

Book review

MOZART AND HIS OPERAS DAVID CAIRNS

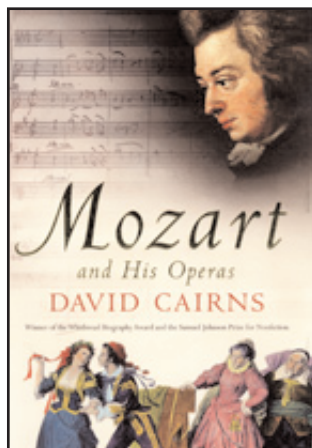
Allen Lane, 2006

HB, 304 pp, £22.00, 9780713994919

David Cairns is best known as the author of a massive and comprehensive two volume biography of Berlioz, which won the Whitbread Biography Award. For many years he was the chief music critic of the *Sunday Times*, and is also the most readable translator of Berlioz's memoirs. As he himself remarks in his preface to his latest book, 'Another book on Mozart and his operas may not be needed. I can only say that I needed to write it ...' For the reader, therefore, the question is whether he or she needs to read it.

This is rather a curious book, neither completely biography nor purely a technical analysis of the operas. It is, of course, always a pleasure to read David Cairns' prose. The style is fluid, full of unexpected twists and turns as the author relates an anecdote here, quotes other writers there, or describes the musical structure of the operas. It is rather like an informal lecture, where a supremely knowledgeable expert invites us into his world and, apparently artlessly, with wit and good humour, draws together history, personal opinion, technical analysis and curious facts, always keeping our attention on the subject. For example in his prologue Cairns sketches the development and impact of Mozart's genius, beginning to unravel the myths and legends that surround him, while making some astute remarks about the music, its composition and its reputation. But the penultimate paragraph of this chapter, in which he describes the effect of Mozart's music on the Maquiritare Indians of the Amazon, is a gem. They refused to venture out while a group of French explorers played various records on their 'portable gramophone', but when Mozart was put on:

'Losing all fear [they emerged] from their huts ... compelled — like man



and beast in The Magic Flute — by the Orphic power of the sounds'.

The other chapters are each given over to the operas in chronological order, starting with the early operas together, then *Idomeneo*, and so on. The circumstances of each work's composition are described with a wealth of detail, links traced between the operas and other works composed contemporaneously. Mozart's life, his collaborators, his relationships, are all woven into the story, and there are splendid technical analyses, which will send me back to the hi-fi as soon as this review is finished. The epilogue, in which Mozart's final illness and death are analysed, is a brief masterpiece.

Mozart's death at the age of 36 is part of his legend, the incomplete *Requiem* symbolising his 'inevitable' fate. Cairns evokes quite a different picture, no less tragic, but more mundane and perhaps more shocking. Mozart fell ill, and died after a brief illness. He didn't expect to die, and nor did his family, except near the end, when the dawning realisation that there was no hope must have been devastating. All that energy and life, all that ambition, was suddenly snuffed out at its peak. And thinking of Mozart's early death I do sometimes wonder how he would have responded to Beethoven's late quartets or even Berlioz's *Symphonie*

Fantastique —after all he would have been only 75 when the latter was first performed.

So can I answer the question, 'should I read this book', which is after all the purpose of a review? Anyone who loves Mozart's music and has at least once found something special in one of his operas will discover in it a rich feast. If you have yet to discover these delights, then it will be mostly meaningless, but if you buy a recording of, say, *The Marriage of Figaro* and some Mozart piano concertos, listen to them, and then read the book, its meaning (and theirs) will become wonderfully clear.

Toby Lipman