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Don Giovanni in Aix-en-Provence

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Don Giovanni in Aix-en-Provence

This talk was broadcast on the BBC Third Programme at 9.25 p.m. on 26 January 1950. It was first recorded on 30 August 1949, but the tape was accidentally destroyed, so IB had to re-record it in a mobile van in Oxford, on the day it was broadcast. The recording has not been preserved, but a transcript was made by the BBC.

Don Giovanni*, International Music Festival of Aix-en-Provence, 1949*
Photo: Henry Ely

THE MUSICAL FESTIVAL in Aix-en-Provence is not a vast, ambitious undertaking like the magnificent festivals of Salzburg or Edinburgh or Lucerne. During the performances which took place in Aix during the last two weeks in July, apart from Sr Segovia and M. Robert Casadesus, no celebrated virtuosi came to delight the public from distant corners of the earth. The orchestras were those of the Baden-Baden Radio and of the Paris Conservatoire. The conductor was Herr Hans Rosbaud, from Baden-Baden, a good, experienced, scrupulous, honourable, devoted musician, but not a man of towering genius.

Yet the occasion was not only attractive, but remarkable; more attractive and more remarkable in one respect, at least, than the great rival summer festivals of Europe – it was fresh and spontaneous, and endowed with a degree of natural charm which these more splendid enterprises seldom possess.

One was reminded most vividly of the Salzburg of more than twenty years ago, before wealth and fashion had yet fully arrived upon the scene. One must not be too critical of wealth and fashion in their relation to the arts, for splendour and luxury often excite and stimulate the artist to exceptional heights: they create a climate which favours the full flowering of the genius of singers and players, since artists of all men stand in the greatest need of perpetual praise and homage and rewards. And Salzburg in the middle 1930s, when Furtwängler vied with Walter, and Toscanini rose to a height far above either – a level not hitherto attained in the experience of any living human being – Salzburg, with its millionaires and titles and patronage, its extravagance and snobbery and unpredictable mingling of genuine elegance with staggering vulgarity – Salzburg was by no means the least worthy symbol of a world which is now dead. And so the role of wealth and fashion must not be too much decried; but they do tend to create an atmosphere in which everything is concentrated upon the production, by great virtuosi, of a few immortal masterpieces. This leads to the neglect of music which offers less opportunity for display, so that in the ruthless brilliance and glitter the nobler and calmer virtues are passed by, and the air, laden with so much social and artistic smartness, is not propitious to the spontaneous freshness, the sincere musical feeling with which the enterprise, as a rule, originally began.

It was so in Salzburg, and must be so whenever the occasion succeeds in attracting the attention of international society. But those who visited Salzburg in its beginnings in the 1920s will remember a very different situation: the unspoilt years when Mozart was faithfully served by such conductors as Schalk and Bruno Walter, and was surrounded by such sympathetic lesser divinities as Gluck and Cimarosa, Goldoni and Strauss, Rossini and

Donizetti; they will remember the simplicity and innocence of those early days, before Wagner incongruously invaded the scene and destroyed Hugo von Hofmannsthal's classical–rococo ideal. The Festival in Aix is still in this valuable youthful phase; but if it succeeds as it deserves, it will not, one fears, be permitted to continue in it long.

All the Aix performances were permeated by a quality of enthusiasm, sincerity and harmonious cooperation, the sense of a new beginning upon which much hope and devotion had been lavished. This could be felt most strongly in what was the centre of the entire Festival, the performance of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. The performances were held under almost ideal conditions: in the open, on not too large a stage, set against the facade of the Archbishop's Palace, which forms one side of an elegant baroque square, so shaped that not a sound seemed lost.

The opera began late in the evening, at half-past nine, in the cool night which succeeds the hot Provençal July day under a dim and usually cloudless sky. The audience sat in a darkness set off only by the stage lights, in which the pure and graceful lines of the seventeenth-century Palace conveyed precisely that degree of feeling, upon the vague frontiers between formal classicism and early, not fully fledged, Romanticism which this opera, more than any other, seems to require.

Don Giovanni is, perhaps, not only the most profound, but musically and dramatically the most complex and unfathomable, of Mozart's operas. It seems compounded of a great number of diverse strands of feeling; and they compose a texture, at once more integrated and more tantalisingly elusive, less capable of clear analysis, less capable even of description, except in purely formal terms, than the relatively simpler succession of gay and melancholy episodes in Mozart's other operas.

The mood is almost always uncertain, uncertain and full of rich ambiguity. Apart from the conventional arias of Don Giovanni, or Don Ottavio or Zerlina, which, for all their beauty, could occur in some of Mozart's other works, the texture, in particular the orchestral texture, of this opera appears to move simultaneously at

many levels of expression, to possess a kind of many-faceted surface, which, like passages in Shakespeare's lyrical comedies, seems at once immensely fertile and not defined, something which cannot be pinned down, however delicately this is performed, as an expression of this or that definite mood or quality of feeling or musical intention.

Nor is the plot as foolish and irrelevant as, for example, those of *The Magic Flute* or *Die Entführung*. For once the librettist, Da Ponte, for all his patent plagiarism from others, seems to have tried to express something genuinely poetical. The opera is full of uncertainties and riddles. Is it serious or comical? Is it an *opera seria* or an *opera buffa*? Is it a tragedy, or a Romantic melodrama, or a heartless Italian comedy, or a legend and an allegory? Poets and scholars of many nationalities have argued about this mystery for nearly a century and a half, and brought a wealth of evidence, historical, literary, musicological, to bear upon the problem. But it has defied their efforts: the opera remains unclassified and unclassifiable, unique, outside the categories. Professor Alfred Einstein wisely remarks that it does not belong to the conventional genres: it stands alone, *sui generis*.

Within this larger question, there are specific mysteries, unsolved and surely insoluble. To take but a few: Is Donna Anna in love with Don Giovanni? We cannot be sure that she is not. She protests too much. And why does she put Don Ottavio off with such unplausible persistency? True, he is no doubt a good man, but a prig and a bore, and a sorry sort of suitor, and the librettist, who was very far from being a puritan, must certainly have conceived him so; but does Donna Anna think him as unattractive as every audience in the world must? And what does Don Giovanni represent? He is a profligate and a blasphemer, bold, insatiable and cynical. But this leaves something unanswered: is he an end or a beginning? Is he the final culmination of a period of fine aristocratic freedom, of style and gaiety and independence, the last embodiment of a violent Renaissance love of life untrammeled by the rules of the severer age which is approaching, and is he finally got down by the new morality of Donna Anna, the bourgeois

daughter of a bourgeois Mayor, and of her dreary philistine suitor? Or is he a figure beckoning from a distant horizon? Does he foreshadow some bold and splendid freedom from the restraints of convention, to be realised only in some unimaginable future, not on this earth perhaps, but in some impossible artistic heaven? Does he stand for the fascinating, irresistible and dreadfully destructive life of art or of love in conflict with the forces of the real world? Or is he merely a glittering and heartless adventurer, a handsome, hollow, two-dimensional figure of comedy, made of pasteboard, with no inner life, and therefore in the end no match for the more solid, duller but more profound figures whose lives he wrecks, but whose tragic three-dimensional reality ultimately sweeps him out of existence?

All this seems half conveyed and half evaded by that wonderful, unbroken flow of concerted music, of which the Emperor Joseph said, after *Don Giovanni* had failed in Vienna, that the opera was divine, but not meat for the teeth of his Viennese. Or are such sociological or aesthetic speculations altogether pointless, since Mozart almost certainly did not indulge in them in any conscious fashion?

And how is the opera to be produced? In a gloomy, sixteenth-century Spanish setting, suggested by the Spanish original, or in the *grand siècle* decor of Molière's play?

At Aix the problem was settled with boldness and imagination. The costumes and scenery, designed by the gifted M. Cassandre, were late rococo, and contemporary with the date of the first performance, and the work was carried out with corresponding verve and life and wit, with no memory of Spain in any century, but only, perhaps, as Professor Dent supposes, of some Venetian town of the eighteenth century, familiar to the librettist Da Ponte, or to his friend the latter-day Don Juan, the famous Italian philanderer Casanova, who by this time was an old man, living out his days as a librarian in a Bohemian castle. Was Da Ponte thinking of his old friend when he composed the character of Don Giovanni? Or perhaps of his own amorous adventures in Venice as an unfrocked priest? Curiously enough there is evidence that

Casanova was in Prague at about this time, and that he even had a hand in the writing of the words of the opera.

And who was Mozart thinking of? Was there a concrete image of some real person in the centre of the timeless legendary figure of Don Giovanni, the hero and villain of a plot which so shocked Beethoven by its immorality? We shall never know; there is no one who can tell us, for Mozart and Da Ponte are in their graves.

As for the singers in Aix, they were drawn from the most diverse quarters, and it is to the very great honour of France that the quality of performance was thought more important than any concession to national feeling. The majority of singers came from Italy, from the Scala in Milan; but Donna Anna came from Hamburg; Donna Elvira was born in Belgium; Zerlina, who acted and sang almost as well as it is possible, came from Vienna; and as for Don Giovanni himself, he was a young Italian named Signor Capecchi, and carried his part off in marvellous style. He began, so I was told, before the war as a promising pianist; his hands were damaged during the fighting in the Italian Resistance, and he then, very fortunately, discovered in himself a most agreeable dramatic baritone.

It was remarkable that the principal singers, only two or three of whom can ever have sung together before, should have achieved so great a degree of common musical understanding, and such harmony of total effect. Don Giovanni acted with a dash and a gaiety and a bravura which is but seldom seen on the greater, but duller, stages of New York or Vienna or, dare one say it, even of Glyndebourne. Leporello responded to him with the greatest life and gusto. It was not, of course, a performance comparable to the immortal evenings in pre-war Salzburg or Covent Garden many, many years ago; but it had something which more polished performances often fatally lack – the spring of life, the sense of unbroken dramatic tension.

The essence of *Don Giovanni* is continuous movement, an uninterrupted flow of music and action – this alone gives the intricate and perpetually oscillating succession of moods and flavours that degree of accumulating dramatic tension which bursts

into its climax in the tremendous entrance of the statue. Unless this continuous pulsation is kept up, the ingredient parts of *Don Giovanni* tend constantly to die off, and need perpetually to be artificially revived. Doubtless all great music requires this stream of life in some degree, but *The Magic Flute*, let us say, or *Così fan tutte*, with their relatively self-contained episodes, are in less vital need of this; whereas *Don Giovanni*, without it, flies into lifeless segments, be the voices never so beautiful and the orchestra never so precise and responsive.

It was this unity and life that the Aix performances possessed. Without them, the subtlety and depth of the music would not, indeed, have vanished, but would have remained stillborn. And the chief credit for this goes to the male singers. Donna Elvira sang in an exquisitely civilised and musical fashion, which made Signora Danco an admirable Fiordiligi at the Edinburgh *Così fan tutte*, but the very virtues of her well-tempered singing seemed too civilised and too cultured to convey a past so harrowed and tragic, and Donna Anna perhaps did not altogether rise to her role, which is admittedly one of the most exacting, mystifying and complicated in opera. But the main thing was that the performance never sagged or drooped. At no point was there a sudden letdown, or a discordant clash, there was no sudden thinning of the texture, nor a tendency to grow mechanical. The voices blended, the movements of the actors fitted into the seamless pattern, the conductor's honesty and devotion kept the proportions true. No individual inserted himself – his own personality – between the audience and the music, there was no exaggeration, no over-insistence, no self-dramatisation, and the results were balanced and beautiful.

There was, of course, a great deal of good music in Aix besides Mozart; beginning with such old writers as Monteverdi and Gabrieli and Vivaldi, and the wonderful Third Lesson from the *Tenebrae* for Holy Wednesday composed by François Couperin in 1714, and ending with the noble *Motets for a Time of Penitence* by Francis Poulenc, written in 1938–9. But *Don Giovanni* overshadowed them all.

Since it is a most complicated and most delicate, most precariously balanced, infinitely shaded work, every performance of it is a far more perilous enterprise than is commonly realised. Enigmatic and tantalising, it strews the path of the listener with musical and dramatic (and at moments almost moral) question marks, even while it ravishes his senses. Despite the familiar beauty of the famous arias and duets, much of this music remains as fresh and original and mysterious as on that evening, one hundred and sixty-two years ago, almost to a day, when the citizens of Prague, more intelligent than the citizens of Vienna a year later, rose to the occasion and gave Mozart an ovation. It needs, in its performance, a degree of tense absorption and active and perpetually changing sensibility which is seldom present in those over-confident, slightly blasé singers, with too much experience, who turn it all too easily into a cosy and meaningless string of agreeable airs, tied to a ridiculous story. Those who took part in the Aix Festival are still in a rising phase of eagerness and continuous creation: with their modest means, their audiences interspersed with enthusiastic students from the local university, and the uniquely beautiful harmony of nature and of art which they have chosen as its setting, they have succeeded in accomplishing a masterpiece.

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