

Mozart's "Menuetto" and Trio from the String Quartet in D Major: On the Objective and Subjective Aspects of an Appreciation of Music

Mozart's "Menuetto" and Trio from the String Quintet in D is many things; it is a progression of notes on a score so pleasingly ordered that it not only conveys the harmonious structure of the piece as heard but depicts a pattern of symmetry and balance that is pleasing to the eye as well; it is a surpassingly lovely contrast of two deceptively simple melodies; it is a historical representative of a form of music that owes its roots to a mid-seventeenth century popular court dance and, at the same time, an example of a typical third movement for a Classical quartet or quintet. In that this short piece of music can be all these things (and more), one must confront the idea that to listen to it requires both an objective as well as a subjective approach, both a quantitative and qualitative analysis. To equate the two might be a mistake, however, for to emphasize the measurable properties of a piece of music would be to disregard its power as art and, as Lewis Rowell observes, while the properties of music can be measured, that is not how one experiences it (11,12). In *The Enjoyment of Music*, Joseph Machlis states it more eloquently when he says of Mozart's music in general that "One sees how it is put together, where it is bound, and how it gets there; but its beauty of sound and perfection of style, its poignancy and grace defy analysis and beggar description" (221).

And yet, objectify music we will, perhaps all the more when the composer is one who has achieved a kind of immortality through it. Thus, to speak of or listen to any piece of music by Mozart carries with it an awareness of its reality as both art and cultural artifact. Rowell discusses the means by which music is transformed, or rather reduced, to object (31) and applying his criteria to the "Menuetto," one may note various properties or facts about it.

To start, this piece can be taken as representative of its genre as described in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*; it is comprised of a moderately paced ternary minuet section paired with a shorter ternary trio "contrasting in key, thematic material, scoring and general mood" (357). Like earlier binary forms of the minuet, Mozart's "Menuetto" in D has a straightforward melodic design without elaborate ornamentation (*Harvard Dictionary of Music* 515). One may note, too, that it is the third movement of a quintet and, in conformity with Mozart's predilection for the viola as fifth instrument, that the instruments used are two violins, two violas and cello.

To further approach this piece of music quantitatively, one may look at the score and note the arrangement for the five stringed instruments. If one cannot read music, this is a daunting task, but some clarity emerges with prolonged study and at least the primary melody played by the first violin can be followed on the top line of the staff. One may note, too, the tonal elements, here the high and thin sound of the violins contrasting with the mellower tone of the violas and more distinctly, the low and rich tone of the cello.

Finally, one may take into consideration the way time is structured in the music, that, for example, this minuet is in triple meter in 3/4 time. As regards time, however, Rowell brings up the question of objective versus subjective time (30). While the discreet notes of the score suggest an atomistic notion of time, upon listening they soon sound more like what Rowell refers to as continuous durations and express intermittent events; one feels the movement and flow of the music rather than experiencing it as separate moments. This is perhaps underscored by the instruments used on this piece. It would

seem that notes on a piano, for example, would retain more of this discreet atomistic quality than the strings do. With the strings one hears less of a separation between one pitch and another except when the instruments are plucked by the bow.

Whether or not the music is perceived as atomistic or continuous, this “Menuetto” certainly reflects the traditional Judaeo-Christian-inspired progression of time in music. There is a distinct beginning and a decisive end, or as Rowell sates of Western music in general, it “begins with a decisive act of creation and moves in a straight line toward a final . . . event” (30). If one were to contrast this piece with, say, a Japanese shakuhachi performance, one could certainly see the contrast between a Zen—inspired circular notion of time in music, without distinct beginning or end, and the marked teleological progression of time as reflected in the “Menuetto.”

Another less technical way to objectify music is to locate it in its original place and time. Dating to 1790, Mozart’s “Menuetto” (and the string quintet of which it is a part) is a lovely example of the intimate eighteenth-century chamber music style. This piece belongs to the mature quintets of Mozart and, as do his other quintets of this period, it “realizes fully the textural richness and variety of which the medium is capable” (“string quintet”). Moreover, it illustrates perfectly Machlis’s claim that chamber music is in “the nature of a friendly conversation among equals” where “each instrument is expected to assert itself to the full” (219). Indeed, this charming “Menuetto” evokes a flirtatious repartee of gentle wit passed lightly between admiring partners. While Machlis notes that Mozart’s minuets are more elegant and closer to the character of a court dance than, for example, Haydn’s, which were folk-like in character (220), this “Menuetto” is also a beautiful example of the “smiling simplicity” and “human tenderness” that is characteristic of Mozart’s music in general (Bakers 1263).

Perhaps most significantly, and most deserving of our admiration and sympathy is the significance of the date this music was written. The year 1790, a mere year before the composer’s tragically premature death at thirty-five, was a time of deepening melancholy, continuing financial difficulties, and faltering productivity for Mozart. As Maynard Solomon reveals in his thorough and moving biography, *Mozart: A Life*, the String Quintet in D was only one of a handful of compositions entered into Mozart’s thematic catalogue between May and December of 1790. That Mozart could compose such a charming and buoyant piece as this “Menuetto” in the midst of “something approaching a total breakdown involving his family, his career, and his productivity,” and at a time of disabling “dejection, anxiety and partial creative paralysis” lends increased poignancy to one’s experience of this music (Solomon 465).

Such a knowledge of Mozart’s personal circumstances lead one to ponder again the objective and subjective aspects of the listening experience. Certainly this “Menuetto” does not express to us any of the emotional turmoil the composer was experiencing when he wrote it. One is led to wonder if indeed the Quintet in D was written, as Solomon suggests, for an elite audience with the aim of attracting connoisseurs to support his concerts. Or one may prefer Solomon’s other conjecture that this piece and others written in the latter half of 1790 represent the composer’s struggle to retain “his musical integrity” and thus “the core of his selfhood” (465). But is it really possible to listen to this rich and lyrical piece and think of it only as a successful exercise at composition intended to raise much-needed funds? Certainly the music, if it can communicate anything, does not communicate that.

Rowell poses just such questions and while one may concede that Mozart indeed followed a kind of process in composing his works, the listener will, as Rowell suggests, “find it easier to think and write about music as if it were a state rather than a process” (29). While the “Menuetto” may express various technical properties to those who possess a deep understanding of the mechanics of music, this piece, through its simple but elegant melody, its contrast of mood from “Menuetto” to Trio which creates a feeling of intimate banter, and its final decisive and satisfying resolution, undeniably expresses, too, the most pleasant and tender of human emotions. Indeed in listening to this piece, one may agree with Machlis’s assertion that Mozart was one of those composers who “entrusted to the string quartet [or quintet] their most private thoughts.” And one may group it with the composer’s final string quartets which, according to Machlis, “contain some of his most profound utterances . . . constituting one of the high points of his art” (229). It expresses love and beauty, order and harmony, grace and perfection. If these things were often lacking in Mozart’s life, they none-the-less live on in his music.

Works Cited

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