

Peter Sellars

Welcome

What birthday present can we offer a man who was so committed to the transformational properties of pleasure, a man who was so crazy and so silly because he was so serious, a man whose every musical impulse breathes reconciliation of opposing forces, of conflict translated and transcended in dance, a heartbroken, hopeful, generous man who did not live to see the world that he and his visionary, philanthropic circle of friends had the courage to imagine?

Mozart died so young, at the age of 35.

Here in Vienna, we have to start at the end of Mozart's life because Mozart's birth was in Salzburg. He died in Vienna. Mozart died deeply in debt, and he was buried in an anonymous grave with the poorest people of the city. So the Mozart story leads us to faceless people in mass graves; not to a glamorous Vienna, but a Vienna of real people and real struggles.

The year before his last he could not get work in Vienna (he had made his political convictions too clear in the *Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte*, and was out of favor with the incoming Leopold II), so he had to go on the road, travelling from city to city in Europe, looking for work, hoping to send money home to his family. He became an economic migrant. He put up a bold front, but this experience was so emotionally devastating that even Mozart stopped composing.

He returned to Vienna empty-handed and began to write the luminous music of his final year. In January his silence was broken by the last Piano Concerto, No. 27 KV 595, which transmutes disappointment into a strange and tender equanimity, and three songs for children, two of which are about the coming of spring. *Longing for Spring*, KV 596, begins "Come, dear May, and clothe the trees in green once more". It is two minutes long, and its gently haunting and insistent tune becomes the last movement of the Piano Concerto. *Longing for Spring* is an image known from Prague to Beijing. It is the hope for political thaw. In China, centuries of painters and poets have honored the plum blossom, the first flower that appears already in February, fearlessly, selflessly, tenaciously, surrounded by ice and snow, to announce that winter will not last forever. Against all evidence, someone has to hold and carry the certainty of the miracle of spring in their heart, and place its promise of rebirth and renewal right up against the cold hard facts of the world.

With *The Magic Flute*, Mozart wrote an opera for the Viennese suburbs (he still could not get serious work downtown), a multicultural intergenerational epic about magic and transformation. How does magic work? What does it mean to live in a time and a place where magic is the only thing that works? How do we understand miracles? What does it mean that as human beings we ourselves are changing at every moment of our lives? That the person who you think is the problem is actually the solution, the only solution? Can an older generation of leaders step down and make room for young people? And what are the trials by fire and water of a young generation? *The*

Magic Flute is a resplendent example of Mozart's life-long determination to place women's voices and visions at the highest levels of a just society. Mozart continues his campaign against slavery. Mozart calls into being a world that integrates simplicity and unforced joy with political complexities and contradictions, in music that is both sacred and playful. It is a world that welcomes pop culture and secret ceremonies, refined intellectual debate and street language, and animals and humans live in delicate harmonic balance.

Simultaneously Mozart wrote *La clemenza di Tito* for Prague. This opera was once thought to be reactionary and undramatic. It has unexpectedly become a most important opera for the 21st century: it is about response to terrorism, breaking cycles of violence, and the rule of mercy. In Act One conspirators assassinate the President and set fire to the capital. In Act Two the President miraculously recovers and orders the responsible people to be brought before him. The terrorists, already sentenced to death, are presented. He forgives them, deals with their issues, and invites them to join the government, because until they have both representation and responsibility no one will be safe. We all thought that this opera was a daydream until Nelson Mandela became President of South Africa, formed a government with the people who had tried to kill him, and declared that the cycle of killing must stop. His Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in which perpetrators faced their victims and their victims' families, tested the limits and possibilities of forgiveness in our time.

Mozart dictated his unfinished *Requiem* from his deathbed. It opens with a full-throated cry for mercy and a description of the soul's ascending passage from darkness into light. What will the ceremonies for the dead be in our own generation, in a time when new mass graves are uncovered and opened nearly every week? What will the ceremony be like that finally puts names to the faces of the disappeared, that lets families at last learn the fates of their loved ones, in which perpetrators come clean, and both the living and the dead can finally move forward or rest in peace?

Perhaps the best birthday gift for this amazing man is to invite a gathering of artists from around the world to come together in Vienna and pick up where he left off. Every initiative in our New Crowned Hope project is a new commission. Some artists will be speaking from places where their peoples are living through genocide and civil war and their aftermaths, where the need is to somehow turn the page of history, and where acts of mercy, imagination, and negotiation are the only hope. The fires in the suburbs of Paris make it very clear that there can be no illusions about a First World and a Third World --- there is one planet, and we are all sharing it.

In 1789, French citizens also set fire to public buildings outside of Paris. Mozart was an active member of the Freemasonry movement, a nucleus of whom were some of the men responsible for creating the American and French revolutions. Mozart was one of the thinkers and citizens deeply involved in imagining the "next" Europe, a Europe beyond autocracy and kings. Fearing that events in France would prove contagious, the secret police shut down all the Masonic lodges

in Vienna. An influential group petitioned the Emperor to reconsider because it was important that Vienna not look like an authoritarian police state. The Emperor relented and permitted one of the lodges to reopen. Mozart's last public appearance was to conduct the last piece of music that he completed in his lifetime, a little cantata for the opening ceremony of this lodge. Five days later he was bed-ridden; three weeks later he was dead.

The name of this lodge was "New Crowned Hope". Where Mozart ended is where we begin.