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*JOSEF MYSLIVEČEK, 'IL BOEMO': THE MAN AND HIS MUSIC*

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Despite being the most successful opera seria composer of his generation, the Prague native Josef Mysliveček (1737–1781), if regarded by modern writers at all, is generally mentioned only as a footnote in the context of Mozart's rapid rise to fame. Mysliveček has similarly been ignored by the bulk of modern performers and recording companies; only in the past decade or so has this pattern of neglect started to shift. Daniel Freeman's welcome new monograph is the most exhaustive, important and thorough work on the composer published to date.

The few aspects of Mysliveček's life that are occasionally mentioned in the literature are usually the stuff of myth (such as the spurious sobriquet 'Il Divino Bohemo'), and Freeman sets about his task by dismantling the old mythology and replacing it with a much more interesting (and certainly just as colourful), detailed and analytical study of the man and his music. Freeman is quite right to point out that Mysliveček's Czech heritage has been a hindrance to his modern reception. In Gluck's case, scholars have traditionally been able to play down his Czech background because of his German birth (Martin Cooper making one of the more biting remarks, that in 1750 Gluck's 'Czech origin would only be remembered occasionally, regarded lightly and casually, as a joke most probably' (*Gluck* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1935), 38–39). Freeman's study, however, rightly steers clear of unnecessary nationalist narratives by carefully unfolding the story of a Czech musician composing what is essentially Italian music.

Mysliveček left a promising career as a miller on the banks of the Vltava in Prague to pursue a seemingly precarious one in music. Unlike his Bohemian predecessor Gluck, whose career followed a similar path, Mysliveček found nearly instant early success. He published his first set of symphonies (Op. 1) less than a year after leaving the mill trade to begin his musical studies. Within two and a half years of arriving in Venice in 1766 his first Italian opera *Semiramide* was being performed there, and having spent just four years as a full-time composer he was already regularly referred to as 'célèbre' in printed librettos and opera programmes. *Semiramide* was performed on Mysliveček's triumphant return to Prague in 1768, and several arias soon found their way into church repertory as contrafacta. Although his first Italian home of any sort was in Venice, it was in Naples that Mysliveček would enjoy his greatest triumphs. The details of Mysliveček's career are greatly enhanced in Freeman's book by the inclusion of a substantial amount of written correspondence, revealing fascinating details about the composer, and exploring the exciting opera scene in Italy in the second half of the eighteenth century.

One of the more refreshing elements of the biographical approach derives from the exhaustive research into correspondence and other original documentation. Freeman draws from František Pelcl's biography of Mysliveček (in *Abbildungen böhmischer und mährischer Gelehrter und Künstler* (Prague, 1782), volume 4, 189–192), it being one of the few early sources close to the composer himself; helpfully, Freeman is often able to confirm or refute some of the widely circulated assertions of Pelcl. The book is clear and attractive in its layout, with only a tiny handful of oversights in presentation. The use of footnotes rather than endnotes may be distracting for some, but with such an important role played by primary sources I found this to be an essential feature when reading the book. The latter part of the book consists of a complete catalogue of Mysliveček's music, though (no doubt for reasons of space) thematic incipits are not given. This is followed by two appendices; the first consists of early biographical sketches and the second contains important letters and other documents both in the original languages and in English translations.

One really has to nit-pick in order to mention any shortcomings of note, but Freeman does fall a bit short in explaining (and possibly understanding) how national and geographical terms – often used interchangeably today – were generally applied in the eighteenth century. Freeman's claim that 'in Western Europe [the]



Czech [language] did not even have a name of its own' in the early eighteenth century (4) is not true at all; it certainly did in England, Austria and the German states. Instances of parallel translations and even basic tables of personal pronouns in Czech had appeared in England by 1660 as 'the Bohemian language' (and more general references to it are much older still). Anything 'Bohemian' was by default in Czech or of Czech character, and it was often distinguished from 'German' (the use of 'Bohemian' in a strict geographical sense came much later). In geographical terms, however, the distinction depended on the rulers of the land. Assuming this context, it is much easier to see how Burney could refer to Bohemian roads, for example, as 'German' roads, yet at the same time opine that 'even the German language is of little use in that kingdom', Czech being preferred (Charles Burney, *The Present State of Music in Germany, the Netherlands, and United Provinces* (London: T. Becket, J. Robson and G. Robinson, 1773), volume 2, pages 1 and 14). Other nations followed a similar pattern. In the seventeenth century one could claim to visit 'Turkey' by going to Budapest, even if the inhabitants in no way considered themselves Turkish. Despite this minor quibble, Freeman uses this particular section to complain about the role of nationalism in musicological pursuits (and rightly so). I would also take issue with Freeman's assertion that 'music critics in the eighteenth century did not recognize a Czech or Bohemian heritage of art music' (106). In fact a wide variety of sources attest that such a style existed, and it was often designated as such; Martin Gerbert's *De cantu et musica sacra* (2 volumes (St Blasien: Typis San-Blasianis, 1774)), for example, praises Jan Zach for his national Bohemian style that did not intermingle with the Italian style, and certain liturgical works by both Šimon and František Brixi are designated by other eighteenth-century writers as being composed in 'stylo bohemo', among many similar examples.

The ample space given to analysis is also to be welcomed, highlighting Mysliveček's influential role in the development of the late eighteenth-century style. Freeman highlights a number of pioneering areas of Mysliveček's output, including his Op. 2 string quintets using the two-violin layout – the first such quintets ever published. Mysliveček's wind octets for two oboes, two clarinets, two horns and two bassoons are also among the earliest known using the standard *Harmonie* ensemble that would later become so popular. Of course it is Mysliveček's contribution to opera seria that warrants the most space and attention. Beyond the music itself, the greatest attraction for many readers is likely to be in the relationship between Mysliveček and Mozart. In addition to offering extensive quotations from their correspondence, Freeman devotes the entirety of chapter 11 to unpacking aspects of their personal and musical relationships. Through these analyses it becomes quite clear that the young Mozart was indebted to his older Czech friend in aspects of orchestration and form, among other areas, as well as for a certain melodic and rhythmic freshness. Freeman's claims in this area are bold but true, as when he states that 'no consideration of Mozart's compositional models or personal development after the year 1770 should be considered complete without taking into account the impact of his contacts with [Mysliveček]' (255). Freeman is well within his rights to criticize Mozart scholarship (and scholars), if discreetly, for overlooking this important relationship.

Freeman has produced an outstanding work of scholarship that should go some distance towards restoring Mysliveček's reputation as an excellent opera composer, a pioneering (and fine) symphonist and a gifted composer of concertos and chamber music. I enthusiastically recommend this book to anyone interested in the music of the second half of the eighteenth century. For anyone teaching a course that deals in any detail with opera seria during this period, or with Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, it should be on the essential reading list.

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