

THE POST-BAROQUE MOZART. PRELIMINARY NOTES*



Professor, Ph.D. FRANCISC LÁSZLÓ
„Gheorghe Dima” Music Academy Cluj-Napoca

Francisc LÁSZLÓ, musicologist, teacher and publicist. Books dedicated to Bartók (12 titles), Bach, Liszt, Enescu, Brăiloiu, studies on Mozart, Ph. Caudella, Schubert, Miculi, Brahms, Kodály, Enescu, Ligeti *et al.*, as well as on Transylvanian music history. Books of journalistic writings. Professor (Consulting Professor since 2007) of chamber music (first cycle/B.A. program), organology (second cycle/M.A. program) and musicology (Ph.D. program).

According to handbooks, the temporal landmarks of the Baroque period were the years 1600 and 1750. Coincidentally or not, these milestones are related to events of a true symbolic value: 1600 was the year of the premiere of the oldest opera that has endured to our days, and 1750 was the year of Bach's death. These years, however, only mark the temporal limits of the one-century-and-a-half historical period in which what posterity unanimously calls musical Baroque, played a dominant, even a determinant role in the musical life and creation. In reality, though, the styles of an age are deeply interwoven. It is the task of handbook authors to establish, *ad usum delphini*, certain guiding temporal milestones, although analytical musical historiography does not operate with fixed limits, but on the contrary, devotes a particular attention exactly to those phenomena which, exceeding the framework-years, relativize the periodization. For example, it is widely known that what we consensually call Classicism was followed by Romanticism, but those who have ears to hear know that these two stylistic trends, obviously different in weight in the two periods of style, coexisted harmoniously throughout each other's lives, as an organic unit and a coherent system.

By tradition and consensus, the stylistic phenomena which significantly precede their age are designated by compound terms whose first component is „pre”, whereas the significant prolongations of the style ages are designated by terms beginning with „post”. In

* This paper was presented at the symposium held within the 18^s Edition of the Mozart Festival, Cluj-Napoca, December 2008.

Some of the ideas set forth in this study were also presented, in a more concise form, at the Conference of the Hungarian Musicological Society of October 3, 2008, dedicated to the birth centenary of musicologist Dénes Bartha, when, however, I focused on a single type of Baroque aria and on its presence in Mozart's works (Ferenc László, „A posztbarokk Mozart, hangszerszólós ariái tükrében [The Post-Baroque Mozart in the Mirror of Its Arias with Obbligato Instrument]”, *Magyar Zene*, XLVI, 4, December 2008, 375–382).

the 20th century, new terms were introduced whose initial syllable is „neo”, which does not signify the perpetuation of the style of „yesterday” in a present stylistic context, but rather the evocation of the style of „the day before yesterday”. It is well known that „neo” styles became an established trend in the early decades of the 20th century. The most notorious example is *Pulcinella* by Stravinsky, where the author’s modernism is merged with Pergolesi’s style, the trend models also including Bartók’s piano miniatures on folk themes, syntheses of the oral „classicism” of peasant music with the elevated musical language of the early 20th century. But there had existed samples of the „neo” trend even before 1900. Brahms, for example, the most post-classical of the great German Romantics, created, long before the emergence of this term, a superb neo-Baroque masterpiece, in the final part of the *4th Symphony*, which is an apotheosis of the chaconne (or of the passacaglia, „as you like it”).

In the last analysis, the „pre”, „post” and „neo” styles can be regarded as special cases of a musical bilingualism. We also find cases (although quite rarely) of musical trilingualism even prior to the final part of Brahms’ symphony. For example, the *Sonata for Flute and Piano No.1* by Sigismund Toduță is a contemporary work of moderate modernity and classical form, whose first movement is a regular sonata form. Its writing is obviously derived from the Baroque concerto, with distinct segments of homophonous „tutti” sections and contrapuntal solos.¹

Although it is not my intention to get too far into terminology issues, I would like nevertheless to emphasize a few vulnerable points, not of this „pre-post-neo” system, as I see it, but of the way it is applied in the specialized literature and public conversation. There are known cases when the „pre” and „post” syllables designate a mere diachronic relation between what was „yesterday”, or, respectively, what will be „tomorrow”, and what is „today”, which is a simplistic application significantly decreasing their operative value. Not very long time ago, the music which preceded the classicism of Haydn and Mozart and which today is consensually called Baroque, was also labeled as pre-Classical. One of the musicologists of high repute, who were propagating the term „Vorklassik”² in this acceptance, was Ernst Kurth, who regarded Bach as an emblematic personality of pre-

¹ Francisc László, *O capodoperă: Sonata pentru flaut și pian (1952) de Sigismund Toduță* (A Masterpiece: Sonata for Flute and Piano (1952) by Sigismund Toduță), „Lucrări de muzicologie” vol. XXII, MediaMusica, Cluj-Napoca, 2008, p. 82.

² Regarding the concept of the Vorklassik, as a style period which was not only preceding but also preparatory of Classicism (cca. 1735–1785), see Peter Rummenhüller, *Die musikalische Vorklassik. Kulturhistorische und musikgeschichtliche Grundrisse zur Musik im 18. Jahrhundert zwischen Barock und Klassik*, München–Kassel etc.: Deutscher Taschenbuch-Verlag – Bärenreiter Verlag, 1983. The essence of the book was presented in the article „Vorklassik” by the same author, in Mark Honegger – Günther Massenkeil: *Der grosse Lexikon der Musik*, VIII, Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, ²1987, p. 311.

classicism,³ a „Vorklassiker” par excellence. We would ignore this obsolete concept if it did not have its pendant in our days, when postmodernism has become a generic term of (almost) all the subsequent trends of modernism. I wish and hope that in the near future, the term postmodernist will no longer refer in contemporary music to everything that is opposed to „yesterday's” modernism, as it happens today, but on the contrary, only to what perpetuates its significant elements within the context of today's pluristylism and eclecticism.

This should suffice about „post”, in the context of the „pre-post-neo” triad.

Regarding the term Baroque, which initially had a rather derogatory flavor, being quasi-synonymous with extravagant or bizarre, it occurred relatively late in musicology to designate the period between 1600 and 1750. In his *Handbuch der Musikgeschichte* (1911), Riemann designated this period on the basis of a technical criterion: „Generalbaßzeitalter” (the age of the basso continuo). The other founder of modern musical historiography, Guido Adler, in *Handbuch der Musikgeschichte* (1924), named it „dritte Stilepoche” (the 3rd age of style). The pioneer of the terminological innovation was Curt Sachs, a polyhistor-musicologist who is sadly better known by us as organologist and ethnomusicologist and who used the term in his 1918 book entitled *Kunstgeschichtliche Wege* (Paths in Art History), and later in his 1919 study entitled „Barockmusik”, published in *Jahrbuch der Musikbibliothek Peters*, vol. 26. Thus, if Adler had wanted to use the term in 1924, he could have used it. 1924 was also the year of publication of the first book dedicated to this style age, i.e. *Musik des Barocks* by Robert Haas. In America however, the term gained popularity only after 1948, upon publication of Manfred Bukofzer's book, *Music in the Baroque Era*.⁴

Mozart, along with Haydn, was an emblematic figure of the Classicism. But no one denies that his compositions hold countless moments of „tomorrow”, i.e. Romantic styleemes. There was even a time in the history of his reception when musicologists were busy detecting some „Romantic crises” in his life and art. His genius, in fact, allowed Mozart to prophetically anticipate even the music of the „day after tomorrow”; I am referring here to certain panchromatic, atonal elements in his music (in *Piano Quintet in E-flat Major*, KV 452, 2nd movement and in *Symphony in G Minor*, KV 551, 4th movement, the beginning of the development) which fully qualify him as a pre-modern composer as well.⁵ Equally remarkable

³ In his book *Grundlagen des linearen Kontrapunkts* (Krompholz & Co., Bern, 1916, ⁵1956), one of the most famous exegetical works on Bach's style, Ernst Kurth uses the lexeme Vorklassik 11 times, as a generic term for the music of Bach and his time.

⁴ Friedrich Blume, *Epochen der Musikgeschichte in Einzeldarstellungen*, Brenreiter, Kassel, 1974, 170–172.

⁵ Francisc László, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart – dodecafonist?* (Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart – A Dodecaphonist?), „Muzica”, XXVIII, 8 (312), București, September 1978, p. 24–29. German version in course of publication at Schönberg Center Vienna.

is the post-Baroque vein of his creation which, though uncontested and incontestable, is treated by musicology more in connection with specific cases and less in works of synthesis. In this sense, it is symptomatic that in the vast bibliography of the International Mozarteum Foundation in Salzburg, comprising approx. 35,000 titles, only one contains the words „Mozart” and „Baroque”, and it is not a case study: *Tradiții barokko v muzike Mozarta*, by Natalia Țeifas, dating from 1992.⁶

Mozart's genius was also evident in his ability to create masterpieces of equal worth in all the three basic genres of his time: the ecclesiastical, the dramatic and the chamber one (the last comprising, in the acceptance of the epoch, his entire instrumental music, including the symphonies and concerts, but excluding the church sonatas). The post-Baroque vein can be detected in all of the three genres, although to different extents and in different forms.

In chamber music, Mozart employed a contemporary style from the beginning. His *Symphony No. 1 in E-flat Major*, KV 16, or his *Piano Sonata for Four Hands in C Major*, KV 19d, his first *String Quartet in G Major*, KV 73f (80), or his first *Quintet in E-flat Major*, KV 174, already fall entirely within the style of his age and are personal contributions to the refining of those species. According to the currently used terminology, these are classical works (some may still display certain pre-classical traits, though not in the loose and obsolete sense of the word, but in the restricted and precisely delimited one). The fact that in 1773, in the final movements of his *String Quartets in F Major*, KV 168, and *in D Minor*, KV 173, Mozart composed two fugues on obviously Baroque themes, should be considered an exception, and sadly, not a very inspired one either. Posterity is entitled to wonder if these fugues are not by any chance foreign bodies in the entirety of these works. Even if they were perfect in themselves,⁷ these fugues are not post-Baroque, but belated pastiches of a historically obsolete formal model and composition technique. What they lack is precisely the contemporary (i.e. classical) dimension. Nine years later, in 1782, Mozart had a short period of creation during which, inspired by his contacts with Baron Gottfried van Swieten, a fervent

⁶ Natalia Zeifas, *Tradiții barokko v muzike Mozarta*, „Muzikalinaia akademii”, 2 (1992), 184–186.

⁷ They are far from perfection, even in themselves. I quote the opinion of American musicologist Peter Wollny (Cambridge, MA): „Im Finale des kleinen d-Moll-Quartetts beispielsweise sind acht Expositionen des archaisch wirkenden Fugenthemas schlicht aneinandergereiht – ohne genügend Raum für Zwischenspiele. [...] Zwar läßt sich eine hier fortlaufende Verdichtung der kontrapunktischen Arbeit erkennen, doch bleibt die Tonale Disposition deutlich unter dem Niveau gleichzeitig entstandener Sonatensätze. Das Finale wirkt daher eher wie ein Ricercar als eine voll ausgebildete Fuge. Eine ganz ähnliche Anlage findet sich im F-Dur Quartett [In the final movement of the Quartet in D Minor, for example, eight expositions on an apparently archaic theme are simply presented in sequence – without enough space for the interludes. Although one can notice a progressive condensation of the contrapuntal work, the tonal disposition remains significantly below the level of the sonata movements emerging at the same time].“ Peter Wollny, *Mozarts Fugen und der fugierte Stil in seinem Spätwerk*, (edit. Rudolph Angermüller et al.), *Bericht über den Internationalen Mozart-Kongress Salzburg 1991 (= Mozart-Jahrbuch 1991)*, p. 86–92.

admirer of Bach and Händel, he resumed his attempts to compose fugues. In this year of the *Abduction from the Seraglio*, when he also made the transcriptions for string ensembles of some fugues from *Wohltemperiertes Klavier* (KV 404a, 405), he composed no less than 13 beginnings of fugues (KV 375d–h, 383 a, b, d, 385e/2, k, n, 404b, 405a.), of which he managed to finish only one (KV 383a [394]). (Subsidiarily, in the same year he also started to compose a Baroque suite, in Händel's manner, which also remained unfinished (KV 385i [399]). Was he hopelessly struggling with a genre of the past, which would not surrender to him? Or, was he going through a creative block? Apparently he was, but in reality things were different, for of all these failed efforts a masterpiece was born at last, overwhelmingly original and post-Baroque in the strict sense of the word: the final movement of the *Quartet in G Major*, KV 387. The brilliant idea it is based on, achieved at an ideal level, is the combination of the fugue, an emblematic genre of the Baroque, with the sonata form, an emblematic form of the Viennese Classicism. The same idea was materialized in an even more complex form, in the final movement of the *Symphony in C Major*, KV 551, nicknamed the „Jupiter” Symphony.

The weight of the Baroque is incomparably higher in Mozart in the ecclesiastical genre, just as it is in the entire religious music of the classics. The transition from the Renaissance to the Baroque had fundamentally renewed the sacred music of the Roman-Catholic church. Around the year 1600, the Palestrinian vocal polyphony, imposed as a model by the Church itself and accepted as such by the composers of the Renaissance, had kneeled before the Baroque vocal-instrumental mass. The characteristic features of the latter were: recourse to accompanied monody and to the practice of figured bass, instrumentalization of the musical language, a more differentiated rhythmic and a freer handling of dissonances, a relative opening towards the style features of the opera, alternation of contrasting segments in the writing: vocal solos and soloist ensembles, monodic or polyphonic choirs and even regular fugues, all these sustained by the accompaniment of an instrumental group of the size of an orchestra, with individualized timbres. However, no fundamental renewal took place in church music during the transition from Baroque to Classicism, as it had happened around the year 1600. The renewals brought about by the classics in the field of language and expression were obvious, but the Baroque matrix remained the same, faithfully preserving the figured bass accompaniment, which, as is well known, was a characteristic symbol of the Baroque music. We can even say, with a slight exaggeration, that, in the field of church music, Mozart was a „born” Baroque composer. And the synthesis between Baroque and Classicism is nowhere better embodied in such an equally „bilingual” Mozartian masterpiece as in the final

movements of the *Quartet in G Major* and, respectively, of the *Symphony in C Major*, nicknamed „Jupiter”. On the contrary, to Mozart, the church music composer, Baroque tradition seems to have often been a burden. He never escaped his Baroque past even in the admirable motet *Ave verum corpus*, the shortest, densest and most pious of his religious works, composed in the last year of his life, which stylistically has nothing in common with the Baroque, but which, as a piece of religious music, was written with figured bass.

In the field of the dramatic genre, it is again under the sign of the Baroque that Mozart made his debut. Of the three subgenres that he practiced with approximately the same intensity (*opera seria*, *opera buffa* and *Singspiel*) two were inherited from the Italian Baroque.

In the *opera seria*, he carried on the tradition of the large gallery of Italian and non-Italian composers who were composing – pardon my irony! – „serial operas” to the Italian libretti of Pietro Metastasio and of other poets specialized in this genre of the Baroque dramatic literature. Mythological subjects from the history of antiquity, intricate and artificial plots, endless successions of predominantly virtuoso *da capo* arias, presented with little regard for the dramaturgical line of the acts, alternating with action-oriented *secco* recitatives, and accompanied only by a *basso continuo* group: this is the zero kilometer point from which Mozart started in order to carve his own path in this realm. *Mitridate, re di Ponte*, KV 87, *Lucio Silla*, KV 135, or *Il re pastore*, KV 208, are exquisitely artistic embodiments of these stylistic parameters. *Idomeneo*, KV 366 (1781) is Mozart's most valuable attempt to „redeem” the species and to invest it with dramatic valences that would approach the heights of his genius. In this sense, it is significant that he adapted the score once again in the spring of 1786, while also preparing the *Figaro* premiere, in view of a concertant performance that took place in Vienna. Five years later, while composing his last *opera seria*, *La Clemenza di Tito*, KV 621 with too little time at his disposal, he abandoned himself, in many ways, to routine and clichés, and thus created a stage work according to standards that he had long surpassed. Despite the beauty of a few moments of brilliance, we must agree with Hildesheimer who ruthlessly concluded: The operatic figures take the genre *ad absurdum*. In this opera, the line between the sublime and the ridiculous is almost invisible.⁸

Mozart was once more a born Baroque composer in the field of the *opera buffa*, also called *dramma giocoso*, in which, however, he had an incomparably more significant

⁸ „Uns erscheinen die Figuren der «Clemenza» tatsächlich darauf angelegt, die Opera seria ad absurdum zu führen, Nachzügler einer Gattung. Hier sind die Grenzen zwischen dem Erhabenen und Lächerlichen beinahe verwischt.“ Wolfgang Hildesheimer, *Mozart*, Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, ³1982, p. 317.

evolution. Even the *La finta semplice*, KV 51, composed by 12-year-old Mozart in the well-established tradition, but abounding in flashes of genius, was already more than just an honorable work of debut. The promises of this first-born work were more than fully fulfilled in the trilogy composed to the libretti by Da Ponte, *Figaro*, KV 492, *Don Giovanni*, KV 527 and *Così fan tutte*, KV 588, which qualify Mozart as the most prominent genius of 18th century opera. Our admiration for the revolutionary complexity and originality of these masterpieces does not prevent us from noticing the obvious Baroque vein pervading them, materialized in general in *secco* recitatives, and in particular in moments like Donna Elvira's almost „Händelian” aria, in D major, in the first act of *Don Giovanni*.

The third main field of the Mozartian dramatic genre, the *Singspiel*, has hardly any significant Baroque roots.⁹ Nevertheless, even in the *Magic Flute*, KV 620, the absolute peak of the subgenre, some post-Baroque moments can be detected. For example, who could deny that the Queen of the Night's virtuoso arias reverberate with the spirit of the Baroque *opera seria*? And then, in the final part, the episode of the Two Armored Men (mm. 196–237), with their solemn, hieratic *cantus firmus*, sung in parallel octaves, with no dynamic differentiation and surrounded by a four-voice contrapuntal accompaniment, is nothing but a creative return to Bach's organ chorales. These Baroque intarsias are in no way foreign bodies in the Mozartian *Singspiel*, like the fugue in the *Quartet in D Minor*, but on the contrary, they are perfectly justified from a dramaturgical point of view.

Certainly, these considerations are only a modest introduction to the many facets of the Mozartian post-Baroque, a general overview rather than a study, and in no way a musicological work in the restricted sense of the term. However, in my opinion, certain issues related to this subject can be subjected to professional assessment even in the form of this essay. I do hope that my fellow musicians will receive my pioneering gesture with rigorous criticism, but also with kind indulgence.

A systematic and hopefully exhaustive research on the subject may not be an easy task, if only for the reason already mentioned in the introduction: the huge number of case studies making substantial reference to this topic, and the inability of the computer's „find” command to find, in their titles, the specific keywords, *Baroque* or *post-Baroque*, linked to Mozart's name.

⁹ Although premiered on stage, *Die Schuldigkeit des ersten Gebots*, KV 35, with deep roots in the tradition of the 17th century Jesuit drama, and being the only representative, in Mozart's creation, of what is consensually called „geistliches Singspiel”, cannot be considered a proper *Singspiel* and therefore cannot be integrated within the dramatic genre. Significantly, in the most exhaustive monograph on Mozart's oeuvre, i.e. *Mozart-Handbuch* (red. Silke Leopold, Kassel–Stuttgart, 2005), the work is integrated within the chapter dedicated to religious music, sub-chapter „Geistliche Oratorien und Kantaten” (Religious Oratorios and Cantatas). An even more drastic position is the one expressed in the *Mozart-Lexikon* (red.: Gernot Gruber – Joachim Brügge, Laaber, 2006), which advises us that the subtitle appearing in the autograph score of this work is „Oratorium” (p. 753), and therefore its classification as „geistliches Singspiel” is apocryphal.