

## Invitation to Mozart's "Minuet" No. 6 for Piano in D Major: An Inquiry into the Nature and Value of Music

It is said that music is the universal language. It is arguably the most fundamental form of human artistic expression. Lewis Rowell, in *Thinking about Music*, asserts that it is also a suitable topic for philosophic inquiry and that an "apperception of the being it represents" is a means of obtaining valid knowledge about the world and about ourselves. Music provides us with another way of knowing reality. It is an integral part of what it means to be human. As Rowell puts it, "The musical experience itself is a form of knowledge and a means of seeking truth...With it, we demonstrate that we are thinking and feeling creatures, perhaps the purest proof of our humanity"(7).

If, as Rowell states, the primary questions concerning music are those that involve being, knowing and value, one would do well to ask some key questions: By what principles is any piece of music what it is; in the case of the piece in question for the purposes of this essay, what exactly is Mozart's Minuet No. 6 in D Major? How does knowledge of the historical and cultural context surrounding the minuet enrich one's listening experience? Can a fully objective determination of whether or not Mozart's Minuet No.6 in D Major is a superior example of the minuet form be made, or will the answer to this question always involve a subjective element? Finally, does any piece of music, such as this minuet, possess any inherent qualities, or are the adjectives applied to it always reflections of the cultural and psychological biases of the listener? Whatever answers result, Rowell is correct in suggesting that simply asking the questions will enrich not only our listening experience but our experience of human existence in general.

So, what makes a minuet a minuet? If one endeavors to *know* Mozart's Minuet No. 6 in D Major on a more personal level, one can begin by knowing *about* the minuet form in general. In his broad overview of music, *Listen*, author Joseph Kerman provides a detailed description of the form and background of this stylized dance music, the best examples of which were transformed into high art by inspired composers such as Couperin, Bach, Haydn, and Mozart. The shortest of all classical movements with a relatively simple form and easy-to-discern melody, the minuet, along with the sonata, theme and variations, and the rondo, was one of four essential forms of the mid-late eighteenth century Viennese Classical style (173). Consisting of two basic sections, each of which comes to a full stop, or cadence, and is then repeated immediately, the minuet tends to feature pairs of sections which alternate in an A-B-A pattern, the middle pattern being a so-called trio which serves as a contrast to the repetitious primary melody featured in the A sections. Though Mozart's Minuet No. 6 in D Major lacks the trio and, as Rowell observes, is unusually chromatic for its day (17), it does reflect other conventions of the Classical music of this era which Kerman lists as "repetitions, self-conscious transitions, and emphatic cadences," all of which help to clarify the forms (173). And like other examples of the minuet, it is a moderately paced piece in triple meter, though the tempo seems dictated by the tonality of the instrument it is being played on; the strings version is slower and smoother than either the pianoforte or modern piano version both of which come off as rather "clunky" if pleasantly varied in the range and arrangement of notes sounded.

This last element, that of being “pleasing” and possessing variety, is not trivial; Kerman cites both qualities as predominant eighteenth-century preferences, embodied, in fact, in what he sees the Enlightenment ideal of “pleasing variety,” along with a predilection for more “natural” music. And indeed, according to Kerman, a pleasing, natural quality can be found in all aspects of music of this period – in rhythm, dynamics, tone color, melody, texture and form. While Mozart’s minuet scarcely sounds natural to modern ears, it was, as Kerman says, “relatively stripped down compared to the Baroque style” (163, 167). In *The Encyclopedia of Music*, Max Wade-Matthews and Wendy Thompson concur and their observation that “the florid, ornamental, technically intricate styles of late Baroque composers gave way to a new emphasis on clarity, order and balance” is well evidenced by such a piece as this minuet (319).

Two style features of Classical music, in particular, are evident in the minuet under discussion here, each of them conforming to the ideals listed above. The first element is that of the dynamic of the piece. As representative of the new focus on variety and flexibility, composers not only began to work more with gradations of volume but also to include directives, in Italian, on the score itself for how the notes should be played (Kerman 168). This can be seen on Mozart’s score throughout, but especially in the middle of the first passage, from the instruction in the first measure of *dolce* to the initials P and F indicating a range from very soft (*pianissimo*) to very loud, (*fortissimo*). Reflecting the demand for simplicity and clarity, melody, too, saw a change from the longer and more intricate to the shorter and catchier. Kerman notes that “short tunes” and “attractive little phrases” are heard more frequently, sometimes worked into longer compositions or, as in the Minuet No. 6 for D Major, standing alone (170). Indeed, one knows the melody of this minuet quite well enough to hum it after listening to it on only a couple of occasions.

Is this minuet a good or even excellent example of the form? Rowell observes rightly that to answer this question we must evoke the criteria we hold essential for it to be considered that genre of music (13); if we lack the necessary expertise – the specialized knowledge or the skill in perception which comes from long experience – to intelligently discuss this criteria, we must rely on the opinion of those who do possess this expertise. But evaluations of small pieces such as this minuet are not always easy to come by. Knowing that Mozart composed this piece of music, one might be tempted to immediately give it high ratings. But one should also be cognizant of the fact that Mozart has not always been held in such high esteem. Until the mid-twentieth-century, Mozart’s music was frequently “dismissed as ‘galant’ and superficial” (Wade-Matthews 326). And it is reasonable to assume that the greatest of composers did not always produce works of equal caliber. One may concede that this piece excellently fits the criteria necessary for a minuet; it has the structure, the memorable melody, and the “pleasing variety” required of a minuet; but that does not definitively decide the matter of whether it is good or not. That is because questions of value are difficult to settle without moving from the objective to the subjective.

When attempting to ascertain if this minuet is good, it may help to also ask if it is beautiful. Rowell cites Beardsley’s suggestion that beauty boils down to three essential artistic canons – unity, complexity, and intensity (14). (It seems we are treading on quantitative ground again here). This minuet appears to have unity; it has a clear opening and distinct cadences. It is coherent; the parts fit together into a cohesive whole. As for

complexity, even this little piece brings to mind the emperor's infamous observation that Mozart's music seemed to have "too many notes" (Wade-Matthews 329). And, short as it is, dance music though it may have sprung from, the exuberant run of ascending notes which do an abrupt about-face to trip headlong down three octaves of notes, only to stair-step up again to the melody; the multiple cadences, the tension created by the dissonance, the expressiveness created by the use of the entire chromatic range; the logical clarity – all belie the simplicity of the form and give a satisfying richness and complexity to the piece. It is a very satisfying listening experience, and yet, it does not seem, in this listener's final analysis, good or beautiful in the same way that many of Mozart's other compositions do. It is too repetitious, too formulaic; rather monotonous, and on the piano and pianoforte versions, "dainty, trivial and tinkly," as Rowell suggests in general for the minuet form (16).

Perhaps one may approach the question of whether or not a piece of music is good and beautiful by asking to what extent it can stand outside of its time and place and still evoke that deep resonance with the human spirit that defines all great art. Part of the appeal of this piece may lie in its ability to evoke the delightful scenes of a lavish and sensuous era; it is hard to listen to any minuet and especially one as lively as this one without conjuring up images of ornate salons, brocades and satin, and a glittering bewigged audience aflutter in fans and long coats. And Rowell seems correct when he asserts that even the seemingly trivial detail matters very much in our appreciation of the music. Some understanding of the history, the composer's life, and the culture out of which it sprang seems inestimably important to a full appreciation of it.

Yet, music seems to possess inherent emotional qualities which speak to universal responses in all human beings. Whether or not it is a technical aspect of the music that evokes an emotional response – for example, that D Major is a "bright" key or that chromatic slow music will always be sad, as Rowell suggests (16), there are certain invariant emotions across all cultures which seem to respond to certain tempos, rhythms, volumes, and other aspects of music. In the same way that happiness or sadness can be detected in a human voice regardless of the listener's level of familiarity with the culture or language, qualities in music can be identified that provoke the same emotional responses in all people. Indeed, if it can be said that music "strikes an emotional chord" in people, that chord is one that seems to be universally shared.

## Works Cited

Kerman, Joseph. *Listen*. New York: Worth, 1992.

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Wade-Matthews, Max and Wendy Thompson. *The Encyclopedia of Music: Instruments of the Orchestra and the Great Composers*. New York: Anness, 2002.