

**Article for *Western Morning News***

**Subject: BBC Radio 3 decides against a Mozart Marathon in 2006**

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Radio 3 is refusing to present a fourteen-day Mozart Marathon in 2006, despite the apparent success of the recent all-Bach event which concluded on Christmas Day. “Our view is that with Mozart end to end, the overall effect would be detrimental to the music,” said Radio 3 controller, Roger Wright. “The music could wrongly be seen as slightly more chocolate-boxy than it really is.” Philip R Buttall, a classical music writer from Plymouth, says that not only have they made the wrong decision, but the reasons given simply won’t stand up in court!

For years BBC Radio 3 played virtually what it liked when it liked, and, if you didn’t have a music degree or similar, then it could often be decidedly hard going. This all changed in 1992, when Classic FM first appeared on the scene, and there was suddenly some actual competition. Classic FM has increased its audience share over the years, and whilst Radio 3 denies it is playing catch-up, clearly it has had to rethink its strategies and programming to some considerable degree. Fortunately, it has never adopted the lowest-common-denominator approach more germane to the ethos of its commercial sister-station, but it has still needed to move with the times – well, a little, anyway.

So, back in June, for the first time Radio 3 devoted six full days’ broadcasting to the complete works of a single composer. Beethoven was a pretty safe choice here, since he’s generally considered one of the three greats, along with Bach and Mozart, and his works not only reveal a clear sense of development through his early, middle and late periods, but are also written for a growing number of orchestral instruments and combinations, and using an ever-increasing array of musical forms. This definitely went down well with the vast majority of listeners, and succeeded in bumping up the Brownie points on the side of Auntie Beeb!

If this was an all-round good decision, then the next foray into composer saturation seemed ill-conceived, when, this time, the complete works of Anton von Webern were broadcast back in September. In terms of output, it needed only one whole day to play every piece by this serialist composer from the Second Viennese School, but in the overall scheme of things, few people would really assign him a place in the Top Ten. However, he did die in 1945, so at least it qualifies as a sixtieth anniversary celebration, and, even if an all-Webern day was not perhaps enjoyed by every listener, it was quickly and painlessly despatched. The downside, though, was that, once this essentially minor figure had been featured, listeners would be queuing up with enough suggestions to keep the schedules busy for years!

So the next project needed to be a big one, in fact an all-out marathon, which would either succeed handsomely, or fall flat on its face. In the event, Radio 3 was totally bowled over by the listeners’ reaction to ten days of wall-to-wall Bach, with message-boards and emails showing a staggering 98% of listeners full of praise for the project.

Clearly another thumbs-up for Radio 3, who were, at least, celebrating the 320<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bach's birth.

So what has Wolfgang Amadeus ever done to upset the powers-that-be at Radio 3?

First and foremost, in terms of important anniversaries, he holds the trump card for 2006, the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth. In 2005, even Beethoven was celebrating only his 235<sup>th</sup> birthday. Round One to the man from Salzburg!

Radio 3 spokesperson, Sian Davis, said: "Roger feels that each composer should be treated individually. While it may work for some composers, we don't think it would work to play Mozart back to back, 24/7. The overall effect of putting his particular style of music together could be rather samey." Here Roger Wright's argument is decidedly spurious. Whereas Mozart's 'particular style' represents the true apotheosis of the Classical Style, Bach's music does the same for the Baroque. And with Bach's vast output consisting to some degree of copious collections of stylistically-related works, surely the epithet 'samey' could be applied just as easily to him, as to Mozart. Certainly having to cover over two hundred Cantatas in ten days needed some sympathetic programming, to avoid real overkill. The jury's still out for Round Two!

But Roger Wright's pronouncement that Mozart's music is 'chocolate-boxy' in the first place, and that hearing too much of it in one go, will merely accentuate this apparently unwelcome quality, simply beggars belief. In these times of political correctness, why then didn't he veto the Bach event on the grounds that there was a strongly Lutheran religious bias, or that the whole concept of a Bach Christmas might prove sensitive in some quarters? A draw, then, for Round Three!

And it certainly can't be because Classic FM has come up with something better this time. True to form the station is devoting New Year's Day to Mozart, whom they at least describe as 'classical music's greatest genius', even if they then indulge in their usual sickly confection of Mozart's Top 40, Mozart at the Movies, A Mozart Journey, and all the rest! Now, as a sure-fire way of making his music more 'chocolate-boxy', this certainly takes the biscuit – chocolate digestive, of course! Wolfgang wins Round Four once more for the Beeb!

Roger Wright's decision not to put on Radio 3's own Mozartfest during 2006 has already received mixed reactions. The London Mozart Players categorically refute the composer's 'chocolate-box' image, and intend to celebrate his 'wonderful music' from January 1 right through to the end of the year. Meanwhile, music-retailer, HMV neatly sums it up by saying: "You're not going to have the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mozart every year. If you can't do it then, when can you do it?" Perhaps public and professional opinion may eventually succeed in convincing Radio 3 to reconsider. If not, then Roger Wright may well end up being Mr 'Wrong' as far as this one seemingly unreasonable decision is concerned!"

Philip R Buttall – 29/12/05