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978-1-108-06197-1 - The Life of Haydn in a Series of Letters Written at Vienna followed
by The Life of Mozart with Observations on Metastasio, and on the Present State of
Music in France and Italy

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Excerpt

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LETTERS

ON

THE CELEBRATED COMPOSER

HAYDN.



LETTER I.

TO M. LOUIS DE LECH . . .

Vienna, April 5, 1808.

MY FRIEND,

YOUR favourite Haydn, that great man, whose name sheds so bright a splendour in the temple of harmony, is still living; but he exists no longer as an artist.

At the extremity of one of the suburbs of Vienna, on the side of the imperial park of Schönbrunn, you find, near the barrier of *Maria Hilff*, a small unpaved street, so little frequented that it is covered with grass. About the middle of this street rises an hum-

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ble dwelling, surrounded by perpetual silence : it is there, and not in the palace Esterhazy, as you suppose, and as in fact he might if he wished, that the father of instrumental music resides ;—one of the men of genius of the eighteenth century, the golden age of music.

Cimarosa, Haydn, and Mozart, have but just quitted the scene of the world. Their immortal works are still performed, but soon will they be laid aside: other musicians will be in fashion, and we shall fall altogether into the darkness of mediocrity.*

We by no means coincide in this opinion with our author; on the contrary, we consider the modern music to be formed upon principles, which will ever preserve it from the oblivion which he apprehends. It is the fate of the arts to have their ages of mediocrity. Men of inferior talent may dazzle for a time, but they disappear, and exhibit true genius in greater splendour.

Haydn is unquestionably the greatest musical genius that has ever appeared. He is not only the founder of the modern art, but the most perfect of all modern authors. His peculiar excellence lies in that unity of design, and felicity of execution, which we look for in vain in other

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These ideas always occupy my mind when I approach the peaceful dwelling where Haydn reposes. You knock at the door : it is opened to you with a cheerful smile by a worthy little old woman, his housekeeper ; you ascend a short flight of wooden stairs, and find in the

composers. In his works we meet with nothing which we wish to remove, or amend. Though learned, he is always intelligible, and the impassioned melody which pervades his compositions, never fails powerfully to interest the feelings. In short, it is from him that we acquire the most correct ideas of musical taste, and perfection ; and as his music is founded upon the *instinctive tones* of our nature, (see note, Letter XVI.) we have no fear that it will ever be lost, while human feelings remain.

Nor can we imagine the art is on the decline, while so great a genius as Beethoven lives. This author, though less perfect in other respects than Haydn, exceeds him in power of imagination ; and, from recent specimens of his unbounded fancy, it is to be expected that he will extend the art in a way never contemplated even by Haydn or Mozart. If we were inclined to push our speculations farther upon this point, we might refer to the very extraordinary discoveries that are now making in Russia, in the department of instrumental music. In the course of twenty years it is probable that such effects will be produced in that country as will lead to the most important results in the science of sounds.

G.

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second chamber of a very simple apartment, a tranquil old man, sitting at a desk, absorbed in the melancholy sentiment that life is escaping from him, and so complete a nonentity with respect to every thing besides, that he stands in need of visitors to recall to him what he has once been. When he sees any one enter, a pleasing smile appears upon his lips, a tear moistens his eyes, his countenance recovers its animation, his voice becomes clear, he recognizes his guest, and talks to him of his early years, of which he has a much better recollection than of his later ones : you think that the artist still exists ; but, soon, he relapses before your eyes into his habitual state of lethargy and sadness.

The Haydn all fire, so exuberant and original, who, when seated at his piano-forte created musical wonders, and in a few moments warmed and transported every heart with delicious sensations—has disappeared from the world. The butterfly, of which Plato speaks, has spread its bright wings to heaven, and has left here below only the gross larva, under which it appeared to our eyes.

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I go, from time to time, to visit these cherished remains of a great man, to stir these ashes, still warm with the fire of Apollo ; and, if I succeed in discovering some spark not yet entirely extinct, I go away with a mind filled with emotion and melancholy. This, then, is all that remains of one of the greatest geniuses that have existed !

Cadono le città, cadono i regni,
E l'uom d'esser mortale par che si sdegni.

This, my dear Louis, is all I can tell you, with truth, of the celebrated man, respecting whom you make such urgent enquiries. But to you, who love the music of Haydn, and who are desirous of knowing it, I can give other details than those which relate merely to his person. My residence here, and the society which I see, give me also a further opportunity of writing to you at length concerning this distinguished composer, whose music is performed at this day, from Mexico to Calcutta, from Naples to London, from the suburb of Pera to the saloons of Paris.

Vienna is a charming city. Represent to yourself an assemblage of palaces, and very

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neat houses, inhabited by the most opulent families of one of the greatest monarchies of Europe ; by the only *noblemen* to whom that title may still be with justice applied. The city of Vienna, properly so called, contains seventy-two thousand inhabitants, and is surrounded by fortifications which now serve only as agreeable walks : but, fortunately, in order to leave room for the effect of cannon, which are no longer to be found, a space of twelve hundred yards has been reserved all round the town, on which it has been prohibited to build. This space, as you may suppose, is covered with turf, and with avenues of trees crossing each other in all directions. Beyond this verdant inclosure are the thirty-two faux-bourgs of Vienna, in which live one hundred and seventy thousand inhabitants of all classes. The majestic Danube borders the central town on one side, and separates it from the faux-bourg of Leopoldstadt. In one of its islands is situated the famous *Prater*, the finest promenade in the world, which, when compared with the Tuilleries, with Hyde Park, or with the Prado of Madrid, is what the view of the

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Bay of Naples from the house of the hermit on Mount Vesuvius is, in comparison with all the other prospects that are boasted of elsewhere. The isle of the Prater, fertile as are all the islands of large rivers, is covered with superb trees, which appear still more noble from their situation. This island, which every where displays nature in all her majesty, presents you at one time with avenues of chesnut-trees in magnificent lines; and, at another, with the wild aspects of the most solitary forests. It is traversed by a hundred winding paths, and when you arrive on the banks of the Danube, which you suddenly find under your feet, the eye is again charmed by the Leopoldsberg, the Kalemberg, and other picturesque elevations which appear in the distance. This garden of Vienna, the effect of which is not injured by the presence of any of the labours of mechanic industry painfully occupied in the pursuit of gain, and where the forest is only occasionally broken by a few meadows, is six miles long and four and a half broad. I know not whether the idea be singular, but to me, this superb Prater

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has always appeared an apt image of the genius of Haydn.

In this central Vienna, the winter residence of the Esterhazys, the Palfys, the Trautmansdorffs, and of so many other noble families, surrounded by an almost regal pomp, there is not that brilliant display of mind, which was to be found in the saloons of Paris before our stupid revolution ; nor has reason raised her altars there as at London. A certain restraint, which forms a part of the prudent policy of the house of Austria, has inclined the people to pleasures of a more sensual kind, which are less troublesome to a government.

The house of Austria has had frequent relations with Italy, a part of which it possesses, and many of its princes have been born there. All the nobility of Lombardy repair to Vienna to solicit employments, and music is become the ruling passion of its inhabitants. Metastasio lived fifty years among them ;* it was for them that he composed

* Metastasio was born in 1698. He went to Vienna in 1730, and lived there till 1782.

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those charming operas, which our petty literati of the school of La Harpe, take for imperfect tragedies. The women here are attractive; a brilliant complexion adorns an elegant form: the natural, but sometimes languishing and tiresome air of the ladies of the north of Germany, is here mingled with a little coquetry and address, the effect of the presence of a numerous court. In a word, at Vienna, as at Venice in former times, politics, and abstract reasoning on possible improvements, being prohibited, pleasure has taken possession of every heart. I know not whether that *interest of manners*, of which so much is said, finds its account in this; but it is certain, that nothing can be more favourable to music.* The enchantress has pre-

This observation only goes to prove generally, that where the higher objects of human pursuit are withdrawn, inferior ones will be sought after in their stead. We should be sorry to believe that depravity of morals is necessarily connected with a good taste in music; nor do we apprehend any such result in this country, so long as Englishmen maintain, with watchful jealousy, those political rights by which they have been far more gloriously

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vailed here, even over German hauteur. The most distinguished of the nobility are directors of the three theatres where music is performed. It is they, likewise, who are at the head of the Musical Society, and some of them expend from eight to ten thousand francs a year, in promoting the interest of the arts. The Italians may be more sensible to the fine arts, but it must be confessed that they are far from meeting with such encouragement amongst them. Accordingly, a village, a few leagues distant from Vienna, produced Haydn: Mozart was born at a little distance farther, towards the mountains of the Tyrol; and it was at Prague, that Cimarosa composed his *Matrimonio segreto*.

distinguished, than by any splendour which music or painting can bestow. Reason, we trust, will still have her altars, not only in the metropolis, but in every part of the island; nor shall we forget, that however delightful the fine arts may be as ornaments, they are miserable substitutes for freedom and virtue.

T.