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Mozart Quartet K. 465 “Dissonance”

To enter into the opening of Mozart’s Quartet in C Major, K 465, is to come upon a Beckett landscape, barren and austere, alone with the pulsating background radiation of the cosmos. Lonely voice upon lonely voice happen upon the scene, foreign visitors, and they clash, yearn toward resolution and are thwarted. This is the famous opening which earns the piece the nickname “Dissonance.” Mozart dedicated the set of six quartets from which this hails to Haydn, whose brilliant and groundbreaking Op. 33 quartets Mozart had just studied. Haydn was deeply impressed by the composer 24 years his junior, making his famous declaration to Mozart’s father "Before God, and as an honest man, I tell you that your son is the greatest composer known to me either in person or by name. He has taste, and, what is more, the most profound knowledge of composition." Yet he remained a bit flummoxed by this opening, saying only “if Mozart wrote it he must have meant it.” This from the composer who, later on, would make a musical depiction of Chaos resolved into blinding C Major light in *The Creation*. Mozart’s upper lines here individually outline a turn, the most innocent ornamental figure of the time, but slowed down so as to be unrecognizable as such, the familiar stretched in the fun house mirror. Not only is the harmony unstable, but the organization of the pulse as well, time that floats rather than flows. The first violin reaches upward and at the moment of arrival the foundation drops away and the alienated searching begins anew. The upward reaches, unfulfilled all, continue through the introduction. And then, in the face of existential crisis, Mozart chooses to look to the horizon rather than at his own navel. At appearance of the Allegro main part of the movement the ominous pulsation of the opening levitates, liberated from the ‘cello that tolled forth the prophecy of darkness. The melodic line again reaches upward and this time overleaps its landing point in order to sigh down into it, discovering its destiny only when shedding the necessity of climbing directly to it. Henceforth only the memory of shadows dares to shade the proceedings.

The Andante begins as a song spun from warmth and contentment. Once the singing has found temporary completion, the first violin and cello begin an exchange of tenderly questioning glances, privately musing, a wordless expression of wonder. Underlying this is a pulsation reminiscent of those in the first movement, now a marker of time that flows easily, never wanting to be anywhere but where it is. and this ushers in a passage where single notes vibrate and pulsate weightlessly, holding time as one instinctively holds breath, to savor the perfection of the present moment, tenderly tremulous, intimate and still. As paradisiacal as this moment is, its comfort proves illusory; toward

the end of the movement, the currents that only hinted at flow now crash upon the shore, through painful dissonances and the darkest caverns one might fear to find inside. And yet, as Mozart and only Mozart knows how to do, all this is let go, allowed to drift away into the most magical occurrence of the piece. As the wonder-filled glances return, a new melody appears atop them, a discovery of a completion that had never been understood as a lack. Again, as in the first movement, Mozart does not wrestle with despair but, noting it, steps aside into a garden previously unnoticed that yet has been awaiting him. John Tarrant writes, in a book about Zen koans, “since joy might be hiding anywhere, you would be willing to look with curiosity at sadness or fear, just in case.” Mozart is thus willing, a teacher for all of us.

In the Minuet, the repeated note idea returns, this time within the role of the coy, suggestive partner in a flirtatious exchange, a sort of provocative posturing, answered by an assertive, stubborn response. The figures dance around each other, masculine and feminine, the energy of the game paramount. In the contrasting trio section the repeated notes reappear as an undertow, and the back and forth takes on a mock ominous cast, all bluster and swirling storms on stage, one of Prospero’s storms that we know will lead, eventually and inevitably, to a double wedding.

By the time we arrive at the Allegro molto last movement the repeated notes have taken on a launching role, ready for vaulting, leaping motion except when they don a serious countenance in good fun to play at interrupting the good cheer of the proceedings. At two points the music gets stuck in a furiously repeating pattern, from which Mozart escapes simply by lifting up above a stalled note as one lifts above cloud cover to see the perennially blue skies. Just as in the opening of the piece, he escapes trouble by levitating above it. Just as the piece readies itself to say goodbye, Mozart reintroduces the chromatically yearning idea from the introduction, but now it simply teases and is tossed aside.

With the recurring character of the repeated note binding the piece together Mozart evinces psychological acumen in his ability to see darkness and tame it. The piece takes and transforms dream images, making them both recognizable and new. It models a sort of lucid dreaming, where a wall becomes a gate because we choose to see it so. In *Invisible Love*, Emmanuel Schmitt says “Happiness isn’t about hiding from suffering, but about integrating it into the fabric of our existence.” We could have no better guide to this integration than Mozart.

Note by Mark Steinberg