

Mozart

a memoir by

Chester Eagle



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To put the famous name at the head of a story seems a case of over-reaching: how could anyone do justice to the great composer? How could anyone find events in their own lives, or imaginations, worthy to sit on the plane of *The Magic Flute*, the great concertos ... everything that's come down from those brief and blazing years? It can't be done, and I'm not trying to equal the works of that most perfectly formed creator, but rather, as simply as I can, to bring him to life again as an influence, a spectre, in some moments of my life.

Here goes! (My overture is done.)

Enter a young man, being driven home by a garage proprietor, who's apologising because the job on his car won't be finished until after the weekend. The mechanics have to play golf and footy. Go fishing. Drink. Take their girlfriends dancing. The garage man says he'll pick up his client on Monday morning because he knows he has to get to work. 'We can't let you walk all that way,' he laughs, because it's more than two miles, in the old measurement, from Reardon's Folly, where the young man lives, to the school where he teaches. 'How'll you fill the weekend?' the garage man asks in a considerate sort of way, which causes the car-less young man to reassure his driver: 'I'll go for walks. It's rather nice along this stretch of the river. I'll read. And listen to music.'

'Music,' says the older man, wondering, without asking, what sort of music this chap likes. 'My son,' he says, 'is getting married in a few weeks, and he and his wife-to-be have their biggest arguments about music. At the church and at the reception. The moment they start I get out of the room.

Music's supposed to put everyone in a good mood, but it doesn't always do that.' The young man agrees, then he shows his driver where to let him out, and he goes inside. A weekend without the car.

Things rapidly get worse, because when he reaches his room he discovers that his gramophone has packed up. The turntable won't revolve properly. It needs a new drive belt, and he's the best part of an hour's walk from the shops. A pity, because he's got a new disc. Mozart. It's supposed to be good but he thinks Mozart is a bit prissy beside Beethoven, who surpassed him, surely, in almost every way? He goes to bed without music that night, and the next day he walks, when he isn't reading, around the bend in the river which Reardon, whoever he was, chose as the site for his home on a slope, with rooms underneath which are rented out to boarders such as our young man, who doesn't like spending his meagre income on rent. Better to buy music, and let it take him to more interesting worlds, of which there are many, and he's still exploring the great tradition which the Europeans have given his country. Pity about that gramophone, pity about the car; we do depend on things, don't we?

By Sunday morning he's frustrated because all he wants to do is to listen to his new disc. Then he remembers that there is a gramophone at the school where he works. It's only used to play God Save the Queen on Monday mornings, after which students salute the flag and mumble an oath of allegiance. This is ceremony at its most dismal, but there is a gramophone, and it works. He sets off.

The town stretches all the way from one bend of its river to the next, and at the Reardon's Folly end there are paddocks full of dry grass. In Australia, this is ecstasy, if one ignores the possibility of fire. The young man, grass on either side, and Mozart in a bag, is happy to be active. It's early summer, and the local climate is milder than the inland where he comes from. There are mountains to the north and he's getting to know them. There's a town around him which he thinks is bone-ignorant, but he's there to teach them. Nothing's happened to him yet to make him feel a need for modesty. He hasn't tested himself to the point where he knows his strengths and weaknesses. What weaknesses? He has a lordly air as he strolls toward the more closely settled parts of town, and he has a purpose. He's going to play his disc – the 39th symphony of Mozart, with the Vienna Philharmonic under Joseph Krips. He's seen Josef Krips conducting in Melbourne, and has both admired and been amused by the man. The Viennese really are different! They're fussy about things that don't bother Australians. Watching the visitor conduct, he's realised that style, the precise way in which certain things are done, is important to the cultivated European: the people of this country, certainly of this town, surrounding him as he walks, on a delightful early-summer morning, are still at the stage where getting things done is all-important, while to fuss about the way of doing them is a luxury that few can afford. It's a town where people with any developed taste are rare.

He walks. The houses thicken, though there are vacant blocks; it's a town that's still forming itself. It's much older

than he is, so he doesn't give it the chance to plead that it's young. New. Trying to find itself, with only the role models of Great Britain to help it shape itself. He walks along the road overlooking the river and its flats. The town is at its best, here. There are hedges below him, houses looking over them, a backwater on the other side of the flats, trees, new and dead, and the loveliest light, ever so clear in this part of the state. He opens the side door of the school with his key – every teacher has a key – and finds the gramophone. Out comes the disc, and in the darkened little room, he lets the Vienna Philharmonic out of its bag.

Powerful chords fill the room, then the sourest, fiercest dissonances, the strings making some of the sharpest noises he's heard. The introduction dies away, and Mozart is into his stride, and the conceptual quality of the music is apparent in every rushing scale. He's following with a score and he sees, and hears, that the violins, violas, et cetera are sweeping down in mighty gestures, again and again. Eight times they do it, and he senses that Mozart has recognised that the power of what he's doing requires that things be made to balance. Two, four, eight! In the shopping street that the young man has avoided there are any number of symmetrical buildings, but the symmetry of the music is on another level; there's so much passion, and inventiveness, that symmetry's called for so that listeners can understand without being swept away. The music sweeps, while the listening mind is ravished, this being an expression for delight. The music rushes to its thrilling conclusion, like, our young man thinks, a sprinter in a hundred yard dash. Never a

moment to look over the shoulder! It's hardly begun before it's ended, yet look how much has happened.

The next movement's an andante. It's not as slow, or psychological, as Beethoven would have made it, because it's social, it's meant to be played, and its feelings admitted, in a room full of people acutely aware of their status in a society that has rank and privilege at every turn. There is a melody which falls, and when it's repeated the young man stands, needing to do something but having nothing available. The music's changing him, though he doesn't know it. He can't stay the same after this. He sees why people say Mozart's divine. He looks around. He's in a room where mothers prepare the lunches they sell to (and sometimes give) the students; there are bowls and trays, there's an oven, a large refrigerator, jugs and urns and paper napkins. There are boxes full of who knows what. It's rather dark and the place is humble, for all the efficiency of the mothers who work there on weekday mornings. It offers the young man no relief. He has, quite literally, to face the music. He's never known anything so poised, so perfect, in his twenty-something years. It has a burning intensity because it's perfect, and it's perfect because the intensity is so exquisitely expressed. Manners, deferences, displays of respect, are so innate that they become something else. Human feeling is the very breath that's bringing the wind instruments to life. Our young man has a feeling that when the flutes and oboes, the clarinets and bassoons blow, then the wisdom of the observing mind is at its sweetest. The horns have a golden, glimmering effect, transforming the world they enter. When the movement

ends, the young man sits for a while before he plays the rest, and once that's done, he plays the andante again, twice, before he's absorbed as much as he can into his immature soul, and must now walk back to Reardon's Folly; it will be a little later in the day, a little warmer, and the sunlight will be more forceful; people, if anybody stops to talk to him, will be a little bolder, and he must be ready for them, and he will, because he's been set a higher standard than he's allowed anything to demand of him before, and he wonders if he'll ever be able to live on the plane, the level, that's been shown to him.

It's a long walk, he doesn't hurry, it takes an hour, and when he gets back he's quiet over lunch. He's asked if he's missing his car, and he says he isn't missing it at all. It's not entirely true; perhaps he means to say that it's done him good to be without because it's made an opening for something new to enter him, but, as far as he knows, at this stage of his life, nobody says things like this. So he's quiet over lunch, but the next morning, when the garage owner asks him what sort of a weekend he's had, he says, 'I think it was good for me!'

He should have been ready for what's happened, but he isn't; the young are always absorbing influences without knowing what effects they'll have. Things that change lives can sit, buried, in a mind or personality for years before they take effect. Mozart's entered him before, and he's known it at the time, but he's forgotten, letting his life move him forward, one thing replacing another without him looking back. 'Don't look over your shoulder!' is a saying one of his friends has, and he likes it: it's the way to live, he thinks.

By the time he listens to the 39th symphony, he's been in the town for nearly four years. He doesn't have a girlfriend in Melbourne, but he did, and the way he came to her, and the way he lost her, are more indicative than he knows.

He'd been given his appointment, he'd been to have a look at the town, and he'd gone back to the city to live it up for a few last weeks. At a party he sees a girl he thinks is lovely. She's slim, fair, refined, he judges, and content to take her lead from others. There's a lot of singing, and also groups sitting around, talking quietly. The young man who's hosting the party, in the absence of his parents, puts on a new recording of Mozart, one of the minor key symphonies, number 25, and our young man listens closely, because the host, who's talkative, says Mozart has the heart of a child. Our fellow thinks the host is wrong. The night is breathing outside, whispering their futures, holding a knowledge that the young people cannot know. But they are aware, or at least the ones who aren't making any noise. He's looking at Margaret – that's her name, he's found out by now – while the divinely gifted composer, in his late teens, brings the room to silence, with his *andante* once again. Not as slow as the *adagio* Beethoven would have written, for Mozart thinks that life moves on all the time, always and forever. Nothing stays the same, unless it's arrested by a feeling, or the plangent expression someone gives it. Those who can crystallise feeling are the most gifted of all, even beyond the surgeons who rescue lives from ending. Nobody knows what life is until it's been expressed, and in music it can be resurrected in a way that no religion can equal, let alone surpass. He talks to Margaret, he

tells her where he's going in a few weeks, and asks her out to dinner the following Saturday; 'But come in the middle of the afternoon, I've got something I want to share with you. Music. Mozart. I think you'll like it as much as I do.'

She comes, and they sit in a room where everything's in boxes. A week or two and the room will belong to someone else. Next year's students will be in, and those who've been toasted at the valedictory dinner will be no more. Mozart sounds, and it's easy to think that it's the great man himself playing the piano because one can see so easily how he wrote his concertos. There's a *tutti*, then, when it's gone quiet, having no more to say, the piano takes up one of its themes and starts to play ... *play* with themes, make up new ones, invert the old ones, challenging the orchestra with inventions until a partnership forms, the many voices of the one with the two hands of the other, until there's simply no more that can be done, and the movement ends. 'That is so beautiful!' Margaret says, and our young man knows she's as touched, uplifted, as he is. Can they make a life together, or is a work by Mozart the beginning and the end of their closeness? More music's played, they talk and they walk, and they have dinner at a hotel in the city that's long since been demolished. Alas. Their feelings and their conversation that evening are ephemeral, but something lingers: each is taking, with the other, those precious early steps which are remembered when maturity makes them common. The concerto, he recalls in later years, is the one in B flat, K450, and he never hears it without remembering an afternoon when it's possible for him and the young woman he finds so attractive

– so Mozartean – to live two lives as one.

He doesn't take this path. He lets his life go off in a wide arc, away from the purity which is at the heart of his feelings for Margaret, not to speak of the composer whose music they've shared. He listens to other music, reads turbulent books, and he learns to understand the people he's living among, even the roughest and crudest of them. They've been made what they are and nobody's led them away from the character they've been given. Respectability sits like a veneer on top of knowledge that's dark about the whites dispossessing the blacks of their land, and shooting them when the blacks struck back at the invading sheep and cattle. He's shown an early house, with openings in the walls for the settlers to push their guns when they want to fire at gathering tribesmen; he's shown places with ominous names where shooting parties trapped black families between guns and water, or other places where the choice for the victims was to stand and be shot, or jump ...

He watches people he thought were friends turn insane with alcohol, or drive with a death wish pressing their accelerators; he watches his former students start to drink in bars, soaking up the deadly male culture the region's proud of; he listens to Anzac Day speeches, and hears the singing of the old soldiers, drunker with every passing hour ...

He learns, too, that roughly spoken people, living in the humblest circumstances, have sometimes the most delicate consideration, and he's humbled; he learns, and it takes years to teach him, that nothing's ever as it seems. He learns that the community he's living among have a feeling for poetry,

and music too, if they can be made to feel it's theirs, and not an imposition layered on them by people whose profession is their improvement, which, to the locals, is nothing but hypocrisy. Their directness turns into a virtue through the years he's with them, and he realises, when the time approaches for him to go, that he's been shown the human soul, or most of the contents thereof, and there's a challenge waiting for him when he leaves, and that is to make something of what he's been allowed to see.

At an age when Mozart was in his full maturity, he leaves his country town, to start again. Or is it to start for the very first time?

He marries. He and his wife have children. They begin to grow. So demanding are they of their parents' care that it's possible to ignore the fact that a changing of the guard is taking place. A new generation has begun, it will replace the one that brought it into being, and it will, in time, be replaced itself, and this will go on forever. The moment, which can be a pearl, or only a humdrum bead, is stretched upon the endless thread we know as time, and most of these moments are either experienced so trivially that they hardly exist, or they're filled with activities which rush them away. The present is endlessly becoming the past, and sucking the future into itself in order to excrete. The factors working against this meaningless evacuation come down to three: art, love, and memory. Without these, humanity is lost, is hardly humanity at all. Art, love, and memory: our young man, our heading-for-middle-age man, sees that he is as lost as anybody else, and hopes, in the European way, for redemption of some sort to change, or justify, his life. Humans are full of hope!

Art, love and memory; let's take the last two first, and together. The marriage has ended and he's in love again. He's been in love before, but this is something special. His innermost thoughts are open to his lover, and hers to him. Each moves like a wind through the psyche of the other, full of love, and with an absence of fear. This is a miracle. Mostly, when they are together, they are talking, or loving, but occasionally there is music. They don't seem to need it much, perhaps because they are making it for themselves. Bach's concerto for two violins is something they understand together, and Mozart – there he is again – in his K364 concerto for violin, viola and orchestra. The timbres of the two soloists can be taken, if you like, as male and female, but which is which? Our man, maturing now, realises that masculinity, such a feature of his country's traditions, is a force like any other, and needs to be managed well. This means that it should harmonise with other forces, of which, of the plenty around, the womanhood of his lover is uppermost in his mind. The feminist rhetoric which has been washing through his life suddenly seems unimportant; he's being tested in the ultimate way by love, and he's rising to his best under his own and his lover's observation. A woman's path through life is not the same as a man's, and yet they must live together, so the test of a man, a woman, is whether or not they can follow their own line while weaving themselves ever so gracefully around, alongside, the other. Our lover and his lover are doing this with ease. All is amazingly well!

Then an unexpected thing happens. Our man gets a call from Margaret. She's back in his city. Her father has died,

she's come around the world to be with her mother. Yes, her mother still lives in the house he remembers from all those years before. Nothing, Margaret tells him, has changed. Well, everything's changed, but Margaret means the house. When can he come around? He suggests the following night, and he goes to the house which he remembers well. Nothing's changed. The Chinese dragon chairs he admired when he was young are still there, the reading lamp in the lounge has the same shade, and the photos of Margaret, her sister and her brother seem as young as they were, back in ...

... whenever it was! The houses across the road have escaped development. The street looks as it always did. He parks his car where, years before, he parked an earlier car which wouldn't start when he tried to leave, and her late father got it going for him. Father was a Commissioner for Trade with the Australian Government, but he seemed to know about cars. He was charming, and our man wonders if he's half as good; he hopes he is, because he's had a feeling of being perfected by the great love that's sweeping his life along, and he knows he's happy with his son and daughter, so perhaps he has been lifted gently onto a plane that's higher than he's been before.

Margaret says she'll make him tea, or would he like coffee? He says tea. She goes out to make it, and he thinks it's silly to spend minutes in separate rooms out of a sense of duty, or politeness. She smiles when he comes into the kitchen, and she opens the fridge to find milk. When she turns to put it on the sink, something floods into him from the past. He blurts out to her, to the world, really, 'The Jupiter Symphony.' She laughs. 'I

was thinking about that!’ They look at each other, linked by an understanding that nobody else possesses. Nobody else knows. He says, ‘It was when we were camped down at Waratah Bay ...’

‘... and we came back for some New Year’s party ...’

‘... and I wasn’t sure if I really wanted to go ...’

‘You were never all that sure about going out ...’

‘I liked being alone with you. We could be closer without others around ...’

She diverts him, or is it bringing him back? ‘You wanted to play some music ...’

‘... but you read my mind, you went into that room, and put it on.’

‘I knew what music you wanted to hear.’

‘I didn’t have many records in those days.’

‘I didn’t have any, except the ones you lent me.’

‘You put it on, and then you came back in here, and you turned to do something at the sink, there.’

‘I don’t remember what it was, but I knew you were looking at me ...’

‘I was looking at your legs ...’

‘Men! Nothing ever changes!’

He smiles. ‘Your legs were ever so brown because we’d been at the beach every day. I wanted to touch them, I wanted to rub them ...’

An impish smile comes to her face, inquiring if he’d wanted to have her legs apart. He said, ‘It was enough to love you and see how brown you were. It was something that had happened

without our noticing. I saw your legs every minute, while we were down at The Prom, but I took the tan for granted. It was only when I saw it here ...’

He points at the kitchen, and she finishes for him: ‘... that we realised that something had happened!’

Wistfully, tenderly, he adds, ‘And something hadn’t. It seems so long ago, now. Inaccessible.’

‘Except that we’ve just accessed it.’ She was at her loveliest when she looked helpless, he felt, then she said, ‘If we had the record, would we play it again, now?’

It made him think. ‘You can’t make a thing happen twice. Perhaps it’s best that we don’t have the record. If we played it, it might disappoint us.’

‘You mean, I think, that we might disappoint ourselves?’

‘Ourselves, and each other.’

She says, with a tenderness that forgives the two of them for what they’d been, years before, ‘That would never do. We didn’t know much about life, back then, did we?’

‘We didn’t. No. But what can people do, but *do* things, and learn?’

She pauses, thinking. ‘I’ve got a life on the other side of the world. Dieter, and three children. And you?’

‘I’m in love, Margaret. Like I’ve never been before. Forgive me saying that, but it’s true.’

‘That’s beautiful,’ she says. ‘I hope all goes well for you. But we did have ...’ They say it together: ‘Mozart.’

That’s all I can tell you about love and memory. The art you must find for yourself.