

Foreword

Most of Milos Forman's film of *Amadeus* was shot in Prague, in the studio but also in the city, so much of which was exactly as it had been in the eighteenth century. Prague was in fact playing the role, so to speak, of Vienna in the film, though Mozart was of course no stranger to the city, and it was wonderfully inspiring to imagine him strolling (or more likely racing) through those streets, playing in those palaces, conducting the orchestra in that theatre, the very one in which *Don Giovanni* was first heard. People still point out the adjacent hotels where he and his librettist Lorenzo da Ponte would communicate across the alleyway, da Ponte lobbing his latest bit of text through Mozart's open window.

Mozart was a distinguished and a much appreciated visitor to Prague, but the city actually belongs, of course, to the great Bohemian composers (Czech or Slovakian as we now call them, though they would not have known what we meant by the words) and the energy of the nineteenth-century city, and above all its central artery, the great river Vltava, is in the music of Dvorak and Smetana. But something of the eighteenth-century city, then one of the most powerful in Europe, can be heard, too, in the Symphony, nicknamed the *Prague* (his 38th) that Mozart wrote to honour his guests. It too bursts with the city's life and energy, but its grandeur, too.

It is inconceivable that the geniuses about whom you will read in this book – turbulent, passionate, avid for experience – would not have responded viscerally

to their surroundings. Whatever it is that makes the architecture of Italian or German or Austrian cities so unmistakably what it is, is also to be found in the music written in those cities. They may have changed radically – very little of Berlin remains the way it was, for example, when it was a great centre of music-making before the devastations of the Second World War – but the spirit of a city rarely changes out of all recognition. It has an identity, a personality, which is beyond alteration. Vienna, for example, has undergone an extraordinary shift in its fortunes, from its eighteenth century zenith as the rococo capital of the Hapsburg Empire, to the culturally complex period of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (during which a large amount of the city as we know it was constructed), to the neurosis of the immediately pre-First World War period when it became the crucible of the modern world, through the troubled inter-war years and the devastation that the Second World War brought, to its final, relatively becalmed manifestation in the elegant but not especially forward-looking city of today, a place understandably hypnotised by its own past. The unparalleled procession of great composers who lived through these transformations – Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Johann Strauss, Brahms, Mahler – did so very much in the present tense, responding intensely to the city in which they lived, its parks, its buildings, its cafés, its institutions. And so it has been for all of the composers and all of the cities represented in this book. Equally, one learns a great deal about cities and

countries by listening to the music written there. It is a two-way traffic.

It was a breathtaking experience for me to visit some of the cities with Peter Beveridge's camera crew – to stay in the hotel in Venice where Vivaldi wrote and played some of his dazzlingly inventive concertos for every known instrumental combination, to stand under the great Byzantine dome of San Marco in that same city and sample the acoustics which were so gloriously exploited by Monteverdi and his colleagues. Vienna and Salzburg are eternally connected to Mozart, the latter city, where he was born, almost too much so: it is impossible to walk twenty yards down the street without seeing his name or face looming up at you to persuade you to buy something – mostly the marzipan chocolates ("Mozart-kugeln") with which his name has become inextricably identified, though a less marzipan-like composer it would be hard to imagine. How astonished he would have been, as he desperately struggled to preserve his dignity as a fairly lowly employee of the city's Prince-Archbishop, if he had been given a glimpse of his own mass-marketing. But Mozart was a practical fellow, much involved with the problems of making a living, and it is to be hoped that given such a glimpse he might have managed at least to arrange, for the benefit of his offspring, a healthy percentage of the billions and trillions made in his name.

An experience of an altogether different nature is to be found just outside of the Finnish capital of Helsinki, in Ainola, the house Sibelius and his wife Aino created for him to compose in, an unpretentious sort of a dacha in the countryside only a few miles from the city but deep in the heart of nature. The moment one crosses the homely hearth one becomes aware of a quite uncommon stillness. Here the great man completed his monumental symphonic cycle and wrote the Violin Concerto and those forbidding masterpieces *En saga* and *Tapiola*, as well as a lot of genial and sometimes stirring occasional music. He composed not at the piano, but in his head, and absolute silence was his requirement, to the extent

that he refused to allow plumbing to be installed in the house: the noise of it would have disturbed his concentration. The only sound that can be heard, in fact, even today – apart from the odd distant motorcar or aeroplane – is the sound of the wind sighing in the trees that surround the house, the sound that echoes through so much of his music. Here the place that has influenced the composer is not a city but somewhere of his own making, the "symphony of wood," as he called it. Here, too, repose the mortal remains of the composer and his wife. It is a beautiful and a serene setting, the tomb itself a thing of austere simplicity, linear and abstract, a monument to the distilled power the composer struggled, to such profound effect, to achieve in his work. It is impossible not to hear Sibelius's music differently after a visit to Ainola, and the same, we hope is true of all our classical destinations.

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Simon in Ainola, the Sibelius family home outside Helsinki.