

Magical Mozart (St. John's)

Thursday, January 17th, 2019

I have a potentially shameful confession to make: as a young music student, I simply didn't understand the appeal of Mozart's music. Perhaps it was the perceived distance between the composer's rebellious young persona (popularized by Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus*) and the often reserved, elegant music he created. Perhaps it was simply a lack of understanding for the level of extreme detail and nuance that Mozart could include in his music with the seemingly slightest effort. But I think the most significant reason for my confusion around his music was simply my early over-exposure to Mozart's instrumental music rather than his vocal music. This is, of course, not to suggest that his instrumental music is inferior or unworthy of consideration. However, in so many cases, the latter actually serves as a kind of Rosetta Stone for the former. That is to say that with Mozart, absolutely *everything* is opera. I remember discovering this during my senior year of undergraduate work and having it radically reconfigure my hearing of Mozart. Suddenly, a single passage for the flute, violin, or piano was brimming with different conversations and characters.

Tonight, alongside one of his serenades for winds, the FSO is thrilled to present excerpts from three of Mozart's most beloved operas: a screwball comedy (*The Marriage of Figaro*), a supernatural morality tale (*Don Giovanni*), and a bizarre, if endearing, Masonic allegory (*The Magic Flute*). In each instance, Mozart's greatest innovation is synthesizing together so many of the disparate threads that were swirling through operatic productions during his time. Opera in the early eighteenth century was undergoing a serious reconfiguration thanks to the work of Christoph Gluck and his so-called "operatic reform" movement. Gluck felt that late Baroque composers like Handel and Vivaldi had shifted the focus of opera away from dramatic storytelling and towards needless virtuosic display on the part of the lead singers. And yet, while these two camps were arguing it out, Mozart seems to float right down the center: managing to paint deep, three-dimensional characters without having to give up the beautiful coloratura flourishes for his heroes and heroines. Whenever I would express my reservations about Mozart as a young composer, I had teacher after teacher assure me that "I'd understand Mozart when I was older." Now, almost fifteen years later, I almost hate to admit that they were right.