

In its issue of *Dimanche 9 – Lundi 10* (2006, p. 21), *Le Monde* published a photograph that would arrest the attention of any music lover. Entitled *Constance, veuve Mozart, en 1840* the photo shows Konstanze on the left, not wearing her usual rococo-style wig and dress, but with a white scarf covering her dark hair, which is combed in two halves in the German style of romanticism. She is shown alongside composer Max Keller and his wife (and sitting on the left). The daguerreotype, recently discovered in the archives of the Bavarian town of Altötting, was made in October of 1840, when Konstanze was 78 years of age and had only two years left to live. She had long ago remarried, taking as a husband the Swedish diplomat Georg Nikolaus Nissen. At the time the photo was taken, Mozart had been buried for half a century, having died on December 5, 1791 at the age of 35.

Our mental image of Mozart and his world leads us to think of him mainly as a part of history, a by-gone era with which we no longer have direct contact. Yet, if someone has been photographed, he/she already belongs to what Walter Benjamin called the ‘age of technical reproduction’ (*Zeitalter der technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*). As such, it is someone ever present, about whom we can apply our reason, psychology and intuition. True, the photo is not of Wolfgang but Konstanze; still, she was close to him and, like Mozart, she embodied the eighteenth century and the world of *l’ancien régime*. A similar impression may strike a tourist of today, while visiting Mozart’s house in Salzburg or places in Prague where the composer once stayed. Through a kind of ‘indexical magnetism’ the photograph connects us with Mozart’s time – and emboldens me to speak of Mozart as an avantgarde composer.

Of course, to make such a claim requires more of a foundation than just a photo. First of all, it is hard to qualify Mozart as a rebellious avantgardist, for what Alfred Einstein (1976) has said about him is indeed true: “Mozart never wanted to exceed the boundaries of convention. He wanted to fulfil the laws, not break them”. Be that as it may, Einstein adds, “he violates the spirit of eighteenth-century music by his seriousness



Konstanze Mozart, photographed in Baviere in 1840



## Mozart or the Idea of a Continuous Avantgarde

Eero Tarasti

and skilful inventions.” Mozart, as we know, thumbed his nose at conventional rules of behaviour, as evidenced in his famous correspondence, and likewise by composing the music for Beaumarchais’s *Marriage of Figaro*. Another scholar, Norbert Elias (2004), goes so far as to explain Mozart’s fall sociologically, in terms of his efforts to make a living outside the court, as an independent composer, a status which Beethoven was the first to attain.

Apart from social context, however, we can interpret the concept of avantgarde in terms of a more universal aesthetic attitude or principle of style – not just as it relates to historical phenomena dating from the early twentieth century – just as ‘baroque’ can designate a formal language of overwhelming exuberance, ‘romanticism’ one of generalized sentimentality, and so on. Let us reconsider, then, the definition of avantgarde.

### 1. What is avantgarde?

We find the concept discussed in the monumental dictionary of aesthetics by Etienne Souriau, *Vocabulaire d’esthétique* (1990). According to Souriau, the ‘avantgarde’, a military metaphor, seems to apply only to arts dating from the beginning of the twentieth century. It refers to artists who display a will to break with tradition, convention and permanent schools. The term is adopted by critics, historians and the public for purposes of either praise or blame. (To this one might add: the avantgarde is always a marked, *marqué*, phenomenon, in the sense of salient and striking). Souriau points out that the avantgarde, in general, is not the creation of an individual; rather, it presupposes a group that attempts new artistic conquests, that carries out ‘experiments’, and that tries to abolish academic constraints, tradition and order. In this sense, Gustav Mahler was somewhat ‘avantgardist’, given his exclamation: ‘*Tradition ist Schlamperei*’ (Tradition is bungling). An avantgard-

ist takes to extremes the parody of conventions, in attempts to make commonly-accepted bourgeois habits appear ridiculous. This aesthetic was often accompanied by aggressive demonstrations and scandalous performances. The avantgarde favours small performance venues, and takes place outside the ‘official’ artistic life. It aims to embody proper artistic values, instead of facile, commercially successful ones. It juxtaposes authentic creation and routine. But carried too far, it may also lead to an avantgarde snobism that amounts to no more than the lionization of cult heroes and the imitation of idols.

Do we find such features at all in the phenomenon of ‘Mozart’? In one sense, No. For we are dealing here with a unique ‘genius’, not with a group. But on the other hand, the answer is a hearty Yes, if one thinks of Mozart’s ambivalence, richness, and ingenuity in transgressing the commonplaces of his received tonal language. One needs only to see the film *Amadeus* to understand that Mozart characteristically enacted the ‘avantgarde’, in the sense of resistance and parodizing of all that is schematic and mediocre. Mozart does in his music what the Marquis de Sade did in literature. Sade assailed the hierarchies of language, at a time when the sublime style of eighteenth-century French literature implied similarly sublime contents. Rebelling against this stricture, Sade instead filled this style with frivolous content of lower-level aesthetics.<sup>1</sup> Mozart, too, confronts received style-constraints, in the form of musical *topics*, and countered these with aesthetic content of the most unexpected and contrary kinds. Take, for instance, the Janissary topic (Turkish march), presumably of a naively grotesque content – following the ‘colonialist’ discourse of the period – which Mozart also enacted in Monostatos’s arias in the *Magic Flute*; but the Turkish topic also fitted well as the main theme of the first movement to his Piano Sonata in A minor, with its plainly sublime and tragic intention. Consider, likewise, the fugato in the Overture to the *Magic Flute*, which presupposes sublimity, carries a syncopated theme representing the exuberance of worldly joy; or the ‘learned style’ in the opening of the *Requiem*, which suddenly foregrounds corporeal musical signs of the ‘sigh’ – of a type with which Belmonte, in the *Abduction from the Seraglio*, conveys his love troubles: “... *O wie ängstlich, o wie feurig, klopft mein liebevolles Herz!*” In this sense, then, there is quite clearly a bit of the ‘avantgardist’ in Mozart. Still, we have not as yet proved our thesis. Further criteria are needed to determine the avantgarde in Mozart – this time from a semiotic point of view.

For semiotics, the avantgarde always represents ‘non-culture’ (cf. Lotman 2001); therefore it opposes something on the level of culture, not just as an individual act. Hence an avantgardist cannot use pre-established techniques. We have an example of this in the history of Russian art: when Kasimir Malevitch and Alexei Kruchenykh were planning their cubo-futurist opera,

*Victory over the Sun* (1913), they asked the painter Mikhail Matyushin to write the music, specifically because he was *not* a professional composer, but had some skill in notating scores, having studied violin for a while at a conservatoire. One could not imagine a professional composer writing the kind of radical, ‘transrational’ music which the authors were seeking (see Taruskin 1997: 86). This really does not hold true for Mozart, not even *mutatis mutandis*, since he mastered all the techniques of his time and that of his predecessors. It is possible, however, that an avantgardist does not always irritate the bourgeois (*épater le bourgeois*) with exclamation marks, but may do so discretely and without fanfare. When all external effects and fauvisms have been utilized, it is avantgardist to write in an ‘antique style’ (e.g., Cocteau and Radiguet in the 1920s) or by having a stage on which there is only empty space, one chair, and one actor, who is reading a book and making no gestures. Nothing can remain avantgarde for very long; the front lines are changing constantly. For instance, serial music eventually led to such extremely complicated tonal structures that it suddenly turned into aleatorism when it was noticed that free improvisation would produce quite the same result. What Taruskin has called ‘maximalism’ – multiplication of traditional devices to extreme limits – does not necessarily mean avantgardism. If the front line is always changing, how can we view Mozart as part of a ‘continuous avantgarde’? Would that not be *contradictio in adiecto*?

Bringing us closer to the core of the issue is the following semiotic observation: the problem of the avantgarde is whether an artist can communicate both code and message *at the same time*. Isn’t this too much for the receiver? As a rule, the code must be familiar, so that energy is consumed only in decoding the message; but if the code is also unknown, then too much is expected of the receiver, who may experience a sort of cognitive overload. Moreover: isn’t there always a ‘theory’ behind the avantgarde? In viewing the history of music, Carl Dahlhaus (1988), in an essay on Beethoven, concluded that the most abstract philosophical concepts are in fact the most radically and profoundly changing forces, even at the level of musical practice. Yet, even if there is always a background theory, who can analyse and make it manifest? If an artist is satisfied with *tacit* knowledge, he perhaps has no need to recognize a hidden theory, and even less need to render such a theory in explicit terms. Starting from Wagner, the reluctance of composers to reveal how they compose is a well-known fact. In the end, the avantgardist is a kind of perpetual *esprit contestataire*, a master of negation – an image that would delight someone like Theodor Adorno.

## 2. Between Individual and Society; or, How the *Moi* and *Soi* of the Composer Meet

To go further we must deepen our investigation and consider if the avantgarde has some ‘theory’ behind it.

If so, then what is that theory, and by what metalanguage can we deal with it? We also need more empirical facts and observations about Mozart as a composer and about his music.

I have elsewhere proposed that a composer's work and social context be scrutinized as an interaction between his 'ego' and 'super-ego', or 'self' and 'society' (see Tarasti 2005, 2006). Instead of 'ego', I employ the French *Moi*, which in Hegelian terms represents *an-und-für-mich-sein*, or in Sartrean terms *être-en-et-pour-moi*, i.e., being-in-and-for-myself. For the latter term (super-ego), I use the designation *Soi*, understood as the social self or 'society'. These principles – *Ich und Gesellschaft*, Myself and Society – were also to Adorno the central problem of every composer (that is to say, every 'existing' composer). This theoretical idea has at last been used for interpreting Mozart, in a study by sociologist Norbert Elias (2004), who combines psychoanalytically tuned observations with sociological interpretations. Elias's central thesis clearly lies in the sphere of what I call the *Soi*. In his view, the concept of the 'biologically' creative genius should be abandoned altogether, since the composer's ego, or *Moi*, cannot be isolated from his or her *Soi*, i.e., community and, particularly, the 'internalized' society. Elias writes:

"We often think that the ripening of a congenial talent would be a kind of automatic 'inner' process which is detached from human destiny in general. One imagines that the creation of great art works is independent of the social existence of their author, his fate, and [daily] life as a man/woman among other people. Biographers believed they could separate Mozart the Artist from Mozart the Man. Such a distinction is artificial, misleading and needless." (Elias 2004: 73- 74)

Anyone who has studied narratology might be upset by such confusion between the physical, real composer and the 'implied' composer, although this observation would be a half-truth. Elias uses terms like 'innate genius' and 'ability to compose' in a rather casual manner. What is involved here, undoubtedly, is an *inherent* 'ability', on the order of a natural force. Yet, the fact that composing and playing music according to the social habits of his time was incomparably easy for Mozart can, in Elias's view, be explained as a sublimating expression of natural energies, not as their direct manifestation (op. cit.: 79). Even if such a capacity as Mozart's stems from an innate biological trait, reasons Elias, the latter can be only an extremely general one, a vague and indifferent inclination, for which we as yet have no proper concept.

Elias is surely on the right path when he tries to 'decode' the concept of genius. It means that Mozart was able to do something that most other people cannot do, namely, to let his imagination flow freely, as a stream of tones that deeply moved many listeners. The problem

lies in the sublimation: how to eliminate the private part of the creative vision and reach the universal form, so as to make art of it. How to cross the bridge of 'sublimation', as Elias puts it. Or in our terms, how does one proceed from *Moi* – the private, the *an-und-für-mich-sein* – to *Soi*, i.e., the social, the *an-sich-sein*? Elias finds this shift impossible to describe. We shall return to this issue below; for now, let us approach this mystery via notions of existential semiotics.

Elias's interpretation strongly emphasizes the aspect of *Soi*. On his view, Mozart's premature demise was due to social processes in the life of high arts and culture, whose victim he became. This macrohistorical crisis, as reflected in the microhistory of Mozart's life and creative output, embodied a shift from artisanry or handicrafts, to the art of professional artists. In handicraft art, the court nobility of Mozart's time dictated the norms of taste – the creative imagination of the artist was channelled strictly according to the aesthetics of the class in power. By contrast, the next phase saw artists becoming more independent, at the least the equals of their audiences, and in a sense determining the latter's tastes and needs by their innovations, which the general public tries to follow. The general transition from hired artisan to independent artist appeared also in music and in the 'structural' quality of art works. Mozart's fate shows the kinds of problems encountered by an exceptionally gifted artist in the swirl of such a revolutionary development. He left his employer, the Bishop of Salzburg, broke off his relationship with his father, and tried to live as an independent artist, trusting in the favour of Viennese court circles. Existentially speaking, the issue was that of *freedom versus necessity*: Mozart, seeking to fulfil the fantasies of the *Moi*, now had the freedom to pursue an independent and original tonal language. But, as is known, this effort failed in the social sense, and the court people turned their backs on him.

The other hypothesis by Elias, which again joins individual destiny to that of society, is the so-called 'criterion of sense'. According to him, the meaning or significance of life comes from being accepted by the group with which one identifies. Mozart experienced a devastating loss of sense when upon being rejected by those circles. This rejection, according to Elias, eventually led to Mozart's no longer being able to fight even against his own illness – a thesis rejected by other scholars, who claim there is no reason to take, say, the *Magic Flute* as any kind of 'musical testament', since he had started many composing projects that were interrupted by his sudden death.

### 3. The Mozartian *Ich-Ton*

A composer's identity, however, is formed by more than just the whims of a given community. We should replace biological models with more precise *biosemiotic*

ones. All living organisms, in relating to their *Umwelt*, are guided by the principle of the *Ich-Ton* (Me-Tone), as theorized by Jakob von Uexküll (1940). This musical term, as used by Uexküll, serves as a metaphor for the manner or code whereby a living organism selects from its surroundings those signs to which to react, while rejecting or overlooking others, and furthermore, the kinds of signs by which it responds to its environment. If we return this metaphor back to music – and why not? that is what Ruwet once did for Lévi-Strauss’s idea of myth as a musical score – then we get in touch with that ‘bridge of sublimation’ that, according to Elias, constitutes the core of creation and that in our own model corresponds to the shift from *für-mich-sein* to *für-sich-sein* (being-for-myself to being-for-itself).

What would it mean to speak of a Mozartian *Ich-Ton*? Is it a latent content, some principle or deep structure that presses for release in some surface structure, for eruption into music as heard? In Mozart’s music do we ever sense some compelling drive, which must first burst forth, and only afterwards resolve into tones? Does Mozart’s music manifest what Ernst Kurth called *Wille zum Klang*? Another Mozart biographer, Wolfgang Hildesheimer (1984), is correct in his view that the fateful ‘must’ is missing from Mozart’s protagonists – and also from themes, i.e., those musical actors in the musical discourse itself. If, as Alfred Einstein claims, the criterion of greatness in music is that an artist first creates an inner world and then expresses it to others in his *Umwelt* – or *Dasein*, as we would like to put it – then do we experience such a greatness in Mozart? Is the melody of the *Lachrymosa* such an expression of the soul, a Kierkegaardian lament, squeezed from the poet’s breast, becoming poetry and song on his lips? No doubt, Mozart *can* be taken as a romantic; but in general, the impact of his music is not based on the latter kind of aesthetic response or sentiment. The Mozartian *Ich-Ton* does not appear as such a transcendent force, as a pre-sign that precedes its proper, actualized sign; it does not occur as a virtuality awaiting actualisation. Rather, it manifests in the course of the music, in the syntagmatic stream of tones, in that ‘Mozartian’ easiness whereby theme-actors unfold and develop from each other, in a process of constant variation; in a word: in their *horizontal* appearance, in the existential sense of *Erscheinen*.

I borrow the latter concept from German philosophy, particularly from that of Karl Jaspers. One of the fundamental notions of existential semiotics, *Erscheinen* does not only mean the vertical ‘manifestation’ of the immanent (which would be simply the same as the appearance of the surface structure from ‘being’ and from isotopies of the deep structure, in the Greimassian or Heideggerian sense), but rather the gradual unfolding of the surface in a linear fashion, in a continuous opening and bursting out. In existential appearing – *Erscheinung* and *Schein* – this linear or temporal appear-

ance is NOT the appearance of something predetermined by ‘being’, but something that can at any time freely choose its course. It is guided or drawn along only by the *Ich-Ton* of the events, the identity of the subject; we can never know in advance how it will react in each situation. Therefore the *Schein* which manifests the ‘truth of being’, in the sense that it is a kind of figuration or ornamentation of structure, is not yet a properly existential *Schein*, which would take place in constant choice at every moment. The choice should be genuinely free, not programmed by any predefined structure or ontological principle. Mozart’s music precisely fulfils this idea of perpetual, existential *Schein* and *Spiel*: we can never anticipate in which direction he will go. Therefore his music is maximally informative, instantiating fully the modality of ‘know’ (*savoir*). One can, of course, find in his music that kind of Schenkerian, ‘organic’ narrativity, which follows the necessity of the *Urlinie*, pulling downward on scale-steps 5-4-3-2-1. But the subject is also present in Mozart’s music. This is the subject who, by hesitating, slowing down, giving up, turning around – in a word, by *negation* – shows demonstrates that he is in an existential situation of choice. If this freedom of choice did not exist, there would be no hesitation, except perhaps as some slight resistance to the ‘inevitable’ *Ursatz*.

Accordingly, in Mozart we can never guess what will happen next. Compare, for instance, he treats a repetitive melody, borrowed from Muzio Clementi’s Piano Sonata in B flat major, by turning it into a fugato theme in the overture to the *Magic Flute*. This was one of Mozart’s typical puns; he consciously ‘borrowed’ the theme from Clementi, having heard it in Vienna at a piano competition between the two composers, in the presence of the Emperor Joseph II. Whereas Clementi lets his theme close in a very conventional manner, stopping the promising beginning with a cadence, after which comes new thematic material, thus loosening the overall coherence – Mozart makes of it a cheerful fugato in which the repetitive rhythmic impulse is retained throughout nearly all of the overture, safeguarded against monotony by bold yet congenial syncopations (accents on weak beats). Here Mozart follows his great idol in fugue writing, Handel – but neither is he far from the “Dance of the Furies” in Gluck’s *Orfeo*. This comparison demonstrates in brief the difference between talent and genius (as described, above, by Einstein).

Because of its constantly unpredictable horizontal manifestations, Mozart’s is ‘new music’ before the concept of new music existed; it is ‘avantgarde’ before the avantgarde. The same feature has been noticed by others as well, though described in different terms. For example, Ernst Lert, in his rich study *Mozart auf dem Theater* (1918), has noted that the deepest sense of Mozart’s music lies in the shape of its melodies, whose length and lushness were the sign of his power. The same is meant by Charles Rosen, in his landmark study *The*

*Classical Style* (1997), when he speaks of Mozart's ability to dramatize the concerto form: the object is not the individual themes and their colouring, but their *succession* (op. cit. : 203). In this sense, Mozart walked a tightrope between two forces: "... freedom or submission to rules ... eccentricity or classical restraint ... licence or decorum.... (ibid.: 210), and in the end came to represent "... freedom from formal preconceptions" (211). Rosen notes that Mozart bound himself only by the rules that he reset and reformulated anew for each work (210). Is this not precisely what the avantgarde composer – or any other vanguard artist – does?

What is essential to the *Ich-Ton* in Mozart is something experienced only in the inner temporality of the music, not as any external force. For this reason he was open to all kinds of 'outer impulses as the starting points for composing, whether commissions or any other prosaic points of departure. These may have set in motion the syntagmatic 'appearance' of his work, but the work that emerged was itself not an exteroceptive or indexical sign of this impulse. It was without foundation that the later generations from Beethoven to Wagner disparaged, for instance, the frivolousness of *Così fan tutte* – true, perhaps of the libretto, but not of the music itself. The latter is sheer, unadulterated Mozart, a subject who casts himself worrylessly on his *Ich-Ton*, which, like Goethe's genius, never abandons him.



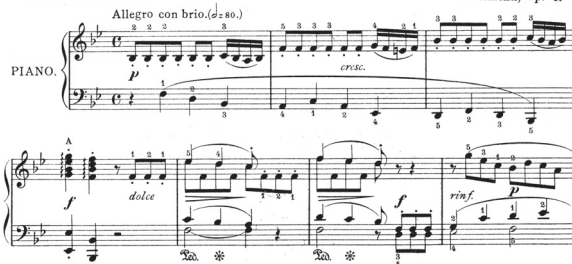
Fugato theme from the Overture to the *Magic Flute* by Mozart

### SONATE

Diese Sonate spielte Clementi bei einem Wettstreit im Klavierspielen zwischen ihm selbst und Mozart, im Jahre 1781 in Gegenwart des Kaisers, Joseph II; späterhin benutzte Mozart die Anfangstakte als Thema für seine „Zauberflöte“ Overture  
*Clementi joue cette sonate à un concours de piano entre Mozart et lui en 1781, en présence de l'empereur Joseph II; plus tard Mozart en employa les premières mesures comme thème de l'ouverture de sa "Flûte Enchantée"*

Revidiert von Franklin Taylor

M. Clementi, Op. 47II



The main theme of the 1st movement to the piano sonata in B flat major by Muzio Clementi

### 12 Adagio e staccato



'Insisting' musical gestures in Handel's Water Music



'Insisting' musical gestures in the Dance of Furies from Orfeo by Chr. W. Gluck

---

## Note

---

<sup>1</sup>. I am indebted to Harry Veivo for calling my attention to this parallel.

---

## Bibliography

---

- Allanbrook, W. J., 1983, *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press.
- Benjamin, W., 1972-1988, “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit”, *Gesammelte Schriften* I.2. 472-508, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp.
- Dahlhaus, C., 1988, *Klassische und romantische Musikästhetik*, Regensburg, Laaber.
- “Document: Constance, Veuve Mozart en 1840”, *Le Monde*, Dimanche 9 – lundi 10 juillet 2006, p. 21 (Culture).
- Einstein, A., 1976, *Greatness in Music*, New York, Da Capo Paperback.
- Elias, N., 2004, *Mozart, neron muotokuva [Mozart, Portrait of a Genius]*, Suom, Aulikki Vuola. Helsinki, Gaudeamus.
- Hildesheimer, W., 1984, *Mozart*, Suom, Päivi ja Seppo Heikinheimo, Keuruu, Otava.
- Lert, E., 1918, *Mozart auf dem Theater*, Berlin, Schuster & Loeffler.
- Lotman, Y. M., 2001, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press.
- Monelle, R., 2000, *The Sense of Music: Semiotic Essays*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press.
- Monelle, R., 2006, *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military and Pastoral*, Princeton, NJ Princeton University Press.
- Ratner, L. G., 1980, *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style*, London, Schirmer.
- Rosen, C., 1997, *The Classical Style. Haydn, Mozart Beethoven*, Expanded edition, New York, Norton.
- Schenker, H., 1956 (1935), *Der freie Satz*, Zweite Auflage hrsg. von Oswald Jonas, Wien, Universal Edition.
- Stefani G. and Guerra Lisi S., 2006, *Prenatal Styles in the Arts and the Life*, Acta Semiotica Fennica XXIV, Imatra, International Semiotics Institute at Imatra; Semiotic Society of Finland; Università Popolare di MusicArTerapia.
- Tarasti, E., 2000, *Existential Semiotics*, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press.
- Tarasti, E., 2003. *Signs of Music: A Guide to Musical Semiotics*, Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter.
- Tarasti, E., 2005, “Existential and Transcendental Analysis of Music”, *Studi musicali* 34 (2): 223-266.
- Tarasti, E., 2006. “Introduction to a Philosophy of Music”, In: *Music and the Arts I-II*, Proceedings from ICMS7 (Acta Semiotica Fennica XXIII; Approaches to Musical Semiotics 10). 3-30. Imatra and Helsinki, Finnish Network University of Semiotics; ISI at Imatra; Semiotic Society of Finland.
- Taruskin, R., 1997, *Defining Russia Musically*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press.
- Uexküll, J. v., 1940, *Die Bedeutungslehre*, Leipzig, Barth.