

Classical Destinations – *Magazine* Article for use and review....

## In The Footsteps Of The Great Composers

The year is 1787. The place is Vienna.

Not quite yet 17, a young Ludwig van Beethoven meets his prospective music teacher, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Two of the greatest names in classical music are acquainted for just a couple of months before Beethoven is recalled to his birthplace of Bonn to be with his dying mother. When he returns to the Austrian capital in 1792, Mozart is dead, and Beethoven's new teacher is another of 'the greats' – Franz Joseph Haydn.

Mozart, remarkably given his lofty status in classical music today, died penniless, aged just 35, and was buried in an unmarked pauper's grave... so the exact location of his remains is still unknown.

Beethoven, of course, is arguably most famous for going deaf at the height of his creative powers, but his erratic behaviour – which included a penchant for dressing like a tramp and pursuing titled women (presumably not at the same time) – makes the antics of today's pop stars appear almost tame.

Indeed, the lives of so many of the great classical composers could provide the material for soap opera scripts – so often the child prodigy is left parentless, struggles to hone the innate talent through training, marries a cousin (or the sister of a first-love), scrapes together a meagre living by teaching, battles illness or depression, and dies young/destitute/insane (possibly all three). Yet through all these trials and tribulations shines the music which, centuries later, still stirs the soul, lifts the spirits and serves as a reassuring constant in an ever-changing world. It's very unlikely that any of them appreciated the magnitude of the legacy they would leave behind and neither, it has to be said, do many listeners who have undoubtedly been

daunted by biographies that have been largely academic works – worthy but impenetrable.

In the new 13-part SBS television series, *Classical Destinations*, the lives of the great composers are explored in the context of the places that were important to them. With the emphasis being chiefly on composers from the Classical and Romantic eras, these destinations are the European cities which also flourished during these periods – among them Vienna, Salzburg, St Petersburg, Leipzig, Berlin, Prague and, of course, Venice. From an Australian perspective, perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the series (which was produced in Australia) is that so many of the buildings – homes, theatres, concert halls and even coffee shops – still exist and provide a tangible link with classical music history.

In the first episode – appropriately extensively devoted to Mozart as the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth in 1756 is celebrated – you are taken to the homes in Salzburg where he was born and began composing (when aged five!) and, in the tenth episode, to Vienna where he composed the opera, *The Marriage of Figaro*. Predictably, all are now museums, but in them Joannes Chrysostomus Wolfgangus Theophilus Mozart comes alive. Perhaps even more so for the series presenter, the British actor and writer Simon Callow, who portrayed the composer in Peter Schaffer's play *Amadeus* (the nickname, incidentally, that Mozart coined for himself), and then played the part of the impresario Schikaneder in the Academy Award winning film of the same name.

Observes Callow of Salzburg, “It is impossible to walk 20 metres down the street without seeing his name or face looming up at you to persuade you to buy something – mostly the marzipan chocolates, called *Mozart-kugeln*... although a less marzipan-like composer it would be hard to imagine. How astonished he would have been if he had been given a glimpse of his own mass-marketing.”

Here, then, is the ‘flip-side’ of *Classical Destinations* – as much as it documents the triumphs and tragedies of the composers and examines the influences of their surroundings on their music, it also considers how their achievements have subsequently had an impact on these places... from the many museums to a complete name change such as is the case with Torre del Lago Puccini. The Tuscan village, not far from Viareggio and visited in episode 11, became the home to the composer of the most enduring Italian Romantic operas – *La Bohème*, *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly* – because he liked shooting waterfowl on the adjacent lake. Today, the strains of Puccini’s operas can be heard across this very same lake from an open-air theatre on its shore; the venue for an annual festival. Indeed, dedicated festivals are very much the manifestation of a composer’s on-going influence on the place of their birth, death or period of most significant output – Mozart in Salzburg, Vivaldi in Venice, Verdi in Busseto, Bach in Leipzig, Beethoven in Bonn, Grieg in Bergen, Sibelius in Helsinki. Simon Callow describes this interconnection of time and place as “two-way traffic” and says that the composers featured in *Classical Destinations* “responded intensely” to both the geography and history that surrounded them.

This is especially evident when the series gets to Norway in episode **three** and Finland in episode four. Both Edvard Grieg and Jean Sibelius “responded intensely” to the Scandinavian and Nordic landscapes, but also the emerging nationalism which was shaping their respective nations and of which, through their music, they became a part. The Finland into which Sibelius was born in 1865 was still part of Tsarist Russia and ruled by a Swedish-speaking minority. The composer didn’t master the Finnish language until adulthood, but if there was ever a piece of music which is evocative of a place with almost photographic clarity, it’s Sibelius’s *Finlandia*. Likewise, Smetana’s *Má Vlast* (My Country) brings to life the bucolic countryside of Bohemia and the progress of the Vltava river from the Sumava mountains to Prague where *Classical Destinations* arrives in episode seven. Not only has this city been important in the lives of the Czech composers, it was also part of Mozart’s life and, thanks to

its wonderfully preserved buildings and streets, was the location for most of the filming of *Amadeus*... substituting for Vienna.

For series presenter Simon Callow, then, Prague represents a remarkable coincidence of music, place and history. He returned to the city for the first time since filming *Amadeus*, 23 years ago.

However, *Classical Destinations* is very much built on these links – through either time or territory – which, over the 13 half-hour episodes, give an absorbing overview of how individual compositional styles developed from both inspiration and influences. For example, J. S. Bach attended the same Latin grammar school, in the German town of Eisenach, as Martin Luther albeit nearly 200 years later. Nevertheless, the Lutheran church was a huge influence on Bach, inspiring some of the most inspiration sacred music ever written. However, Bach also died a pauper and was buried in an unmarked grave in Leipzig. This wasn't rectified until a young Felix Mendelssohn intervened nearly 80 years later and, after becoming only the second person to conduct Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, sparked a revival in the Classical-era composer's music. Mendelssohn drew on influences from Bach, Mozart and Beethoven, but also established forms and structures which were adopted by those who followed him.

If these connections thread through *Classical Destinations* to give it a finely-woven 'texture', then the high definition vision and classical music soundtrack clothe it with a sumptuousness akin to a 16<sup>th</sup> century royal court. Over 100 hours of footage was shot under the direction of musician-turned-producer Peter Beveridge who, like Simon Callow, was often struck by the meeting of past and present at many of the locations. This was particularly spine-tingling in the segments where co-presenter Niki Vasilakis – a young violin virtuoso – performs music by the composers at the sites that were significant to them.

Recalls Peter, "Playing Mozart's music in the Hall of Mirrors at the Schönbrunn Palace where a six-year-old Wolfgang performed for

Marie Antoinette... or Bach's music for solo violin filmed next to his grave in St Thomas's Church in Leipzig and in the Hermitage in St Petersburg... these were stand-out experiences with Niki".

Niki Vasilakis also plays the theme music for *Classical Destinations* which was specially written for the series by Paul Terracini and was recorded with the Prague Symphony Orchestra. The rest of the soundtrack is drawn from the extensive classical recording list of the Decca Music Group, providing a powerful combination of music and imagery which makes the lives of the featured composers seem very real.

Perhaps the essence of *Classical Destinations* is best summed up in Simon Callow's observations about the house Jean Sibelius had built – named 'Ainola' after his wife, Aino – just outside Helsinki, as a place in which to compose music.

"The moment one crosses the homely hearth, one becomes aware of a quite uncommon stillness. He composed not at the piano, but in his head and desk in absolute silence was his requirement to the extent that he refused to allow plumbing to be installed in the house. Even today... the only sound that can be heard is the sound of the wind sighing in the trees... the sound that echoes through so much of his music.

"It's impossible not to hear Sibelius's music differently after a visit to 'Ainola'."

Through *Classical Destinations* exploration of the emotional and physical influences on their lives and works, it's also impossible not to better appreciate the achievements of classical music's most significant composers. Subtitled "An armchair guide to classical music", *Classical Destinations* will have you out of that chair... if not to head for the record store, then to visit the travel agent.

- *Paul Burrows*-
- Editor Classical Destinations companion Book.

