|Mozart's Cosmic Heartbeat

Mozart's Grace. By Scott Burnham (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), xi + 189 pp. £19.95 cloth.

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Scott Burnham speaks about a unique beauty in Mozart's music, as if one were making love to an Eternal Idea - with a throbbing human heartbeat that is somehow also cosmic. The idea that "Mozart composed the most beautiful music we can know" has been "commodified," he feels, in the notion of "a so-called "Mozart Effect" (the title of Don Campbell's 2001 book), 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" (3).

Yet perhaps not all the talk of the special curing qualities of Mozart's music is nonsense. The discovery, for example, of an enhancement in spatial-temporal mental imaging and functioning in human subjects, and research that purports to link such performance-improvement to distinct neuro-physiological processes in the brain; or the calming of seizures, amongst other troubles, is not absurd, though in general I share with Burnham the wish to speak more intuitively, rather than rationally and scientifically, of the

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way Mozart's music miraculously and mysteriously enters into the very fabric of erotic, cosmic, delicious or excruciatingly melancholic love. Thus Burnham concludes his marvellous book with certain jewel-like phrases as these:

> It is as though he transforms the ever available lightness of consciousness into music. For Mozart's music captures the mobility of consciousness, as a fluid, human medium; the gracefulness of consciousness, in its weightless maneuvering; and the grace of consciousness, as a crucial endowment of identity, the gift of self-awareness.
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> There is a strong sense that Mozart's music lives knowingly in a world of beautiful appearances, a consoling realm for fallen spirits who have lost the key to things as they are. …The beauty that results is as real as a rainbow. (167–68)

As a soupçon of the author's oeuvre, let us consider the beginning of the chapter "Grace and Renewal," which we can grasp even if we are not listening to the actual music.

> If man is the melancholy animal that knows he must die, so too is he the hopeful animal that knows renewal. As a basic rhythm of life, renewal is available with every onset of spring, every sunrise, every breath. In much Western art music, the potential for renewal is composed into the musical experience: an intramural renewal is enacted every time a recognizable tune returns within a movement.
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> The Andante from the Piano Concerto in G Major, K453, offers an enchanting entrance into this aspect of Mozart's art. Its opening five-bar utterance

> returns four times in the course of the movement. Each of these returns is prepared differently, and each leads to a different place. The utterance itself possesses a kind of self-contained simplicity that allows it to act as a miraculous foil to all the musics that surround it. ... Its functional presence is hard to pin down: it has been hailed as a frame, a motto, an incomplete question, an inscription, a proposition." (117)

In a Note to this we read: "Cuthbert Girdlestone heard it as an incomplete question, with a presence like that of "an inscription carved over a portal and repeated at intervals inside the building." Joseph Kerman calls it a proposition, "balancing two senses of the word, that of proposal and that of invitation. For Charles Rosen, it is a "frame" for the form, for Susan McClary, Elaine Sisman, and Richard Taruskin, a "motto" (179).

This whole idea resembles Wordsworth's poetic expression that there can be "spots of time" in experience—immaculate moments—Eternal Nows in the language of Zen Buddhism; these are moments where Mozart transcends, excels even himself in sacred, mystical experiences, in a communion with cosmic love or nature. Thus "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'" (5).

This book is not about Mozart's life nor his character; it is not a biography, nor about the socio-historical-cultural context in which his miraculous and tempestuous existence took place ("nature's unique gift to humanity," as Wolfgang Hildesheimer puts it)—though each of these aspects inevitably creep into it. It is about Mozart's music, and in particular about those moments in which he soars beyond even his own perfection. It is this that Burnham refers to as Mozart's "grace," which points to the complete lack of "service

music" or fill-in space, of which there is never a squeak or gesture. For Mozart wrote "exactly the number of notes that he required," to paraphrase an unconfirmed remark he is presumed to have made.

The fact that Mozart was so young, a prodigy-genius from the beginning, places him in a unique position. Quite apart from his perfect musicality, his loving musical and dramatic sensitivity, his innovative bold creativity, he expressed a sympathy and "love for humanity": mercy, forgiveness, gentle kindness, and an urge for justice. But for Burnham there is still something else, Mozart's "grace." I do not disagree with this sense of wonderment, though perhaps I would have chosen another word for it. For Mozart's music often bursts with intensity of feeling, and is then heartrending, as in the first movement of the 39th Symphony, with its savage, brutal, ascending pain, its crying, jarring, "difficult" intensity.

"Grace" might seem to mean something lightly delicate and Apollonian—did not Goethe compare the slow movement of the 40th Symphony to a Grecian Urn? Of course it all depends on what Goethe meant by that. But I rather disagree with Burnham that Mozart's music is never "searing," reaching through sorrow and desperation an excruciating Dionysian beauty, though yes, it is always on a certain level "controlled."

So let us consider closely this word "Grace," which is so central to Burnham's thought about Mozart. In the Chambers Concise Dictionary of English, the relevant definitions are "easy elegance in form or manner: what adorns and commends to favour: favour: kindness: the undeserved mercy of God: divine influence: eternal life or salvation: v.t. to mark with favour: to adorn."

In addition to Burnham's examples I would include the Adagio of Mozart's first Symphonia Concertante, with its utter melancholy and simultaneous "enantiodromatic" joy.

Is the throbbing of the strings in this Adagio a freezingly painful sadness or a warm, glowing heartbeat, as it seems softly to wind up again and again? Mozart wrote K297B, at the age of twenty-one, in Paris, *before* his mother died; nor yet had the girl he thought he loved rejected him (whose sister he later married). He found Paris a rather cold place, and was lonely. Perhaps he was dreaming of Aloysia, who can say? It seems he later forgot about this masterpiece, when at last he began to list his works.

Was Mozart really caught short at the age of thirty-five, simply burnt out, or the victim of some terrible illness or illnesses, or was his life a single, fast meteoritic "creative arc," an almost mystically preordained destiny, which began at the age of four, as Hildesheimer suggests? Or, as a teacher at my school once said to me: "Mozart was finished," his life having reached a point of total completion rather than being cut short. The Requiem sounds so perfect, with the dying Mozart apparently dictating and puffing out his cheeks to sing the final parts of this unbelievable, miraculous music to his twenty-two year-old pupil Sussmayer.

Burnham's suggestion that a parallel exists between Mozart's music and Kantian Enlightenment philosophy is very interesting. "With this uncanny melding of the deeply personal and the transcendently suprapersonal, the inner-worldly and otherworldly, we are verging on the realm of what some have called post-Kantian subjectivity. The occluded core of this modern construction of subjectivity is the noumenon, the opposite number of the phenomenon in Kant's transcendental analytic, the supersensible thing-in-itself, forever unavailable to human cognition" (114). Schopenhauer would later assert that music, like no other medium, can give voice to this noumenal realm. Marshall Brown spoke of Mozart's "revolutionary self-absorption," manifested in the slow introduction to the "Dissonance" Quartet, in which the music seems to access some preconscious realm, some deeply interior

space. These are evocations of the supernatural, or of preternatural dissonances. "These rapturous moments sound as oblique refractions from some other dimension… and intimate an altered, heightened consciousness." "Frequently," quoting Maynard Soloman in another Note, the author affirms that Mozart's greatest beauties "exist in brief compass, concentrated in fleeting, self-contained passages whose overwhelming effect is magnified by their unexpected emergence and subsidence into a less rapturous context" (178). He contrasts this Mozartian divinity with the infinite recreation in earlier music, such as the Baroque, of the same, unchanging Divine Truth, more external, less interiorized. An expression of certainty comes to be replaced by something more disturbing and passionate, as Robbins Landon has commented. Mozart's contemporaries realized this, some not liking it, such as poor Mozart's ignorant and unkind employer the Archbishop Colloredo of Salzburg.

This passionate interiority was of course pushed yet further with Beethoven, and the contrast between the two as discussed in this book is fascinating. Deep lovers of Mozart will tend to agree with Burnham. Mozart's early Romantic sensibility, whereby we can hear in his music "intimations of this new, interiorized self, still deeply suffused with a sense of what has been lost, namely, the transparent and innocent harmony of Enlightenment faith" has an affinity, if one really listens to both, to the music of Shelley's poetry. As Burnham says, "To lose that innocence is to find a new kind of beauty, the melancholy beauty of ironic intimation, the sound of the unreachable noumenon" (115). On the contrast between Mozart and Beethoven, Burnham writes:

> If the Commendatore's death brings on the supernatural as the sudden absence of overbearing sound, the very beginning of the opera's overture achieves a related

effect with the sudden onset of such sound. For many listeners, the opening of this overture is one of the great shockers of the Viennese Classical era, right up there with the beginning of Beethoven's *Eroica*. The harmony textbook is no help here, for it instructs us only that we hear a tonic followed by a dominant, as in any number of declamatory symphonic openings. … how could such everyday ingredients create the effect of this opening, which is not just arresting but materializes with paralyzing immediacy, like the head of Medusa? (40–41)

How this is done is then explained in detail.

But there exists in Mozart a symphonic dissonance quite literally as bold as the *Eroica*'s most famous dissonance, and it is found in the slow introduction to Symphony No. 39. After an exquisitely wrought sequence over a pulsing pedal point on the dominant B-flat, the B-flat and its insistent rhythm switch to the upper registers. This has the intensifying effect of bringing the action closer. ... Although Beethoven's dissonance (elsewhere in the *Eroica*) is an exact transposition of Mozart's, it does not arise as the hottest link of a linear sequence but rather as an astonishing *non plus ultra*, a showstopping dissonance after which the scene must change. Beethoven's dissonances in the *Eroica* seem to precipitate themselves more as verticalities, and they can come on with the visceral force of blows; Mozart's are always more linear, as in the heightened sigh, or other types of tragic intensification. (81–83)

C. Robbins Landon wrote about the extraordinary quality of "enantiodromia" in Mozart's music, taking up Carl Jung's idea of the "coincidence of opposites," which has its precursors in Heraclitus, Plato, and Hegel. It can sound joyful at one moment, sorrowful at another; sparkingly light at one moment, tragically ironic at another—and very often both poles at the same time. This simultaneity of opposites relates also to the "partial identity of subject and object" in Hegel's philosophy, as well of course to the all-pervasive insight of Heraclitus that we never enter the same river twice or, that is, in the same way.

Strikingly, yet unobtrusively, Burnham moves from one example to another in one work after another, in no kind of chronological order nor even in an order of genres (he makes, as he says, no attempt at comprehensive coverage at any level). It is as if, quite rightly, he sees no importance in the developmental sequence of Mozart's music: it is all *Mozart*, whether written when he was eleven, sixteen or thirty-five years old, and in whatever form or genre. For, like no other composer, Mozart wrote equally perfectly in all genres, instruments, or voices available to him in his lifetime, as well as inventing some new forms, such as the piano concerto, and composing for a celestially strange instrument like the glass harmonica, hardly known beyond Mozart's miraculous piece. Burnham's aim is to explain exactly how, musically, Mozart achieves his emotional, spiritual, metaphysical, playful and erotic effects. Of course other brilliant musical analysts such as Donald Tovey and Alfred Einstein have attempted this before, and like them Burnham has brought together his own personal and unique experiences of Mozart from a lifetime of love and ecstatic appreciation: "I find myself standing alongside all those who have been tempted to give voice to their enchantment with Mozart. As I recede for good into this happy company... I invite you to savor its knowing innocence, how it opens both outward and inward, leaves a finger's touch on the heart" (168).

Beauty held in suspension, beauty placed in motion, beauty as the uncanny threshold of another dimension, whether inwardly profound or outwardly transcendent, and beauty as a time-stopping, weightless suffusion that comes on like an act of grace. These are the "categories" that Burnham uses to grasp the uniquely beautiful and utterly otherworldly qualities of Mozart's music.

Such are the mysterious qualities of beauty and enchantment in Mozart—"commodified" according to Burnham's view of the "Mozart Effect", which does however hold some truth, as I have suggested. It echoes the notion that Mozart in some sense reaches the fundamental structures of the Universe, as if "the master plucked his music ready-made from the Universe," as Albert Einstein so wonderfully put it, or as if there is "here pure sound, conforming to a weightless cosmos, triumphant over all chaotic earthliness, spirit of the world-spirit", as Alfred Einstein so magnificently put it (quoted in part in Burnham, 2); or, as Wolfgang Hildesheimer so touchingly suggested, Mozart was "an unearned gift to humanity, nature's unique, unmatchable, and probably unmatchable work of art." The "music of the spheres"—in mathematical, Pythagorean, ethereal harmonies of the "cosmos" and of "life"—in physiological and neurological rhythms, the very Forms, in the Platonic sense, of emotions, the very being of sexual ecstasy, are yet other metaphors and images that strain towards the same "personal attempt to describe what is striking about the sound of Mozart" (4), in order to grasp something that ultimately remains ineffable and unreachable through words. A secure self-confidence on one level, a soft, sensitive vulnerability on another—Mozart's music is at once untouchable and touching, and Burnham's wish is to "listen closely and describe their effects as I hear them" (5).

There is in Mozart's music an excruciating kind of lovingness, beauty (Burnham is not ashamed of using this word as it is not the same as "prettiness"), and sorrow

simultaneously. Yet these words hardly touch the mystery, miracle, of Mozart. Who was he? What is surely clear, is that he lived raw, on the edge: his "classicism" or "perfection" was not some kind of withdrawn phenomenon but the immersion of an absolutely unique "genius" into the maelstrom of existence, in ecstasy, amazement, terror, and spiritual and emotional, indeed erotic, passion. Mozart lived just before the idea of "genius" in the modern sense had arisen (and nor was the ancient Greek idea of an inspiring demon-spirit who was part of and always behind a man commonly understood in Mozart's time or place). The concept of an exceptionally creative, wild and impossible-to-understand, irrationally and incomparably miraculous soul—applied in retrospect to Leonardo da Vinci, J. S. Bach, and later to Beethoven, Schubert, Wagner and so on—was not around in the still stiff but yet trivial cultural world of Mozart's Austrian capital of the Empire. The vocabulary for Mozart was still that of "talent," as Hildesheimer so ably shows.

Burnham quotes Karl Barth: "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" (1). Hildesheimer, in response, suggests that instead of such heavenly fantasies, "one ought perhaps to have done something for this divine musician during his earthly life… the greatest genius in recorded human history." As Daniel Barenboim put it in a TV interview: "There are bad composers; and there are great composers. But then," he said, with a marvellous gesture of his right hand, "and then there is Mozart."

Tragedy is everywhere in Mozart, as is ecstatic happiness and supreme, absolute joy; but these do not seem necessarily to correspond chronologically with the moments of his life in which he wrote the music in question. (Hence the point about developmental sequence in Mozart's music.) It is all most strange. It is as if his being was a preconceived

totality, moments of which were plucked out in the process of his composing his perfect, divine music; yet he obviously experienced real miseries and normal happinesses in ordinary linear time as well.

No one, I would think, could write music like that of Mozart without having experienced emotions similar to those which he expressed. I cannot believe that he lived in some kind of hermetically sealed-off abstract world from which he could turn out miracles simply as some kind of removed, creative god. What sickens some people is that the calm sweet beauty that flows over us like a kitten's purring, or drowns you in thrilling excitement, pain, doubt, or fear, is sometimes talked of in ways that ignore what he actually went through. Yet the utter originality of genius does not negate the effects of the influence of others, for Mozart above all (such as from Vivaldi, J. C. Bach, and Michael and Joseph Haydn). At every point in Mozart one hears echoes of other sounds, with already existent musical forms rising up from deep within to an extraordinary transcendence, as well as anticipations and precursors of later "great" music—from Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, Schumann and Wagner; to Bruckner, Mahler, and even Schoenberg.

ADDENDUM TO MOZART´S COSMIC HEARTBEAT

Mozart´s urge to justice is very clear in "Die Entfurung aus dem Serail" (The Escape from the Hareem), "The Marriage of Figaro", and "The Magic Flute", but it is equally present in "Don Giovanni". For as well as being thrilled by the Don´s amorality, his boldness, his fearless, demonic energy and sheer Dionysian volcanicism, we also feel the utterly

translucent passions of the women, whether they purr like kittens, here as in Mozart´s religious music, or express the fury of wild-cats or tigers, some of whom fall head over heels in love with him due to his capacity for deeply romantic charm, and his scorn for social rules and the fear of Fate, expressed in an intensely amazing way in his final scene with the statue of the Commendatore that has come to life.

So we also realize his monstrous egotism, his callous exploitation of the women´s emotions and desires; really his darkness is sociopathic as well as a Faustian courage. He abuses his power and privilege in ways that are sometimes (verbally, not physically) savage and bestial. (He does not rape women as a note in the programme to one performance of "Don Giovanni" I saw argued, he seduces them). Mozart understood all this very well of course.

Some men are like Don Giovanni, causing such distress, and some women find them exciting: fearless, mad, but also with a deep soul which these women recognize. He is driven obsessively by his desire for women; he uses power and wealth to this end, it is not the other way around. He is compelled to conquer one woman after another, everything is secondary to that. He cannot stop, and suffers the consequences of his out-of-control energies with a fatalistic courage.

Mozart was a short, slender man, but not short of testosterone. He could get quite irritated, though his philosophy was undoubtedly "Masonic" – in the terms of his time; that is, orientated to "Universal Brotherhood". But at points in "Die Zauberflote" even that could be expressed in quite fiercely "Germanic" ways – in both words and music. Make no final, total generalizations about Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart!

There is no evidence to suggest that Mozart was either a drunkard (though he no doubt enjoyed a few glasses of wine with his dinner); nor that he was adulterous. It is

probable however, from various reports later, including that from Beethoven, that he could be flirtatious with his female pupils, and perhaps with the young women who sang in his operatic and other works. Flirtation is not the same as adultery however, and certainly was not in 18th C Vienna. But it could be enough for a young man of Mozart´s suggestibility to imagine the sexual emotions that fill his female roles; and quite apart from those that he knew from his wife Constanze, who was, in spite of all alternative opinions, the most important woman in his life.

This is not however to refute that he ever strayed from the “straight and narrow”, but there is no direct evidence of this. And there is no reason to believe the (nonetheless) interesting theory (espoused by Peter Davies) that Mozart wasted a great deal of money gambling.

Of course, he got into debt because he spent more money than he earned; his income was irregular, and he did not want to live like a pauper, nor humiliate his wife. That was why he ended up in such ghastly debts, though he and/or his young wife might have been a little compulsive when spending money. Mozart was someone with an extremely imaginative, emotional sensibility and sensitivity.