

Reprintable only with permission from the author.

Mozart Quartet K. 428

When I was younger I aspired to be a serious composer. It seemed to me that a good approach to composing would involve choosing one of the received forms - sonata allegro form, for example - and, having devised a couple of striking melodic ideas, fit them into that form and follow the rules for getting from one structural point to the next, while maybe, I don't know, throwing in two or three unexpected twists and turns along the way.

Studying the music of great composers, I often felt that I could detect a similar creative system in use, where, on a very good day, I could imagine myself coming up with something nearly that good using my assembly method. But then there was music which seemed to defy this logic, where I was unable to imagine a method that would summon this music into being. Where my approach to writing music was like taking a boxy, pre-fab house, cutting some doorways between the rooms, and populating the rooms with furniture and things, this other music evoked the contemplation of lovely objects, the exploration of unknown passageways, and then, eventually, a realisation that the form itself, an airy mansion that contained these things, had risen up around us, called into being by its contents.

Very often, the composer of that music turned out to be Mozart. And the first movement of his E flat Quartet, K. 428, is a perfect example of it. Why should he attempt to construct his opening theme out of ungainly, awkward intervals, using nine of the twelve notes of the chromatic scale in the process? And how can that ill-advised approach lead him, as a result, to a melody so full of grace and equipoise? Again, how did he think of taking the last two notes of this melody, a falling step, and expand it gradually to four falling steps, then to six, creating in effect a magic carpet that transports the music joyously to its next key area? Having reached that new key area, B flat major, what inspired him to write a second theme that, instead of consolidating B flat major as it's supposed to do, spends its time flirting with three other keys? Or again, in the middle, development section of the movement, by what alchemy did he excise the rather elegant opening flourish of that second theme, and repurpose it as a kind of nefarious muttering in a minor key, beset

by phantasmagorical triplet arpeggios that come from who knows where?

In movements like this one, the sonata form seems not like an uncomfortable suit of clothes into which the complaining composition must fit, but something bespoke: the form is called into being by the substance. Mozart doesn't seek to satisfy the form, but rather to justify its very existence, to explain with his music why it is beautiful and needful.

Likewise with the slow movement. On the one hand it lives in a binary-form "house," one which gives it a nominal definition and direction; on the other hand, the gentle, melancholy inhabitant of that house takes no particular notice of its surroundings as it wanders from chamber to chamber. Again, we have to ask the unanswerable questions. How do the contents of the opening -- awkward contours, grinding chromaticism, almost bitter dissonance -- become endowed, in this composer's hands, with such luminosity? And how did Mozart, that greatest of melodists, choose to write this music, which contains no melody that can be articulated as such? Rather, we are preoccupied here with shadowy chromatic motion, with shifting planes of chordal progressions like the surfaces of a great Abstract painting, out of which the melodic element seems always about to be born, but in the end remains a thing alluded to, not revealed.

The E-flat Quartet was one of six quartets that Mozart dedicated in a group to his great contemporary, Joseph Haydn, and the Minuet movement is the moment of frankest homage to the older composer. The affect of the main section lies close to the particular flavor of Haydn's humor and spirit, opening with a guffawing figure, and tending to make jokes out of stuttering motions, as well as passages that get stuck and go around in circles before finding their way out again. By contrast, the central Trio section is pure Mozart. Written in a nearby minor key, and set against brooding bass pedal points, it presents a drifting, mesmeric tableau containing classically Mozartean paradoxes: grace by dint of asymmetry, consolation through the expression of sadness.

The finale starts with a children's tease: a few little fillips of tunefulness, wrapped up innocently enough, and then abruptly interrupted by a rambunctious blizzard of activity, tearing all over the map. The teasing

continues in the next passages, as the moment of the outbreak shifts, becomes unpredictable -- a game of musical "gotcha." Later melodies are graver, sweeter; it is ever Mozart's way, in his chamber music as in his operas, to get us chuckling, and then to transfix us with a moment whose tenderness is all the more affecting because it came out of nowhere. At the end of the movement, when the children's tease returns for the last time, it is adorned with a graceful upper melody, a kind of birdsong, which might seek to forgive or relax the earlier fakery. However, the horseplay persists right up to the end, as the music dwindles almost to a pinpoint before clobbering us with four final, triumphal chords.

Note by Misha Amory