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Mozart Quartet K. 421

Classical style is operatic at its core. It is music of narrative flow, propelled by contrasts and tensions, by interaction between personalities, points of view and states of being. And although later generations codified certain standard forms into which we like to fit the drama of classical period movements (easily or not), musicians and theorists of that time might have looked at the works differently.

A particularly compelling period document is the analysis of the first movement of Mozart's Quartet in d minor, K421, by the French critic and theorist Jérôme-Joseph de Momigny, six years Mozart's junior. Momigny discusses harmonic events and divides the movement into sections, but most captivatingly he turns it into an operatic aria; a text is set to the first violin part, complete with multiple exclamations and asides. Momigny's protagonist is Dido. Aeneas is abandoning her, commanded by the deities to leave Carthage, forbidden to explain to his love why. She sings to him: angered, grief-stricken, bereft. She sighs, sings with nobility and tenderness, queries him breathlessly; she is, in a word, operatic.

It may be an audacious dramatic leap, but it fits. Not least of its virtues is that in the story depicted a journey is begun but, while this part of the story ends with Dido's death, the story of the journey itself is open-ended. It is striking in this work that even with the first movement's dark dramatic intensity there is no forte cadence in the home key supported by the cello's (and thus the quartet's) lowest "d." It is an unexpected lack, keenly felt, and in fact only in the last bar of the work's final movement do we find such a cadence. The piece as a whole takes on the sense of an odyssey, journeying toward this landing. And as in another famous journey, Homer's *Odyssey*, there are transformations, disguises, a succession of places visited and a wiser homecoming.

Each of the first three movements begins with a vocal gesture, the sense of a protagonist: the first with a sigh, the second with an interrupted breath (as if one secret lover in a stolen moment warns the other, "shush!"), the third with a confident declaration. The fourth movement, a set of variations, begins as if to dance, and yet there is an almost unearthly muttering that answers the dance and connects back to a sigh. Each is a stop on Odysseus' expedition, and in each the same elements reappear -- transformed, transmuted. To each stop has been brought a self, and its elements are reflected into the environment. Cavafy says in his poem *Ithaka*: "As you set out on the journey to Ithaka, / wish that the way be long, / full of adventures, full of knowledge. / ... / You won't meet

the Laistrygonians / and the Cyclops and wild Poseidon, / if you don't bear them along in your soul, / if your soul doesn't raise them before you." (trans. Alik Barnstone)

The first violin's sigh beginning the piece is the first of the recurring elements that bind the work together and allow it to function on the level of allegory, with recurring musical gestures taking on varying shades of meaning as they change context and temperament. Underlying it is a descending bass line casting a pall of melancholia. Yet it is the most unassuming figure in the mix that becomes the second essential element of the work, the pulsation in the middle voices. These repeated notes are points set against the curves and angles of the melody, urgent and constant. They suggest uninterrupted time, unyielding destiny, separate from the surrounding vulnerability. Later in the movement Mozart accelerates the repetitions, creating a fluttering figure that eventually becomes the entirety of the rhetoric in the moments preceding the recapitulation of the opening theme and texture. It is as if the repeated notes are reaching toward a way to resolve the self-involved melancholy of the opening sigh.

The second movement finds us in a lovely garden scene, quietly enraptured, enchanted. The sighing figures reappear, now more sensual, a voluptuary regarding his Edenic surroundings. Cavafy continues in his poem: "May there be summer mornings / when with such pleasure, such joy / you enter ports seen for the first time; / ... / buy abundant sensual perfumes, as many as you can." Yet with a chill wind the pleasure of the moment is interrupted, the repeated notes issuing a warning, an urging back to the path, quietly insistent. We are perhaps with Odysseus and his crew on the island of the Lotus Eaters; we must wrest ourselves from the charms of tactile gratification in order to rejoin the search for greater wisdom, no matter how often the temptation returns, and return it does in this movement. Cavafy tells us "Always keep Ithaka in your mind. / Arriving there is your destination." There is as yet no resolved sigh, no complete understanding, and the movement dissolves gently with the repeated notes signaling a sort of ellipsis.

They are taken up immediately at the start of the Minuet, where they seem defiant, almost scolding, and attach to agitated half-sighs. As in other minor mode works, Mozart chooses the movement that should be the most elegant and uses it to make a strong, almost fierce proclamation, almost as if to say it is not yet time to dance. In this quartet it seems to signal that the moment of homecoming has yet to be earned. Here is the moment of greatest confrontation between the repeated notes and the sighing figure, a failed attempt at reconciliation. In the midst of it, the lighter than air trio section

offers an ironic aside, sighs turned into hiccoughs, repeated notes teasingly hidden in the pizzicato middle parts.

Odysseus' penultimate stop is on the Island of the Phaeacians, where, as a guest of honor at a banquet, he recounts his adventures, earning the promise of a ship to bear him home. The last movement's variation form suggests the raconteur as well, the hero recognizable in each adventure recalled. The repeated note figure here takes on a more human, vulnerable cast, as if fateful events are in the past and have been assimilated. All the tales lead to a variation in major, a promise of carriage, of resolution. This resolution manifests as an expressive fusing of the two main figures, whereby the pulsation of the repeated notes is finally understood, destiny embraced; the sigh that radiated self-pity at the start now breathes a centered equanimity. It is as T.S. Eliot says in "Little Gidding" from *Four Quartets*: "We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time." Concluding this set of variations, in which varying permutations of repeated notes and sighs appear, the final measure is a repetition of the first sigh of the first movement. Now at last it is complete, in forte with the lowest "d" of the cello as an anchor. It is truly a homecoming, led into with the accelerated repeated notes featured in the first movement; the music in a sense moves backwards, with a new understanding won through all the explorations that have intervened. Cavafy wishes for us: "you moor on the island when you are old, / rich with all you have gained along the way, / ... / Ithaka gave you the beautiful journey. / ... / With all your wisdom, all your experience, / you understand by now what Ithakas mean."

Note by Mark Steinberg