

# The Mozartian Letters: A Small Musical Aesthetic Treaty

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## ABSTRACT

### **Expression of Mozart's involvement in the creative universe**

In the biographies of great men, the explanation of a gigantic creation is attributed to their mind, talent and their special energy. Behind some vast productions though, lays next to the genius a simple mechanism of defining a unique objective and the total subordination of resources in order to attain it. Among the resources located on the same level of importance with the cells in the brain is time and, above all, the ability to harmonize it with the intended purpose. From that period of Mozart's life, an ensemble of filial-paternal letters were transmitted and preserved for us and for eternity, that could be considered a true "epistolary novel" which re-makes and re-writes in an Atticist style (specific to the Athenian style of writing, namely with an increased elegance...), Mozart's artistic and philosophical vision. This can be considered a real profession of faith or, in other words, a narration with philosophical and aesthetic flickerings having the core packed in the rustle of long letters. The letters can also be considered a suite of narrative sequences that rebuild the paths he crossed, the contact with great personalities of the time, and which, at the same time, communicate to us his attitude regarding life and death, his generous, non-transactional intellectual and artistic dignity. For the ensemble of the work, Mozart's travels through Europe's largest musical centers are a well-marked branch of sensitivity. Being carried out with involvement, through symbolic valorization, they influenced his works or completed the harmony of the work in general. The voyages allowed for significant internal revelations of the musician and appeared to him as a tool to challenge intuition and search for individuality in the unity of reaction to various stimuli.

## Keywords

Letter, conception, travel, aesthetics, musical language

## INTRODUCTION

### **The rustle of browsing some long letters**

Antonimic when compared to the metaphor of the threshold of a non-deferested forest that does not allow access, the aesthetic organization of some of Mozart's works, on the contrary, allows the formation of theorizations following the entrance into the universe of thinking and feeling of the brilliant musician.

The opinions regarding Mozart by some of the great creators from the Central and Eastern Europe who considered him the "light and warmth-giving sun of art" (Dvořák) and

the "unsurpassed master of form" (Tchaikovsky), come to confirm the value of ideas and feelings of Mozart's creation, as well as the possession of some subtle ways of exposition with which he dressed up his work.

The spontaneity of Mozart's musical ideas is well-known, as well as the ease with which they were transposed on the stave. However, we cannot talk about Mozart without highlighting his *art theorist* side as well, quality from which he exposed his ideas about music in general and about his music in particular.

At some point, some musicians and aestheticians saw in Mozart an inexplicable "miracle." That opinion excluded the human factor. Thus his creation was affected as it was no longer attributed to him. Emptying its ravishing human content and diminishing its deep meaning, it remained a graceful play of sounds, a distant féerie broken from life. Going beyond these unilateral interpretations, we must admit that among all great creators before Beethoven (1770-1827), Mozart is perhaps most linked to the life of his time.

The tribulations of the period, the thoughts and feelings of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Austrian society man represented for Mozart a source of inspiration. He does not belong to the "purist" artists, on the contrary, he is the artist who discovered the whole poetry of life, with its whole arsenal: tragic, sublime, heroic, lyrical etc., which found its reflection in his very diverse creation.

## AESTHETICS OF MOZART

The composer was born in the family of a great musician, Leopold Mozart (1719-1787), his father, a man of a vast musical culture, endowed with a performer's talent and with a special pedagogical gift. At the same time, he asserted himself in music composition as an author of operas, sonatas and symphonies influenced by the *Mannheim School*. In this environment, in which music and books represented the spiritual center of family life, the great musical talent of Leopold's two children who remained alive, flourished: Wolfgang and Nannerl, true miracle children.

Except for J. S. Bach (1685-1750), none of the great composers had a full and early musical education such as the one received by Wolfgang. We have to notice from this early stage the moral force that emanates from the transmission of the flame of musical progress given by the connection between Leopold and his son.

Speaking about Mozart's music, we notice the spontaneity of his musical ideas as if it had not been thought, sought, premeditated and invented by the composer. This easiness with which Amadeus composed, does not entitle us to ignore his ideas about music in general and his own music in particular.

Being unable to ensure his existence because of the French who still considered him a beginner and because of the failure of honouring the orders of some noble French people, he had to exhaust his creative genius by teaching piano lessons, a thing which he disliked. This is what Mozart wrote to his father from Paris on 31 of July, 1778: "You must not think I'm lazy just because it's totally contrary to my genius, to my way of life, you know I am... immersed in music... that I like to speculate, to study, to reflect" (Mozart, 1968).

Without having worked wilfully on a composition system, his aesthetic ideas, mostly concentrated on the letters addressed to his father, may form a "musical aesthetics micro-treaty," in which we can find surprising elements of originality and modernity.

Mozart's correspondence, one of the most beautiful ones offered by art history, highlights in the pages written to his family – father and sister – a true and unusual epistolary talent. After reading them, you have the impression that you understand the psychological mechanisms that influenced him and which help you, the reader, to better understand his music.

An idea that the 21-year-old man issues about the specificity of the arts is found in a greeting letter addressed to his father, Leopold Mozart, on his birthday:

I do not know how to write nicely. I'm not a poet. I cannot arrange the phrases so artistically as to produce shade and light, I am not a painter. I cannot express my feelings neither by gestures nor pantomime. I am not a dancer. I can, though, through sounds. I am just a musician. Now I have to conclude with a sound greeting. I want you to live enough years so that there will be nothing new to do in music" (Mozart, 1968).

Mozart did not have special knowledge in the field of general art theory as a result of the reduced aesthetic education received from the master musician, Leopold Mozart, his father, and yet from his congratulatory letter, one can distinguish the concise way in which Amadeus knew how to essentialize the specificity of beautiful arts, as Lessing will call them: music, painting, poetry, choreography.

With his characteristic modesty he says that the poet should write beautifully, which he is not capable of, although he has written poems. The painter must produce light and shadow through his art, in a Rembrandtian sense, which the young Mozart feels incapable of doing, although some letters and scores are ornamented with humorous drawings. And ultimately he emphasizes the idea that he can express his thoughts and feelings through sounds: "I am just a musician." Consequently, the father's birthday greeting card can only be a sound greeting.

These aesthetic ideas expressed directly and concisely, hide in themselves a knowledge of the specificity of arts and the autonomy of each one. Mozart opposes the communication through notional or figurative signs to the communication solely through sounds. Also regarding the specificity of the arts, some argue that in reality all arts, including music unfairly dubbed the most abstract one, are reducible, ultimately, to the spoken language, to the word.

At first sight, if we do not put the sign of equality between the different arts, we will find a wide variety of specificities among them. Other theoreticians of art argue that poetry or literature seems to be the most complex of all arts due to the fact that in creating literature, apart from the brain which collaborates in the creation of all other arts, all the sens organs work together: vision (because the text can be read), vocal cords (because the text can be reproduced aloud), hearing (because the text can be heard), sense of touch (because the paper can be printed) and taste (because in a very abstract way, the artwork can be tasted).

Returning to the art specificity idea, we must say that apparently, this categorical and exclusive aesthetic of Mozart is in contradiction with the brilliant pages of his operas created for stage, where gesture, word, costumes and decorations complete the communication through song in a harmonious, syncretic form. As it will be seen later,

Mozart considers that even within the sphere of opera, essential is the music and not the word.

One of the most daring and, at the same time, modern aesthetic ideas of Mozart's thinking appears to be the awareness of the permanence of novelty as an essential condition of music within the infinity of time. Here are the words expressing this idea: "I wish you to live enough years so that there will be nothing new to do in music" (Mozart, 1968).

In Mozart's aesthetic thinking we also find the idea of the dialectical relationship between the old and the new, between tradition and innovation. In a letter dated July 5, 1770 from Neapole, he wrote to his sister: "They are playing here a Jommelli opera. It is beautiful, but too polished and outdated for theater." And continued in another letter to Leopold, his father, on November 4, 1777, from Mannheim, that he heard a Holzbauer missa, which "although it was composed 26 years ago, it's beautiful" (Mozart, 1968). He makes these observations not to axiologically oppose the old to the new.

### **Aesthetic aspirations reflected by Mozart's creations**

Young Wolfgang's meeting with great personalities of the musical culture of his time such as Johann Christian Bach (1735-1782), composer Abel, the Italian virtuoso of the violin, Nardini (1722-1793), all these interferences will leave deep marks in the thinking of Salzburg's genius. They would lead him in the formation of his musical taste, to study the musical past to get to know his contemporary creation and to seek his own path in the European art.

If we have the curiosity to make a parallel between the luminous drive, the melodic verve of Christian Bach's symphonies and Mozart's adolescence symphonies, we will find an explicable similarity. The last symphonies of the composer collected under the name of *Final Symphonic Trilogy* reveal through the depths of their ideas and feelings, through their drama, the revolutionary symphonism of Beethoven.

Thus, starting from tradition, Mozart goes an upward road towards innovation. He introduced in the mixture of the old traditional elements of music, some individual nuances of thought, typical pictures of the epoch in which he lived, and that gave birth to the admirable music in which the audience distinguished, along with common ideas and forms common to the classics Bach (1685-1750) and Haendel (1685-1759), features identical to his contemporaries, Haydn (1732-1809) and others that will gain a broad resonance in Beethoven's music. However, we must consider his novelty in a strong connection with life and restless toil in order to give it an artistic expression, allowing him to address with equal force and intensity both the people of his time and those he anticipated in the future.

If we could compare Mozart's travels to Italy with Goethe's Italian voyage over a period of 17 years from each other, the two artists sought to discover in their journeys their conception of the art in contact with its artistic glorious past, Antiquity and Renaissance. Following these trips, both have strengthened their conviction that an artist is great if he works to raise his people, to assert the treasures of feelings and artistic thinking of nations through art. These travels through European capitals would complete his genius with some influences and musical interferences that have not altered his strong personality.

Speaking of Germany's literary movement *Sturm und Drang* (*Storm and Aspiration*), it must be said that it expresses the noisy and passionate rebellion against the existing order. Of course it would be difficult to fit some phases of Mozart's creation into the aesthetic principles of the current mentioned above, however, the aspiration of his whole life to be the creator of an Austrian national work, to assert himself as an Austrian composer, as well as his endeavor to promote the most popular, most accessible and essential element of the music – the melody – linking it to the simplicity and burning poetic force of the folk song, his attraction to the new and bold themes – all of these in one place indicate to us the generous direction of Mozart's aesthetic thinking.

In the conception of the brilliant composer as well as that of his successor, Beethoven, the art merged with the love and with the desire to communicate through love with his fellow men. Communicating the beauty and truth of life to the people, to help them know life through art, as a specific form of knowing the world, is a superior act of love. We find this idea concentrated in his creation where there is a continuous interweaving of ethics with aesthetics, of life with beauty, of truth with perfection.

We do not think that we are making a great mistake if we refer to the finding that the primal aesthetic element and the most characteristic of Mozart's instrumental creation is the melody. About this, in his violin method, Leopold Mozart broadly exposes his son's aesthetic conceptions about the meaning of melody.

A part of his father's aesthetic conceptions are also appropriated by his son, whose views are organically related to "the principle of correspondence between the feeling and his musical expression," a principle featured by Leopold Mozart. This deep realistic principle, after which the melody necessarily accompanies the artistic expression of the idea or the feeling, points to Mozart as one of the great thinkers of feeling-melody or idea-melody.

It seems to us that an aesthetic and even life principle is also the focus of a letter from 1776, addressed to composer Padre Martini (1776-1784): "Dear beloved, too honorable master... we are here in this world so we can always strive to learn, to inspire one another through conversations and to dedicate ourselves to progress, science and art" (Mozart, 1968).

The whole being of Amadeus did not leave room for fluctuating concerns in his activity. A primordial constant of his whole life was music and his passion for it. The consciousness of artistic duty always accompanied Wolfgang and left him only at the time of death, when his brilliant hand was on the staves which consumed his destiny, writing the funeral *Lacrimosa*.

In one of composer's letters we have earlier referred to, we read the following confession: "I'm totally immersed in music... all day long I am concerned only with music." I love to reflect on my art, to study it, to meditate it" (Mozart, 1968). What an emotional and edifying profession of faith of a genius artist!

### **The issue of language accessibility**

Mozart referred several times to the issue of church music. In a letter addressed to his good parent, he asks from Vienna for some sacred musical scores because "we like the music of all masters, whether old or modern," and continues: "If it gets warmer, please search in the attic and send us some of your church music. You have no reason to be ashamed of. The barons van Swieten and Starfer also know very well as you or me, that

tastes always change and that the change of taste has spread even to church music. This shouldn't have happened. From this also results that the true church music is found in the attic and is almost entirely eaten by moths" (Mozart, 1968).

These few quotes support the idea, which often comes from Mozart's aesthetic thinking, of the dialectical relationship between the old and the new, between tradition and innovation.

Mozart was also concerned about the ongoing process of renewing the musical language and changing the taste of the public, which makes him confess: "I would like to write a book, a small music critique with examples, but, *nota bene*, not under my name" (Mozart, 1968). These words tell a lot to his father about his intentions and, of course, the presumptive author under whose name he could hide his own identity, meaning the famous pedagogue, musicologist and composer, Leopold Mozart.

Mozart makes other deep and actual aesthetic and sociological considerations concerning the so-discussed issue of accessibility in art, especially in music. This must satisfy both the expert specialists in the arts and science of musical language, as well as the non-specialists, that is to say, namely the broad public which must like the music without knowing why. Following the same letter of December 28, 1778, Mozart recorded with an extraordinary perspicacity (*Ibidem*): "No one knows and no longer cherishes the middle way in all things today. In order to achieve success, you must write things that are either so easy to understand that even a coachdriver can sing or so incomprehensible so that no man with a healthy mind can understand them...."

It must be said that Mozart is not in either of the two extremes: neither in the facility situation nor in the hermetism situation, as he chose the middle way. He believed that "the unfamiliar," the general public, must also be content when they listen to good music, even if they do not know why they like what they have listened to. If the uninstructed public should be delighted to hear such great music, even without knowing why, the more the composer needs to know how to create such good music for both "experts" and "non-specialists." From those mentioned above, we can take one of the fundamental problems of the artwork reception, the problem that has troubled mankind from antiquity until today. The genius composer who blends with music itself, simply formulates the essence of music as the art of sounds:

But because the passions, more or less violent, must never be reproduced up to repulsion, and music must not offend the ear even in the most appalling situation, but it must continue to enjoy us, so it must remain music in all circumstances (Mozart, 1968).

Another idea that came out of this "epistolary novel" to which we continue to refer, is the one which categorically affirms the need for permanent innovation: "If we, the composers, would always exactly respect our rules (which were quite good when nothing better was known), we would also write music as inappropriate as they write the texts" (Mozart, 1968).

### **The text- music relationship**

The text-music relationship is often approached by Mozart. Affirming the primordiality of music against the text, he writes:

[i]n a work, the poetry must be the absolute listening daughter of music" and continues: "music fully reigns, and because of it you forget about everything. Even more a work must be liked to which the plan is well thought out, and the words are written only for music and are not put here and there just for the sake of a sinful rhyme ... words or even stanzas are absolutely indispensable for music, but the rhymes, only for the sake of the rhymes, they are absolutely damaging (Mozart, 1968).

Here, we are the witnesses of a complete and clear "ars dramaturgia," formulated by the all-time greatest dramatist of musical theater. In another place, Mozart wrote: "It is best when a good composer (who is good at theater and is alone able to give instructions) meets a smart poet, a true Phoenix bird" (Mozart, 1968). Mozart's dramaturgic, theatrical and musical sense makes him claim that a good composer needs to understand theater to be able to give dramaturgical indications even to the librettist, who must unconditionally accept them. As a proof that Wolfgang had no complexes, regardless of the personalities he was referring to, is also the fact that his opinions, sometimes of a disrespectful severity, concerned both W. Shakespeare and the French people with their language and music: "The French are and remain donkeys, they do not know anything, they have to appeal to foreigners... Had it not be this damn French language, so wicked for music. It's a misery" (Mozart, 1968). Just like Rousseau, Mozart made these critical comments regarding the French language based on phonetic and linguistic considerations, saying about it that is "non-musical." The only "musical" language in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was considered to be Italian. It was the language of the European music. Later, he would write to his father: "I do not think that the Italian opera will last for a long time, and I anyway support the German opera. All nations have their own operas. Why don't we Germans have it, too?" (Mozart, 1968).

For the composer, the only defining and destructive element was the language in which the work was to be performed, even if the subject was Italian, Spanish, French or Turkish. He also believes that music, the primary factor of the work, must adapt even during the creative process to the production and phonetics of the language in which the characters sing.

We did not intend to treat exhaustively all of Amadeus's aesthetic ideas and principles, however, we also cannot finish without making known the aesthetic ideas regarding interpretation, without which his creation cannot be understood.

### **Indicative elements in interpretation, according to Mozart's thinking**

We must note that even in the field of musical interpretation, the composer is constantly concerned about the relationship between the new and the old, between the innovation and the tradition.

Mozart accepted the new and promoted it, but not by ignoring its aesthetic value. We could list some instrumental aesthetic and technical ideas about how Mozart played the piano and taught others: respecting the tempo, hands independence, expressive singing but without grimaces, expression, taste, natural ease, pertinence, observance of the forte and piano instructions, reading at first sight (*prima vista*).

He also expressed similar principles regarding violin performance: "I'm not a velocity amateur because the sound of the instrument gets lost." He was against the excess of

virtuosity for the reason that it ruins precision in detail, correctness and accuracy in singing.

We appreciate the fact that those mentioned above entitle us to claim that Mozart emphasized a fundamental aesthetic idea in the process of the interpretative creation, namely combining the performer with the composer in an indestructible whole, creating the impression that the interpreter is also the composer. The composer genius was the greatest classical concert pianist and improviser who, without theorizing, has practically achieved in his creation of all kinds a superior pan-European synthesis, between the stylistic and architectonic architectures, *all'italica*, *alla french*, *alla tedesca* and *alla traca*.

Included in the current of the advanced ideas of his age next to Goethe, Schiller, Lessing in Literature, de Gluck (1714-1787), Haydn (1732-1809) and Bach's sons in music, Mozart embraces the common ideal of the great German artists of his time, who wanted to cultivate through their creation the so-called beautiful soul, open and vibrant to all that is good, true and beautiful in life.

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