera. Not only so, but, adopting and carrying further the ideas of Gluck, he developed a scheme having a singular analogy to that advocated by Wagner. In the first place Beaumarchais would discard the word "Opera" altogether. So would Wagner; he distinctly tells us that his works are not Operas. Then, for "Opera,"

Beaumarchais desired to substitute "melodrame," which is only another form of the "music-drama" of his successor. Here is a strong point of affinity to start with. But we find one more remarkable still in the theory advocated by the French dramatist, which may be thus summarised: first, an intimate alliance of all the arts necessary to Opera; second, an absolute agreement of the musical expression with the dramatic situation or sentiment; third, the desirableness of marvellous elements in the story; fourth, the whole work to be dominated by a philosophic or religious idea; fifth, absolute fusion of voices and orchestra, of the word and the tone. All these points are touched upon by Beaumarchais with perfect clearness. For instance, after naming the arts necessary to Opera, he says, "The true order of these arts should be, as I think, the following: first, the piece, or invention of the subject, which comprises the main interest; then the workmanship of the poem; then the music, which is but a new expression of the verse, lastly, the dance, which by its grace and gaiety gives warmth to unexciting situations." On the second of the points named above as comprised in his theory Beaumarchais observes, "The music of an Opera is only an embellishment of the text, which it ought not to abuse. If a musician possesses true talent, if he reflects before writing, he will feel that his duty (and his success) consists in expressing the poet's thoughts in language more harmonious—to give them greater force, and not to create anything apart from them." Here it may be pointed out that, just as Wagner prohibits the repetition of words, so did Beaumarchais. In the preface to the "Barbier de Seville," he remarks, "We shall use dramatic music seriously at the theatre when it is felt that one sings there only in order to speak, when our musicians are *en rapport* with nature, and above all cease to impose upon themselves the absurd rule of always returning to the first part of an air after completing the second. Are there any repeats or rondos in the drama? This cruel *radotage* is the death of interest, and denotes an insupportable emptiness of ideas. In effect, if declamation be an abuse of narration at the theatre; singing, which is an abuse of declamation, becomes, as one must see, the abuse of an abuse. Add to this the repetition of phrases, and where is interest?" Further on we see that Beaumarchais contended, precisely as does Wagner, for perfect harmony of feeling and object, instead of rivalry, among the constituent elements of an Opera. "If the soul of the musician," he observes, "has entered into that of the poet, and in some sort espoused it, all the executants ought to occupy towards each other a similar relationship. From their union will come pleasure, just as from their separation arises weariness." With regard to the entry of the marvellous into operatic story, we again find the French dramatist anticipating his German successor. He believed that dramatic music should find its subjects in myths and legends, and that, as already stated, some powerful idea, religious or philosophical, should be illustrated. Among other things on this subject he says, "I am of opinion that one ought to take the mean between legend and history. I cannot help perceiving also that highly civilised manners are too methodical for dramatic purposes. Oriental manners, less regulated and known, leave the imagination a freer field, and appear to me better suited." Much other might be quoted, but enough if the intelligent reader sees clearly the remarkable points of unity between the author of "Le Mariage de Figaro" and him who gave us "Der Ring des Nibelungen."

As the theories of Beaumarchais were expounded in the preface to "Tarare," we naturally look to that Opera for their illustration. There can be no doubt