

Mozart turns two hundred and fifty

Part 2: Paris and London

Laura Villon
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The following is the second of a five-part series of articles. It contains references to numerous works of music by Mozart. We encourage readers to listen to these pieces, long samples of which are available free of charge on www.classical.com.

Paris! On November 18, 1763, from their traveling coach, the Mozart family first viewed this center of Enlightenment thought. Upon their arrival the family was feted by the royal court at Versailles. Wolfgang “bewitched almost everyone” and was pampered by the musical Polish-born Queen Marie and her children. Ambassadors and courtiers sought them out. They visited the sumptuous apartments of the King’s mistress Madame de Pompadour, herself a patroness of the arts and accomplished harpsichordist, as well as her Paris mansion, today’s Elysée Palace.

With their concerts taking in a fabulous sum for the ever-cautious Leopold, the family stayed in Paris until the spring of 1764. They were in great demand in high society, and their concerts were well attended. The seven-year-old Wolfgang wrote four sonatas for keyboard and violin, which his father published.

But they were most at home with the group of Germans who formed an influential circle in Paris. The German-born Friedrich M. Grimm, secretary to the royal Duke d’Orléans, championed the Mozart children, organized their public and private concerts and helped them with Parisian etiquette.

Listen: Seven Variations on “Willem van Nassau” K25

Grimm, a Machiavellian figure, published a fortnightly *Correspondance Littéraire, Philosophique et Critique* for select European princes to help them keep up with literature, Enlightenment thought, and the latest gossip of the great capital. The philosopher Denis Diderot contributed reviews to his paper. Grimm delighted in the chance to best his Italian and French rivals by promoting the Mozarts’ German talent.

Among Grimm’s Parisian circle was the brilliant materialist philosopher Holbach, whose house was a salon for people of the Enlightenment, the Encyclopedist Denis Diderot, and Helvetius.

Rousseau and romanticism

Many people have heard of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), the philosopher of the French Revolution. Few realize that he was first known through his interest in music, that he invented a system of musical notation, and that his opera *Le Devin du village* played before King Louis XV at the Château de Fontainebleau.

Enlightenment thought of the early eighteenth century sought to apply reason to the problems of mankind and society, confident that the pursuit of knowledge could improve social conditions. Rousseau however, by the middle of the century, attacked these ideas. The arts, he wrote famously in *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, “cast garlands of flowers over the chains men bore.”

At the request of Denis Diderot, Rousseau contributed the article on music to Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*, which set out to summarize all modern scientific knowledge and thought in one work. Revolutionary in its

consequences, the multivolume work was everywhere banned, yet every great household had a complete set in its library. The *Encyclopédie* is credited with spreading the ideas of advanced scientific thought broadly throughout Europe and preparing the way for the French Revolution.

While the two friends later had a falling out, nonetheless their ideas would profoundly change the trajectory of European social and political thought as well as the direction of art and music.

In his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Rousseau wrote that civilization corrupted humanity through the power of property, while in the “natural” state, people were equal. The educated classes enthusiastically embraced Rousseau’s ideal of the “noble savage.” In the arts, support for a more “natural” style supported by Rousseau in music, Diderot in drama, and Noverre in dance swept through Europe and overturned old forms.[1]

For over a century the courts of Italy and France had demanded heroic opera and theater to reinforce the idea that the reigning monarchs were, if not descended from, at least closely related to the Gods.

In Italy, *opera seria* dealt with lofty themes from classical mythology of duty, sacrifice, love and repentance, usually an encomium to the appropriate prince. Between dry or more flowing speech (*secco* and *arioso*), which advanced the action with harpsichord accompaniment, the principal singers sang long virtuosic arias in which they embellished a vocal line and improvised variations on it.

The French counterpart to *opera seria* was *tragédie lyrique*. The Sun King Louis XIV had expelled the Italian musicians and selected Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632-1687), Florence-born and French-educated, to head a new French theater. Based on texts of classical antiquity by Corneille and Racine, French *tragédie lyrique* outlawed Italian vocal virtuosity in favor of choral ensembles. Ballet became an integral part of the opera, and movable stage sets and fantastic machines took the place of Italian vocal pyrotechnics.

By the mid-eighteenth century, however, the absolute power of the princely courts was losing its grip. Wealthy bourgeois mingled freely with the old nobility in the salons and in public theaters. Actresses shed their wigs and noble dresses in favor of more realistic costumes. The freer English style of dress and all things English suddenly became the rage on the Continent.

The conflict between the old and the new forms came to a head in France when an itinerant Italian troupe of lyrical comic opera, or *operabuffa*, arrived in Paris in 1752 and won great popularity. Supporters of Queen Marie and the enlightened public greeted the emotional naturalistic drama of the *Bouffons* with delight. Their opponents, King Louis XV and his mistress Pompadour, for their part supported the national theater, now under Lully’s successor, the aged Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764).

The “War of the Bouffons” was still going on when the Mozart family arrived in Paris in late 1763. Each faction occupied their own corner of the opera theater. Insults were hurled and abusive pamphlets were published. Leopold wrote home of the “perpetual war between Italian and French

music.”

Baron Grimm and the lesser-known Rousseau supported the Bouffons against Rameau. Rousseau’s *Lettre sur la musique française* of 1753 decisively swayed French opinion towards the Italians. Rameau was humiliated.

In the midst of the “War of the Bouffons,” Christoph Willibald Gluck, Kapellmeister to the Empress Maria Theresa, produced a revolutionary opera, *Orfeo ed Euridice*, in Vienna in 1762.

Gluck’s new operatic form sought to integrate music with the dramatic action and to introduce complex human—i.e., flawed—emotions. “[S]implicity, truth and lack of affectation” are “the sole principles of beauty in all artistic creations,” Gluck said, echoing Diderot. “To imitate nature is the acknowledged aim ... which I seek to attain” (Gutman 128).

Gluck is the direct precursor to the dramatic genius of Wolfgang Mozart, who, “making the drama of character part of the comedy of situation ... like Shakespeare, set tragedy and comedy side by side” (Gutman 157).

Rousseau’s appeal to naturalism would resound in Germany in the *Sturm und Drang*, or Storm and Stress movement we associate with the writings of Johann Wolfgang Goethe and the symphonies of Joseph Haydn.

End of the baroque—*le style galant* and *le style bourgeois*

In April 1764 the family crossed the English Channel and headed to London, where they would stay for 15 months. Within four days, they were warmly received at the English court of the German-speaking King George III and Queen Charlotte.

If Paris was intellectually liberating, London was a social whirl. Leopold took pains to describe the democratic atmosphere in the city’s great public parks. For one shilling, all classes could enter the parks and hear great music. In St. James Park, the King waved to them from his carriage. “Here everyone is equal, and no lord allows any person to uncover before him; having paid their money, all are upon equal terms,” he wrote home to his patron Hagenauer (Gutman 188).

Leopold and his son set out to better their knowledge of English and devoured English literature. He praised the courage of striking weavers who protested their unemployment and poverty in the capital in 1765. He and his family came to see England as a symbol of freedom.

It was in London that Wolfgang met and studied with Johann Christian Bach (1735-1782), the youngest son of the great Johann Sebastian Bach and one of the great influences on his music.

The father, Johann Sebastian Bach, was a master of Baroque music, with its complex polyphonic contrapuntal structure. [2] J.S. Bach’s and Handel’s works established the tonal system of melodic music. This allowed for modulation from one key to another, and for a rich chromatic harmony which fused counterpoint in the melodic lines with a figured bass homophonic line.

J.S. Bach’s death in 1750 marked the end of the dominance of baroque music with its intricate polyphony. Two of his musical sons came to represent the two different styles of music resulting from a backlash against the baroque.

His youngest son, Johann Christian Bach, had gone to Italy to absorb the Italian lyrical style; he studied with the counterpoint master Padre Martini in Bologna, later also Wolfgang’s teacher. In France the court of Louis XV developed a less demanding and immediately appealing style of music, designated *Rococo* or *style galant*. Johann Christian brought this light courtly style to London when he became music master to the Queen.

The second-eldest son, Carl Phillip Emanuel Bach, was court musician in Berlin for Frederick the Great. He came to represent Rococo’s German counterpart, the sentimental *style bourgeois* or *Empfindsamer style*, which arose in the 1750s. Connected with the growth of the German middle class, this music sought an emotional response from the listener. Joseph Haydn attributed much of his musical education to a careful study of the

works of Carl Bach.

Through these two styles, Mozart biographer Gutman observed, the two sons of J.S. Bach “linked the baroque art of their father with the classical Viennese school of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven.... Linked tandem, the Mannheimers and this pair of Bach brothers decisively shifted the balance of power in European music toward the Germans” (118-19).

At 21, J.C. Bach was already a leading European musical figure. He befriended and taught the eight-year-old Mozart, a friendship they later renewed when Mozart returned to Paris in 1777 as a young man. Under his influence, Mozart wrote two symphonies, six sonatas and a motet based on the text, “God is our Refuge.”

Bach taught him the elements of Italian opera. This and the oratorios of Handel sparked Wolfgang’s lifelong passion for dramatic opera, of which he would become a master.

By the time the family returned to Salzburg in November 1766 after a three-and-a-half year tour, Wolfgang had grown from a virtuosic performer to a promising composer. Within the next two years, he would compose an opera, *La Finta Semplice*, and a Singspiel [3], *Bastien und Bastienne*, based on the French opera by Rousseau.

Listen: Bastien und Bastienne, K50

Listen: La Finta Semplice, K51

To be continued

Notes:

1. In his *Lettres sur la danse et sur les ballets* of 1760, Noverre argues for natural movement to express the drama of the story, rather the stylized movements of the courtly theater. Noverre later became a friend and collaborator of Mozart. Gutman, Op. Cit., p. 121.
2. Polyphony signifies several melodic lines intertwining as they move forward. It derives from the plainchant of the Medieval Church. In counterpoint, the contrasting parts carry the same weight and are of equal difficulty, in contrast to the chordal structure of the subsequent melodic music.
3. Singspiel was a form of popular opera or operetta, with spoken dialog in the German language interspersed with arias and ballads. It grew out of translations of English ballad opera. Its successor is considered to be operetta.

Works cited and consulted:

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Gutman, Robert W. *Mozart: A Cultural Biography*, Harcourt Brace, 1999.

Holborn, Hajo. *A History of Modern Germany, 1648-1840*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968.



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