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## Mozart in Prospect Park

by Peter Webster

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Though it prides itself as a world center of classical music, New York City has surprisingly few public monuments to important composers. There's Verdi Square on Broadway at West 72nd Street with its impressive 1906 Carrara marble statue of the great Italian atop a limestone pedestal surrounded by characters from his operas. Antonín Dvořák is commemorated by a bronze standing three-quarter figure on a granite base in Stuyvesant Square, near the now-demolished 327 East 17th Street house where he lived and composed in the 1890s. And there's a modest, though moving, bronze plaque and bust of Béla Bartók on the wall of the apartment building at 309 West 57th Street where, impoverished and mortally ill, he spent the final years of his life.

What even the most dedicated Mozartean may not know, however, is that among New York's sparse scattering of musical monuments is one dedicated to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: A four-foot-six-inch bronze bust of the Austrian composer sits atop a granite column in a section of Brooklyn's Prospect Park known as the Concert Grove. Originally designed as an expansive promenade for audiences of open-air concerts on a small island in the neighboring lake, the Grove included an Oriental Pavilion, designed in quasi-Hindu style by Calvert Vaux in 1874, where attendees sat to enjoy the music floating across the water.

Due to acoustical problems, this lovely Victorian idyll came to an end in 1887, when the Music Pagoda was built in the park's central meadow and concerts shifted there. But the Grove, its pavilion, lawns, flowerbeds, and paths remained, home to a growing collection of bronze sculptures of historical figures and classical composers. There are three of the former—the first statue of Abraham Lincoln erected after his assassination (1869); Irish poet Thomas Moore (1879); and American author Washington Irving (1871)—and four of the latter: Henry Baerer's bust of Ludwig van Beethoven (1894); the statue of Mozart (1897); Chester Beach's Carl Maria Von Weber (1909); and Sigvald Asbjorsen's Edvard Grieg (1914).

Like the Beethoven and Weber busts, the Mozart bronze was donated to the park by the United Singers of Brooklyn. This German-American male choral society, 3,000-members strong at the time, epitomized the Teutonic organizations that played a enormous role in shaping the musical culture of 19<sup>th</sup>-century New York—a defining influence succinctly described in Joseph Horowitz’s superb *Wagner Nights: An American History*:

German and Austrian immigrants already numbered 200,000 at the time of the American Revolution. Their influx crested in the 1850s and 1880s. . . . In New York’s Kleindeutschland—with Vienna and Berlin, one of the three capitals of the German-speaking world—more than 100,000 German speakers were also German-born—about 15 percent of the total population.

. . . it was music that indelibly stamped German-American culture. The arriving Prussians and Franconians, Saxons and Bavarians swarmed with singers and instrumentalists. They sang and played in their parlors, in beer gardens, in smoky theaters and makeshift concert halls. No German institution was more characteristic than the singing society, which, as New York’s *Staats-Zeitung* once summarized, united “the worker, the businessman and the politician [and erased] the social distinctions which divide the German element.” Philadelphia acquired a *Gesangverein* in 1835; Baltimore one in 1836. . . . The Germans also held annual singing competitions, or *Sängerfeste*.

In fact, the United Singers of Brooklyn had won the Mozart bust at the Eighteenth Annual *Sängerfest* in Philadelphia in 1897. At a cost of \$6,000, the group commissioned a granite base and had the work installed in Prospect Park, where it was dedicated on October 23 of the same year. The *New York Times* reports that unveiling was preceded by a grand parade of the German singing societies through the streets of Brooklyn, followed by a United Singers performance of Mozart’s “Blessing of the Song” and a massed-choirs rendition of “The Star-Spangled Banner.” The afternoon evidently did Mozart proud.

It would be nice to report that the bust does its subject equal justice, but the truth is that Mozart, dressed in a period high collar and jabot ruffled shirt, here looks more like a bland businessman than a great composer. The charmless bronze portrait is the work of Augustus Max Johannes Mueller, a German-American sculptor who was born in

Meiningen in 1847, studied at the Royal Academies of Art in Berlin and Munich, and worked in Pennsylvania. Several painted-zinc allegorical figures on the dome of Philadelphia's Memorial Hall—one of the earliest examples of Beaux-Arts monumental architecture in the United States, it was built as the art gallery for the 1876 Centennial Exposition and used as a recording venue by the Philadelphia Orchestra under Ricardo Muti and Wolfgang Sawallisch in the 1980s and 1990s—are attributed to Mueller. These undistinguished statues don't suggest that the artist was having an off day when he sculpted Mozart.

While the Mueller bust can be faulted for failing to evoke Mozart's genius, it's harder to claim with confidence that it doesn't *look* like the composer. Only 14 portraits created in Mozart's lifetime are known to exist, sometimes reproduced in different mediums, like oil paintings, engravings, or medallions. A recent exhibition at the International Mozarteum Foundation in Salzburg, Mozart's birthplace, gathered most of these images together in the hope of erasing idealized conceptions of Mozart—a bewigged, red-jacketed, romanticized figure—and focusing attention on what he might really have looked like. As a fascinating article in the *New York Times* says:

The exhibition speaks to a yearning within the living to know the past, by knowing the face of someone whose work lives on so powerfully in our own time.

“It's an emotional question,” [Gabriele Ramsauer, director of the foundation's museums and of the Mozart birthplace,] said. “Mozart is such a universal genius. Everybody knows him. Everybody takes part of his life.”

Research done for the show altered assumptions held for decades. Among the discoveries: a long-doubted 1783 miniature portrait on ivory set on a tortoise shell snuffbox, depicting a cherubic face surrounded by curly hair, with dark, serious eyes, was shown to be an authentic likeness; and the painting by Joseph Lange, Mozart's brother-in-law—perhaps the most famous portrait and the one that Mozart's wife, Constanze, considered the most true to life—long considered unfinished, was revealed to comprise a small completed painting of Mozart's head and shoulder that had been trimmed and mounted on a larger canvas, with paint added around the edges to smooth out the surface: the enlargement was unfinished, not the original.

Mueller's bust may be New York's only statue of Mozart, but there have been many attempts to depict the composer sculpturally in other cities. In Salzburg, Mozartplatz, a square near the cathedral, is dominated by Ludwig Schwanthaler's bronze statue of the composer, largely paid for by King Ludwig I of Bavaria—he was as crazy for Mozart as he was mad for Wagner—and ceremoniously unveiled on September 5, 1842, in the presence of Mozart's sons. (His widow did not live to see the unveiling; she died on March 6th of the same year in the house at Mozartplatz 8.) The most photographed statue in Vienna's tourist-thronged Burggarten is undoubtedly the Mozart memorial, created in 1896 by the Austrian sculptor Viktor Tilgner. The wildly Romantic monument, which was originally erected in Augustinerplatz but moved to the Burggarten in 1953, shows an almost Byronic Mozart on a pedestal surrounded by putti and musical instruments, while a relief depicts a scene from the 19<sup>th</sup> century's favorite Mozart opera, *Don Giovanni*.

One of the most recent statues is also one of the most charming: Scottish artist Philip Jackson's life-size bronze figure of the eight-year-old Mozart, violin in hand, commemorates the child prodigy's stay in London from April 1764 to July 1765. Unveiled by Princess Margaret in 1994, the monument stands in Belgravia's Orange Square, near the house where the family lived during part of their sojourn and where Mozart composed his first symphony.

Peter Webster writes frequently on design, architecture, and the performing arts.

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